

Merrimack School District Budget Committee

Minutes
January 12, 2010

Present: T. Beard, M. Beck, R. Buckley, J. Burk, B. Cummings, S. Heinrich, C. Lang, M. Publicover, C. Ortega, A. Schneider, A. Sylvia, C. Underhill and School Board Liaison J. Thornton

Also Present: Superintendent M. Chiafery, Assistant Superintendent Dr. Mark McLaughlin, School Business Administrator M. Shevenell and various department heads

S. Heinrich called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM. He led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Announcements

S. Heinrich welcomed those present and reviewed the Committee upcoming meeting schedule and the evening's agenda. He announced that Committee meetings were being recorded and would be available on cable or on-line.

Approval of Prior Minutes

A. Schneider made to MOTION to approve the minutes of November 10, 2009 with corrections. Second: M. Publicover. M. Publicover proposed a correction. MOTION PASSED unanimously.

Department Presentations

Maintenance

Department Head: Tom Touseau

Committee Liaisons: T. Beard, B. Cummings, C. Ortega

Liaison Report: T. Beard told the Committee that the liaisons had met with T. Touseau prior to the "second round" of School Board budget cuts. He indicated the main topics of discussion were asbestos abatement, carpeting in the library at Masticola Elementary, paving at the high school and the loss of a custodial position at the high school. C. Ortega said the liaisons had discussed the overall benefit of the Honeywell program. There have been some energy savings, which have resulted in budget reductions and there have been some additional expenditures. M. Shevenell will be providing additional details. B. Cummings said the liaisons also discussed the security camera maintenance program. He indicated that there are two natural gas meters that were not operating properly which resulted in a higher amount budgeted for gas. He said that T. Touseau has indicated that the loss of one custodial position will not result in additional overtime. He also said that 70% of the roof at Reeds Ferry School (RFS) needs to be replaced. This

roof was installed in 1990 and had a 15-year warranty. The proposed new roof will have a 25-year warranty.

T. Touseau told the Committee that his budget as first proposed had been down 4.8%. He said the budget as now proposed is down 11.3% from the current budget. He also indicated the department would be able to work with one less custodian.

Discussion included:

- Loss of a custodial position
 - Currently all custodians are working at full capacity.
 - Each custodian at the high school currently is responsible for cleaning 3,000 square feet.
 - Having one less custodian will mean asking a little more of each custodian and that some cleaning jobs might not get done every night.
- Maintenance Overtime
 - Most of the overtime in the budget is the result of people using the building during hours when custodians are not regularly scheduled and for which a rental fee is charged.
 - This rental fee offsets about 75% of the overtime.
 - Overtime also covers plowing.
- The Honeywell ventilation upgrade was not done to all of the upper elementary school due to cost. At this time, the cost to do a ventilation upgrade of the “old section” of this building, without the installation of air conditioning, is over \$350,000.
- The proposed budget includes funds for an architectural study to consolidate and/or relocate the current SAU and SpEd offices. The School Planning and Building Committee is currently working on this project. If a cluster is eliminated at the middle school, the vacated space could be considered for this project.
- Having a custodian regularly scheduled to work a Tuesday – Saturday schedule was suggested as a possibility.
- Roofing
 - There are several roofing projects in the C.I.P. over the next several years.
 - The possibility of doing some, or all, of these projects in one year and bonding the whole amount was suggested.
 - M. Shevenell told the Committee that the bond for the additions ends in 2012-2013 and that budget year might be a good time to think about proposing a multi-roof bond.
 - M. Shevenell will look into bond spending time lines – how soon and what percentage of the bond must be spent after issuance of the bond and how many years the District would have to spend the principal of the bond.
- Asbestos removal
 - Recently there were asbestos removal projects at RFS and Merrimack High (MHS).
 - The budget as originally proposed had included an asbestos removal project for Thorntons Ferry (TFS). The School Board cut this project. T.

Touseau told the Committee the asbestos removal project at TFS should be done, but the situation there is not yet critical.

- There is an asbestos abatement plan started many years ago.
- Asbestos abatement projects are scheduled for five additional years in the C.I.P.
- Asbestos removal projects are scheduled during the summer when no students are present.
- Putting off asbestos removal at TFS will probably result in a shift in the schedule rather than doubling up in any given year.
- All areas that contain asbestos are sealed. If the seal shows wear, the areas are re-sealed. There is no significant cost impact to re-seal these areas rather than remove them.

