

Merrimack School District Budget Committee
Minutes
December 10, 2024

Present: S. Bernier, M. Berry, D. Coakley, G. Groff, J. McCormack, C. Mower M. Murphy, R. Paepke, S. Rand, A. Santoriello, B. Trant and School Board Liaison K Martin
Absent: L. French

J. McCormack called the meeting to order at 7:04 PM and led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Public Participation

There was none.

Approval of Prior Minutes

C. Mower made a MOTION to approve the minutes of November 19, 2024. Second: D. Coakley.

MOTION PASSED: 10 – 0 – 2. (M. Murphy and K. Martin abstained.)

Budget Preparations

Liaison Teams

J. McCormack told the Committee that Liaison Team assignment and other informational sheets were in the meeting packets. She reviewed the Liaison Team Meeting Information Sheet with the members.

G. Groff mentioned that it would be helpful to have the list of written questions sent by the School Board to the various department heads.

K. Martin said the District has those questions and the answers to the written questions could be obtained by watching the various meetings on cable or reviewing the meeting minutes.

D. Coakley said on the Liaison Team Information Sheet statement #5 under Process regarding members holding questions seems in conflict with #4 under Procedures and made a MOTION to remove that statement. Second: M. Murphy. The MOTION PASSED unanimously.

J. McCormack clarified that there should be only one meeting per department and it should be held before that department's budget is presented at a Committee meeting.

Proposed Budget Committee Mission Statement

J. McCormack read a proposed Budget Committee Mission Statement that she had emailed to the members before the November 11th meeting:

The Merrimack School Budget Committee is committed to ensuring the financial accountability, responsibility, transparency and sustainability of our local school district. In accordance with RSA 32, the Budget Committee plays a crucial role in overseeing public funds and is entrusted with the authority to determine and put forth to the voters the total dollar amount of the district annual budget for the following fiscal year. The Committee's inquiries serve to enhance transparency and oversight for the taxpayers with respect to the process of both allocating funds and scrutinizing whether expenditures are prudent, with a direct educational impact. Our goal is to carefully evaluate the recommendations provided by the school board and administration, balancing the educational needs of our students with the fiscal responsibility to our taxpayers. Through thoughtful deliberation, we strive to put forth a budget amount intended to enhance educational outcomes, be fiscally prudent, and maintain the long-term financial health of the district.

J. McCormack said she thought having a mission statement defining the Committee purpose would provide real clarity and align the members on the role and the responsibility of the Committee.

Discussion included:

- The Budget Committee purpose is defined in RSA 32.
- The proposed mission statement seems to be a respectful summary of RSA 32.
- The proposed statement has not been reviewed by legal.
- Educational outcomes are not the only thing that the Budget Committee considers.

D. Coakley made a MOTION to get a legal review to see if this proposed mission statement is in conflict with RSA 32 and if the Committee can create a mission statement. Second: K. Martin.

J. McCormack asked if there was anything else that members might want to be part of a mission statement.

C. Mower asked for a Point of Order and stated that there was a Motion on the floor.

Discussion on the motion included:

- A mission statement created by the Committee is unnecessary.
- A mission statement could potentially clarify what the job of the Budget Committee is.
- Members should have a copy of the proposed mission statement during any discussion.
- No decision on the proposed mission statement should be made tonight.

A. Santoriello asked if he could make a motion to table this issue. He was told there was already a Motion on the floor.

Discussion continued:

- Instead of calling the proposal a mission statement, could it be called a statement of purpose or a summary of RSA 32?
- Do other towns have mission statements?
- Having legal review is a good idea.

M. Berry called the question.

D. Coakley asked to AMEND his MOTION to put off voting on getting a Legal Opinion until each member of the Committee has a copy of the proposed mission statement and the Committee has an opportunity to discuss the proposed mission statement. Second: S. Rand.

J. McCormack told him that she had emailed a copy of the proposed mission statement to all members but would be glad to provide copies for discussion at a future meeting.

MOTION PASSED: 6 – 5 - 1

In Favor: S. Rand, M. Berry, M. Murphy, D. Coakley, K. Bernier, K. Martin.

