

# Merrimack School District Budget Committee

Minutes  
February 9, 2010

Present: T. Beard, M. Beck, J. Burk, R. Buckley, 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. M. McLaughlin, School Business Administrator M. Shevenell and various department heads

S. Heinrich called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM. He announced that the fire alarm system in the elementary school was inoperative and stated that the fire chief had provided two fire fighters who would walk the building corridors during the meeting, so that the meeting could go on as scheduled. He gave directions for evacuating the building, in the event of an emergency and stated that should evacuation be necessary the meeting would be recessed until February 9<sup>th</sup>. He thanked the chief for coming up with a plan so that the meeting could be held. He then led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

## **Announcements**

S. Heinrich told those present that two petitioned warrant articles had been received and that these articles would be presented before the Public Hearing. He said that the Committee meeting would be recessed around 7:25 PM and the Public Hearing would be convened at 7:30 PM. He said that after the Public Hearing, the Committee would take final actions, if any, on the budget and final votes on all warrant articles.

A. Sylvia asked if it was possible to move the Public Hearing to before the presentation of the petitioned warrant articles. He said many in the audience might want to speak on the warrant articles.

S. Heinrich told him the public would be able to speak to speak on the warrant articles during the Public Hearing regardless of when they were presented to the Committee and, in any case, the Public Hearing was posted to start at 7:30 PM so it could not be started before that time.

## **Petitioned Warrant Articles**

S. Heinrich told the Committee that the District had received two petitioned warrant articles: one for the Math teaching position at the high school and one to reinstate the middle school cluster. He said each had more than 25 signatures, but the signatures had not yet been verified so that any Committee action would be subject to verification of the

signatures. He said that he wanted to ensure that both articles were presented to the Committee before the Public Hearing so the Committee would not be voting on the either article until after the Public Hearing.

**Petition to reinstate a High School Math position**

Robin Calvino (Courtland Drive) presented a petitioned warrant article requesting reinstatement of the high school math position that had been cut from the budget. She said the accreditation team is visiting the high school next month and the community needs to show a concern for education. She said the Math Lab couldn't continue to be opened every period of the school day without this position in place. She said the Math Lab affords students an opportunity to receive re-teaching and reinforcement, which she felt, could directly affect the school NECAP scores in math. She said the Math Lab could potentially save taxpayers money if it prevents students from failing and needing to re-take courses. She respectfully requested the Committee support this article and that it be placed on the warrant.

Discussion included the following points:

- The latest NECAP scores showed that only 33% of high school juniors scored as proficient or higher in math.
- The Budget Committee does not make decision about staff position based on the qualifications of the persons currently holding the positions, but rather based on the need and benefit of the positions.
- Having a petitioned warrant article puts the decision about this position in the hands of the voters.
- Even if the article passes, the School Board may still decide not to reinstate the position, but they can't use the funds for any other purpose.
- District legal counsel should evaluate the article.
- The article could be amended at deliberative session. However, the current wording cannot be changed, except for minor grammatical changes, for placement on the warrant.
- The amount requested in the petitioned article (\$66,632) is different from the amount (\$66,681) that the Committee had been told this position would cost.

**Petition to restore middle school teaching team**

Dayna Bergin (Holly Lane), Audrey Rogers (Klara Drive) and Gretchen Beard (Cabot Road) presented a petitioned warrant article requesting reinstatement of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade teaching team that had been cut from the budget. They said that, while the high school cut had only been in one curriculum area, this cut affects all parts of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum. They indicated they felt that home values would decrease when word got out that Merrimack is not supportive of quality education. They said that the additional cost for reinstating this teaching team would equate to \$36 for a home valued at \$300,000. They said they thought this cut was penny wise but pound foolish. They noted that it would be a challenge to provide personal instruction to help children progress and that they were concerned about having Science lab classes that violate state standards. In addition, they were concerned that NECAP scores would drop. They stated that 7<sup>th</sup> grade is the start of middle school and that having small class sizes is important. They ended by

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saying that a lot of people who signed the petition were not parents of 7<sup>th</sup> graders but people who cared about the education of the children of Merrimack.

Discussion included the following points:

- The article refers to four teaching positions, not necessarily the same four people that are currently teaching.
- The article carries more directive weight than if the money had simply been added to the bottom line.
- The School Board did not mandate an amount to be cut or that any additional funds be cut. It requested that the Administration go back and look for more cuts.
- The petitioners supported the original budget presented by the Administration.