James Mastricola Upper Elementary School (JMUES)

Principal and Assistant Principal: Marsha Mc Gill and William Morris

Liaisons: J. Burk, T. Beard, B. Cummings

Liaison report: J. Burk told the Committee that she was part of the JMUES liaison team last year and once again she felt that the budget that was presented was frugal and prudent. She said the supply accounts had been increased to support the assessment project, the computer budget was increased to continue to meet state requirements of demonstrating competency and literacy and continued furniture replacement was included in the budget. She said she felt that, overall, the increases in the budget were not significant. B. Cummings said the computer budget increase is to upgrade the labs, which were last upgraded in 2001. He said that \$1000 had been budgeted for each computer and that the last computer bid came in at \$785 per computer. He felt that the budget, in general, was pretty lean and reasonable. T. Beard said that the hot button issue in the budget seems to be replacing the PCs in the computer lab. However, he said that replacement parts don't exist for the current computers and, since the elementary schools have more advanced computers, the students are taking a step back when they go to the upper elementary school.

M. McGill said the budget was created to support the District's literacy and math initiatives by providing materials and texts toward that effort. She said the computer increases are to support the District's collaborative assessment project. She also indicated the furniture request is a continuation of the 5-year plan to replace old furniture.

M. Shevenell stated that computer replacement would probably be a yearly budget item. He noted that the computers in the "new" middle school are now 6 years old.

Discussion included the following:

- The computers that are replaced will be put to other uses, such as in the teaching lab or in classrooms. There are some computers still in use that are 10+ years old.
- Furniture replacement
 - If furniture was delayed, children would not be sitting on the floor.

- The furniture for the fifth grade came from the elementary schools when the upper elementary opened in 2004. As a result, the furniture in each classroom is a mix of non-standard desks.
- Maintenance fixes desks when they can, but if a desk can't be fixed, it gets discarded.
- Field trips:
 - The music field trip was eliminated as the music students take part in a variety of community activities.
 - The per pupil cost of a field trip varies depending on the field trip; however, it is usually under \$10 per student.
 - The main cost of a field trip is transportation.
 - All trips support the school curriculum.
 - Some field trips costs are offset by fundraisers, PTO and community contributions.
 - All the children participate in Exchange City.
- The amount proposed for substitutes is less than what was actually spent last year. However, the amount proposed is based on an average of the three-year history.
- Project Safeguard
 - Last year \$4,500 was budgeted and the program cost \$1,452 more. This was a one-year anomaly.
 - Some Title monies fund the program; the rest of the costs are covered by other sources.
 - M. McGill said the school does not have grant funding to do a different type program and she feels this program is a nice transition to the PACT program. (Police and Children Together)

Elementary Schools

Principal and Assistant Principal: RFS – Kimberly Yarlott and Timothy O'Connell,
MES – John Fabrizio and Emily Carter,
TFS – Bridey Bellamare and Sharon Putney

Liaisons: C. Underhill, R. Buckley & M. Beck

J. Fabrizio reported for the principals that significant factors in the elementary school budgets were the computer supply budget to cover the cost of printing and cartridges, funding to support the literacy standards based learning, funding to purchase resources for the math standards based learning and the continuation of the 5 year plan to replace furniture. He indicated the proposed budget would be the 3rd year of the plan

Liaison report: C. Underhill told the Committee that all three budgets seemed to be frugal. He noted the projected population for RFS is up a little bit and the proposed budget for RFS is up a little bit. He said the projected populations for MES and TFS are down a little bit and the proposed budgets are down a little bit. He noted the budgets continue to support literacy and numeracy efforts and the furniture replacement plan. M. Beck stated he had been unaware that many of the curriculum materials are not texts, but consumables. He said he thought the budgets were frugal and the principals had done a

good job managing the curriculum and budget needs. R Buckley agreed that the budget was frugal and the principals had given the liaisons a fantastic presentation.