Opposed: B. Trant, A. Santoriello, R. Paepke, G. Groff, C. Mower

Abstained: J. McCormack

C. Mower asked for a Point of Order. He said the amendment to the original motion had passed and the Committee now needed to vote on the amended motion.

D. Coakley said the amended motion was to table discussion about getting a legal opinion on the proposed mission statement until all members have a written copy of the proposed mission statement for discussion at a later meeting.

MOTION PASSED: 7 – 0 – 4 (C. Mower did not vote.)

In Favor: S. Rand, M. Berry, B. Trant, M. Murphy, D. Coakley, K. Bernier, K. Martin

Abstained: A. Santoriello, R. Paepke, G. Groff, J. McCormack

Budget Books

Members received a budget book containing the proposed FY 2025-26 budget that was presented to the School Board by the Administration.

Strategy Discussion

J. McCormack told the Committee that this year her strategy for reviewing the proposed budget will be to have a work session to review the major expenditures after each department budget is presented at the various upcoming meetings. She said the first review meeting would be on January 7th. She said she expected that the Administration would present a whole budget overview and then the Committee would hear from the liaisons about the District-Wide budget, be able to ask questions and then have a work session.

J. McCormack said on January 14th, the various school budgets would be presented. She told the Committee this strategy would allow the members to review the budget in small chunks while each department budget was still fresh in their minds. She also said she hoped this strategy

would help the Committee function more efficiently and reduce the risk of members getting caught up on small items so that by the first meeting in February the Committee would have a better idea of how it wants to organize the final budget number it will be proposing.

Discussion included:

- Could meetings start earlier than 7 PM or an additional meeting be held?
- How is the new strategy different from how the Committee operated in the past?
- Liaison leads will give a summary of the department budget and the liaison meeting and then Committee members will have a “Q and A” with the department head.
- A written explanation of the meeting plan under the new strategy will be provided.
- Last year’s meeting issues were an anomaly.
- Members like being able to watch and/or attend the School Board budget meetings.
- The new first page “budget summary” as the first page of each department budget is a good idea.

Questions and Supplemental Data Requests

J. McCormack asked members if they had any questions or supplemental data requests that she would direct to the Administration.

Members requested the following:

- Five years of historical data on free and reduced lunches
- Information about Special Ed contracts with service providers
- Details of state unfunded mandates
- How much of the budget is fixed costs.
- The list of budget account numbers
- More information on the surplus the District has been carrying

Members were reminded to send the liaison team meeting information to the Administrative Assistant as soon as possible so the meeting can be properly posted.

Members were also reminded that the job of the Committee is to put forth a bottom line budget number that is prudent and can get passed by voters.

Proposal for Student Representative

D. Coakley told the Committee that near the end of the budget process last year, several high school students came before the Committee to discuss some of the items in the proposed budget. He said the students provided additional information about the budget items that the Committee was discussing and he thought that having a student representative on the Committee would be beneficial.

D. Coakley made a MOTION to look into what it would take to get a student member on the Committee. Second: K. Martin.

Discussion included:

- Would a student member have a vote?
- Having a student representative on the School Board is spelled out in state law.

- There is nothing in state law about having a student representative on the Budget Committee.

MOTION PASSED: 6 – 5 – 0 (R. Paepke did not vote)

In Favor: M. Berry, M. Murphy, K. Bernier, G. Groff, K. Martin, D. Coakley

Opposed: S. Rand, B. Trant, A. Santoriello, J. McCormack, C. Mower

Public Participation

State Rep. Wendy Thomas told the Committee that state budget discussions this year are going to be brutal and that there could be additional financial impacts on local towns. She said that the Budget Committee should be aware that there is going to be an LSR (Legislative Service Request) to remove all caps for school vouchers. She said she would keep the Committee updated.

Next Meeting

J. McCormack reminded the Committee that the next meeting date is January 7, 2025. She said the complete schedule of meeting dates (and snow/as needed dates) plus the schedule of departments to be reviewed on each date was in the meeting packet.

G. Groff made a MOTION to adjourn. Second: D. Coakley.

J. McCormack declared the meeting adjourned at 9:15 PM.