S. Heinrich recessed the meeting at 7:28 PM.

The meeting resumed at 9:09 PM.

### **Recommendations on Petitioned Warrant Articles**

#### High School Math Teaching Position

M. Beck made MOTION to recommend the petitioned warrant article for the math teaching position. Second: C. Lang

M. Beck spoke to his motion by saying he had brought the issue up at the prior meeting and after input during the week, he felt the position was needed. C. Lang spoke to her second by saying the District needs to do more to address the poor test scores in math. She said that the District needs to be strong in math and that, with 2/3 of the students not proficient in math, it is critical to have this position which allows the high school to have math help available every period of every day.

Discussion included the following points:

- The cost of this article is only one piece of the tax burden.
- Class sizes are projected, not definite.
- The Budget Committee's job is to decide whether expenditures are reasonable.

C. Ortega stated it was wonderful to have so many members of the public come and speak. He said that the "will of the people" was heard this evening, would be heard again at Deliberative Session, and yet again at the ballot box. However committee members were elected to represent the people, taking many hours of committee and liaison meetings and deliberations and going through the facts. While what he saw tonight shows that there is public support on this petition, he heard no new facts on this article.

M. Publicover said he would be abstaining. He said he had already voted on this issue. He said the petitioner had rejected the Committee vote and decided to go directly to the people using the democratic process and he thought the voters should have their say.

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A. Schneider said he would be abstaining, also. He said he was glad to see the two petitioned articles come forward as they provided specific voter direction.

C. Underhill said he was on the record as being conflicted and that he, too, would be abstaining.

A. Sylvia said he felt he was elected to represent both sides.

J. Thornton asked members to declare a position rather than abstain. She said that voters look at School Board and Budget Committee recommendations to help them decide how to vote. She said the voters trust both to have done their homework.

T. Beard reminded voters that in 2007 there was a warrant article to reinstate an assistant principal position at MES that had been cut due to declining enrollment. He said the article passed and the position was re-instated. He noted that the current enrollment at MES was less than the enrollment when the position was cut and this position was not proposed for elimination. He stated, further, that by living in New England, the voters have direct impact on the budget. He said the Committee is elected to make hard decisions and that he would be casting a vote.

C. Underhill indicated that he would vote, as a member of the Budget Committee, for what he felt was best for the town.

B. Cummings said regardless of Committee vote, the article was going to the voters. He thanked the petitioners for bringing the article forward.

S. Heinrich said the loss of the math lab disturbed him.

A roll call vote was held. MOTION FAILED: 4 – 7 – 2.

Voting YES: M. Beck, S. Heinrich, C. Lang, A. Sylvia

Voting NO: T. Beard, R. Buckley, J. Burk, B. Cummings, C. Ortega, J. Thornton,  
C. Underhill

Abstaining: M. Publicover, A. Schneider

S. Heinrich told the Committee the article will be placed on the warrant as “Not Recommended: 7 – 4 – 2.”

#### Middle School Teaching Team

C. Lang made a MOTION to recommend the petitioned warrant article for the middle school teaching team. Second: T. Beard.

C. Lang spoke to her motion by saying that the public response during the hearing had – been overwhelmingly in favor of restoring the four teaching positions. She said she did not know what would happen at the Deliberative Session or at the ballot box, but that she agreed with the comments that educating a child is a step by step process, that if one step is lost, it may never be made up and that middle school children are at a vulnerable age. T.

Beard spoke to his second by saying this warrant article is only for one year and that, if the article passes, the issue will be revisited next year.

Discussion included the following points:

- There are pros and cons to this proposal; the debate is compelling on both sides.
- This is a one-year proposal. If it passes, the teaching positions do not become part of the default budget for the following year.
- This article allows the voters to decide.
- Three years ago, \$700,000 was added to the operating budget at the Deliberative Session. The Budget Committee vote to recommend, taken after the Deliberative Session, which appeared on the ballot, was 3 – 1 – 8. The School Board vote to recommend the budget that year, taken after the Deliberative Session, 3 – 2 – 0.
- Voters look at the “votes to recommend” from both the School Board and the Budget Committee that appear on the ballot and often make decisions on how to vote based on those votes.
- The middle school principal is working on a plan of implementation, but does not have one prepared. She has indicated that cutting one cluster is not something she wants to do, but if the cluster is cut, she’ll figure out how to make it work. She also indicated she’d like a year to put together a definite plan.
- Administration has indicated that they will not expect to have classes with 27 students in them at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level.