Discussion included the following:

- Furniture replacement
 - The furniture replacement is necessary because of the deterioration of old furniture. Some items are possibly repairable.
 - Some desks are non-adjustable and cannot be used in all grade levels.
 - Replacing students desks is a bigger priority than replacing cafeteria tables.
 - Maintenance has done an excellent job of repairing cafeteria tables, though they will eventually need to be replaced.
 - The principals agreed that, if they had to, they could manage one more year without any replacement furniture.
- The schools have gone to laser printers and some use color ink. The schools typically buy new cartridges rather than refilled cartridges.
- The line for custodial staff at MES is a portion of the aggregate mix between MES and JMUES.
- Some of the schools have attempted to merge events (like hold the book fair on the same night as parent conferences) in order to reduce need for police details.
- A constant amount is budgeted each year for Title 1 tutors to show effort on the part of the District. However, district funds are only expended if the federal funds do not cover actual costs.

Special Education (SpEd)

Department Head: David St. Jean

Liaisons: C. Ortega, J. Burk, A. Sylvia

Liaison report: C. Ortega told the Committee that the SpEd budget is down 2.2%, mostly due to a decrease in the number of students (772) being eligible for services. He said the budget is child specific, and highly prescribed and regulated. He explained that Catastrophic Aid is state reimbursement for student program costs that are more than \$41,000 per student. He said that the state usually reimburses 100%, but has announced that this year the reimbursement rate will be about 87.79339%. He also said that there are 49 Out of District Placements (ODPs). The cost structure for these placements is also highly regulated and there is little room to change the costs. J. Burk told the Committee that the only item of note in the budget is the salary increase, due to the evergreen clause, which affects the para-professionals. She said the budget was pretty straightforward. A. Sylvia said the liaison meeting was quick because the budget was straightforward and regulated.

D. St Jean also told the Committee that the budget is down 2.2%. He said some students left the District and some have come back. He said the budget is based on the current students the District has and the services they are projected to need. He said his department has to follow state and Federal law and the budget is created before the IEP

meeting determines exactly what services a student will need, but if a student does not need something that is budgeted for, the monies are not spent.

Discussion included the following:

- SpEd Expendable Trust
 - The trust was used for pay for a very expensive (\$137,000) placement, which was not in the budget. This resulted in no budgetary impact.
 - This was the first time the fund was used.
 - The fund had grown to about \$630,0000 before this expenditure.
 - At some point, the District may be looking to add to the fund.
 - The fund can only be used for SpEd expenses.
- The State sets the tuition for ODPs.
- Catastrophic Aid
 - District pays up front for services that cost more than \$40,000 per student.
 - The reimbursement comes a year later. Expenses in the proposed budget will be reimbursed in December 2012.
 - The reimbursement is part of estimated revenues.
- Contracted services
 - The District uses contracted providers for some services, including all OT providers.
 - Many of the contracted individuals are provided through SERESC.
 - Contracted individuals are not part of the collective bargaining agreement.
 - If an IEP requires a service, the District must provide it – even if it involves only for one student.
 - Reimbursement could go back to 100% and it could go lower than 87.79339%.

Other

Minority Budget Report

S. Heinrich told the Committee that School Board members Emily Coburn and Rose Robertson-Smith had asked permission to give the Committee a minority report.

E. Coburn thanked the Committee for the opportunity to speak and gave each member hard copy of their report. She said the School Board had given the Administration a directive to prepare a budget that was below the default and to pay specific attention to furniture and technology replacement. She said the budget as proposed now eliminates 12.5 professional positions and 5 support staff. She said that proposed staff cuts could result in class sizes as high as 34:1 at the high school in history, 28:1 at the middle school and upper elementary school, 24:1 at TFS and RFS and 20:1 at MES.

R. Robertson-Smith told the Committee that the State Administrative Rules state that, in no case, shall the class size for a Science laboratory or a Career and Technology class be more than 24:1. She was concerned that, once again, the middle school would be in non-compliance.

E. Coburn said that every year since 2004, the proposed operating budget has been below the default budget. She said, this year after the first round of cuts, the budget was \$636,000 below the default. The second round of cuts resulted in an additional \$649,000 being cut. She ended that the community is upset with the cuts and has expressed concern that staff should be reinstated.

Discussion included the following points:

- School Administrators provided the class size information.
- When Administrative Staff discussed class sizes, Social Studies classes were not discussed.
- The high school principal did not tell the School Board about potential class sizes of 34:1.
- The high school has not yet gone through the enrollment process. The class size figures are actually “guesstimates” based on prior student patterns.
- The Administration will research and get back to the Committee with teacher ratios numbers for the first year the District became a “District in Need of Improvement” (DINI).
- The Administration put forward all the various budget reductions and the Superintendent has stated staff can work with the budget as currently proposed.
- The budget as currently proposed is about one million dollars below the default.
- R. Robertson-Smith and E. Coburn voted against the proposed budget due to the removal of the asbestos abatement project and the additional staff reductions at the middle and high schools.
- The School Board can apply for a waiver of compliance for Science classes that are above 24:1. This request would have to articulate plan to come back into compliance.
- There are some on-line virtual academy classes that might be options for some of the students to address class needs.
- The first budget proposed by the Administration was \$636,000 below the default.
- Each year for the last five years, staff positions have been cut in response to declining enrollments.
- J. Thornton told the Committee that the School Board majority had looked at student teacher ratios in light of what’s acceptable, given the economy and felt that ratios of 20:1 at the middle school were not justifiable.
- At the next meeting, members will question the middle and high school administrators regarding projected student teacher ratios. C. Lang specifically requested that K. Johnson review the minority report.
- Administration was asked to look into numbers at Freshman Honors Math and Senior Honors English.
- M. Chiafery said that the high school would not have any class with a ratio of more than 30:1 and that she didn’t expect any of the ratios suggested in the minority report to come to fruition.

Merrimack Teacher’s Association (MTA) Statement

S. Heinrich told the Committee that Deb McLaughlin, President of the MTA has asked to make a statement.

D. McLaughlin asked the Committee to reconsider the staff reductions. She told the Committee that the MTA was concerned about the impact the budget cuts would have on students. She said that research has shown that lower student teacher ratios result in better student performance. She also said that the District had made progress to get out of DINI status but larger class sizes will jeopardize that situation. She also said the teachers are continually faced with more initiatives and requirements that they have to meet. She requested that the Committee consider the quality, well-being and safety of the students when finalizing the budget.

Public Participation

Roy Swonger (Klara Drive and also a School Board member) provided the Committee with copies of a study from the Department of Education on class sizes. He said that smaller class size is most important in grades K - 3. He said the benefits of small class sizes decrease as students get older. Then teacher quality was identified as more important than class size. He also said he felt allowing a minority report was improper and unprecedented. He felt that the School Board liaison should be the one to provide both a majority and minority report. In addition, he said that Committee members needed to understand how the default budget is determined. He said that there comes a point when several years of small enrollment reductions equate to a classroom. He said the School Board was looking at class sizes of 30:1 for the high school college prep classes and 24:1 in high school standard classes. He also said there are some budgetary items, such as retirement and health insurance increases, that the School Board can’t control. He said the School Board has considered several alternatives such as hybrid 7th/8th grade teams, junior high model as opposed to middle school model and the needs for a common assessment project. He asked the Committee to respect what the Administration had done and said that none of the cuts had been dictated. He ended by noting that the proposed budget, even with the cuts, is nearly \$1 million dollars more than the current budget.

Cindy Thomas (Baboosic Lake Road) told the Committee she was a Merrimack 5th grade teacher, but was speaking as a private citizen. She said she was concerned about the educational, social, emotional and cultural needs of the students at the middle school level. She felt that it would be a challenge for teachers to meet all the needs of the middle school students if class size increases. She said children are not numbers, but rather vulnerable, fragile human beings. She ended by saying, with all due respect, that any Merrimack resident, whether a teacher’s spouse or not, has a right to state his or her opinion.

Jody Vaillancourt (Coleman Path and also Chair of the School Board) told the Committee that she was disappointed that the Merrimack Teachers Association and the School Board minority had been allowed to speak. She said one can take numbers and spin them

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anyway one wanted. She requested that the Committee do its diligence and bases its actions on facts and accurate information and not buy into hysteria.

S. Heinrich thanked the audience for coming to the meeting and said he understood that people felt passionate one way or the other about the budget. He said a request for permission to give a minority report has not happened in the years that he has been on the Board and that he had made the decision to allow such a report on the agenda under "Other." He also noted that, in the past, the School Board liaison has voted representing the majority view of the School Board whether that was the School Board member's personal position or not, but in such case, would often state their personal position.

C. Lang made a MOTION to adjourn. Second: B. Cummings. MOTION PASSED unanimously.

S. Heinrich adjourned the meeting at 10 PM.