A roll call vote was held. MOTION FAILED: 5 – 6 – 2.

Voting YES: T. Beard, M. Beck, S. Heinrich, C. Lang, A. Sylvia

Voting NO: R. Buckley, J. Burk, B. Cummings C. Ortega, J. Thornton, C. Underhill

Abstaining: M. Publicover, A. Schneider

S. Heinrich told the Committee the article will be placed on the warrant at “Not Recommended: 6 – 5 – 2.”

#### **Final Actions on Warrant Articles**

S. Heinrich asked if any member wanted to change his or her vote on the warrant article regarding the MESSA contract. No one did.

S. Heinrich asked if any member wanted to change his or her vote on the warrant article regarding the RFS roof replacement. No one did.

S. Heinrich asked if any member had any additional operating budget adjustment to propose. No one did.

S. Heinrich made a MOTION to recommend an operating budget of \$64,173,352.  
Second: C. Lang.

S. Heinrich spoke to his motion by saying that the Committee has done its due diligence on the budget. He said that, if changes are made to the operating budget or warrant articles are amended, the Committee would have another opportunity to vote to recommend the budget after the deliberative session.

Discussion included the following

- The Committee's budget equals the budget presented by the School Board plus \$21,918 for the part time business position that the Committee approved last week.
- Default budget
  - If this article fails, the default budget is over \$1,000,000 higher.
  - If the budget fails and the default is in place, the School Board does not have to spend all the money.
  - Any money not spent goes back to reduce the school portion of the taxes for the following year, but the funds are collected "up front."
  - If both petitioned warrant articles pass and the operating budget fails (i.e. default budget passes), the District could have a lot of "extra" money. .
- Through agreements and disagreements, this is the best effort of the Committee.
- It would be nice if a healthy majority sent a positive message about the work of the Committee by recommending the budget.

A roll call vote was held. MOTION PASSED: 10 – 2 – 1.

Voting YES: T. Beard, R. Buckley, J. Burk, B. Cummings, S. Heinrich, C. Lang,  
C. Ortega, M. Publicover, A. Schneider, C. Underhill

Voting NO: A. Sylvia, J. Thornton

Abstaining: M. Beck

## **Other**

### **Other Meetings**

A. Schneider told the Committee that after the Deliberative Session, the main work of the Committee is completed for the year. He stated that in the past the Committee has not really met until fall to re-organize, and review the prior year's actual budget. He wanted to know if members were interested in meeting in the spring to discuss how it wants to function and/or plan a course of action for the next year. He suggested the Committee could do quarterly budget reviews, discuss budgetary issues such as revenue and the RSAs or possibly offer additional training.

Discussion included the following points:

- Budget Committees in other towns meet throughout the year, not just during the budget process.
- If monthly or quarterly budget reviews are conducted, the Committee should compare budget percentages from the same month or quarter in past years because some expenditures, like snow removal, are seasonal.

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- The goal of budget reviews should be to look at trends, not to be a “watchdog.”

By consensus, a majority of members agreed they would be comfortable meeting in the spring.

### **Deliberative Session**

S. Heinrich told the Committee that the next meeting would be March 2<sup>nd</sup> at end of the Deliberative Session. He said if any changes were made to any warrant articles during the Deliberative Session, the Committee could vote to possibly change its recommendations. In addition, the Committee will need to approve minutes. He indicated that Deliberative Session starts at 7 PM and that the Committee has reserved seating in the front row.

### **Filing Period**

S. Heinrich noted that the filing period for election start February 24<sup>th</sup> and runs until March 5<sup>th</sup>. He stated his seat as well as those of C. Lang, C. Ortega and A. Sylvia were up for election. He indicated that anyone wanting to file for election had to be a registered voter.

### **MS 27**

S. Heinrich told the Committee that a majority of the Committee has to sign the MS 27 documents, but that it won't be finished until the School Board finalizes its budget figures. He said that their final budget figures go on the form, though it is the Budget Committee figures that are the basis of the recommended budget amounts. S. Heinrich indicated he would send an email requesting that members go to the Superintendent's Office to sign the form. He said that one's signature does not mean you approved the figures, just that the figures on the form were those that were recommended by the Committee.

### **Approval of Prior Minutes**

This item was put off until March 2<sup>nd</sup>.

S. Heinrich thanked everyone for his or her hard work and made a MOTION to adjourn. Second: Everyone. MOTION PASSED.

S. Heinrich adjourned the meeting at 10:14 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Pat Heinrich