

Merrimack School District
Budget Committee
Public Hearing

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 opened the Public Hearing at 7:30 PM. He welcomed those people who were in attendance and introduced each member of the Committee. He stated the purpose of the hearing was to give the public an opportunity to comment on the proposed School District operating budget and monied warrant articles before the Committee finalized its recommendations. He said he would present an overview of each warrant article and then ask for public comment on that article before moving on to the next article on the warrant.

Article 3: Support Staff contract

S. Heinrich said that the Committee was only dealing with the cost items associated with the proposed new contract for the Merrimack Educational Support Staff Association (MESSA) Contract. He noted that the proposed contract included a minimal salary increase and an increase in the amount each member would contribute of the health insurance plan. He said the recently approved “evergreen” statute, which states that the terms of any contract approved after July 15, 2008 remain in force until a new contract is approved, affected the current MESSA contract. He indicated that the Budget Committee vote to recommend this article was 11 – 0 – 2.

S. Heinrich opened the floor for public comment.

Carolyn Morgan (Royal Court) told the Committee that she was a taxpayer, a School District employee and was speaking as the President of MESSA. She said the contract covers over 300 Title 1 tutors, maintenance workers, mechanics, custodians, para-educators, kindergarten assistants, library assistants, administrative assistants, and food service workers. She said she was happy that Budget Committee supported the proposed two-year contract.

Barbara Garant (Lesa Drive) told the Committee she was also a taxpayer and a School District employee and had been the chief negotiator for MESSA. She said the MESSA members support every facet of the school district from administrators and teachers to the children. She said the District has a well-seasoned and well-trained staff; most of who live in Merrimack and are, themselves, affected by tax bills and the current economic conditions. She said the salary increase was not what most members had hoped to receive as many MESSA members are the

lowest paid district employees; however, the contract does include an increased contribution to health insurance. She said she felt a fair contract had been negotiated.

Roy Swonger (Klara Drive and School Board member) thanked both Mrs. Morgan and Mrs. Garant for their comments. He told the Committee that a long time had been spent on negotiations and that negotiations had been well done on both sides. He, too, stated this was a fair contract. He indicated this was the first District contract that was covered by the Evergreen law which meant that the step increases for all support staff were already included in the operating and default budgets and that the amounts in the warrant article are over and above the step increases. He indicated that first year salary increase is 2.56% but the average salary increase is only 1.9%, but there will be a pay back as each member will be contributing an additional 1% contribution toward the cost of health insurance. He said the School Board values the work of the support staff, thanked the Committee for recommending the article and asked the voters to support it.

Mrs. Morgan told the committee that 2.56% may sound like a decent raise, but that she personally will be getting .17% which equates to \$40 for the entire year and that amount does not include the increased health care contribution.

Shaun Colby (Clay St.) told the Committee he was a 6th grader at the upper elementary school and he wanted to get the best education he could. He said that if there were too many kids in the classroom, the teachers wouldn't have time to help all of them.

S. Heinrich opened the floor for public comment.

There were no additional comments on the MESSA contract.

Article 5: RFS roof

S. Heinrich stated that this article appropriates funds to fix the roof at Reeds Ferry School by taking \$260,000 from the roof capital reserve fund and raising the remaining \$567,370 through taxes. He said the roof was in poor condition and needs to be replaced.

There were no public comments.

Petitioned Warrant Articles

A. MHS Math Teaching position

S. Heinrich stated that this article was a petitioned warrant article that had not yet been placed on the warrant. He said the Committee had not yet taken a vote on this article, but an attempt to put the funds requested in this warrant article into the operating budget at last week's Budget Committee meeting had failed by a vote of 4 – 9 – 0.

S. Heinrich opened the floor for public comment.

Shannon Kane (Scotch Pine Lane) told the Committee she was senior at the high school. She thanked the Committee for allowing her to speak. She said the loss of this math position represents a loss for every student, athlete, teacher and administrator at the high school. She said

she had not had the person who currently holds the position that will be cut in the classroom, but rather as a teacher outside the classroom. She said this person was also a cross-country coach who had been named coach of the year. She said her current math class had 25 students first semester and now has 30 students. She said the environment was much better first semester with fewer students in the class. Further, she said that the recently released NECAP results show that 67% of Merrimack High School juniors scored less than proficient in math and wondered if Merrimack taxpayers can really afford these low scores.

Lauren Perry (Lesa Drive) thanked the Committee for taking the time to listen to her comments. She said she didn't want to see any positions cut at the high school, as she was concerned the cuts would impact her education. She said that a student getting specific attention is not always possible when class sizes are high and these cuts may result in some classes not being offered. She said she could not understand budget cuts being made at the cost of academics and asked if the math lab would still exist if this position were not restored.

Cassie Turveo (Sarah Drive) told the Committee that the person currently holding the position that was being cut had been named Teacher of the Month for January and read from two of the nomination forms that had been submitted.

Jackie DeGrandprix (Cedar Lane) told the Committee about her personal experience joining the track team and then having the coach as her math teacher. She said she had never had such a positive response to getting after-school help as she had had from this particular teacher. She told the Committee that she's one of the luckiest people because she got to call this person both coach and teacher.

Kaley Gagnon (Danforth Road) told the Committee she didn't believe the NECAP scores would improve if this teaching position were cut. She asked what year was the School District supposed to be at 100% proficiency.

There were no additional comments on the petitioned warrant article for the math teaching position.

B. MMS Teaching Team.

S. Heinrich stated that this article was a petitioned warrant article that had not yet been placed on the warrant. He said the Committee had not yet taken a vote on this article, but an attempt to put the funds requested in this warrant article into the operating budget at last week's Budget Committee meeting had failed by a vote of 5 – 7 – 1.

S. Heinrich opened the floor for public comment.

Merrill Rodgers (Klara Drive) told the Committee she was a 6th grader in a class with 25 students in it. She expressed concern, from personal experience, that larger class sizes will prevent students from getting the help they need.

Alicia Kane (Scotch Pine Lane) told the Committee that she was a 7th grade student at the middle school and that her Social Studies teacher was always teaching test strategies, which Ms. Kane

found to be helpful in not only her Social Studies class but others as well. She said she had been in a large math class and had difficulty understanding things; however she is now in a class with fewer students and doing much better. She said that cutting a teaching team would be a great loss to the school and to the District.

Jennifer Chantler (Berkley Street) told the Committee that the Merrimack School District teachers are amazing, but that she felt that having 27 children in a class really makes it tough. She said the teachers will teach their course material well, but they don't know as much about the children as they should. She said she, herself, is a teacher in another district and has had large class sizes. She indicated her students don't get 100% of her attention. She also expressed concern about the NECAP scores that will result when next year's 7th graders are tested in 8th grade. She said she knew the principal and school staff would do everything they could to make this cut work, but she felt that it was the District's responsibility to make sure that all students get the same opportunities all the time.

Gale Taylor (Abbey Road) told the Committee that she remembered the battle many years ago to get the new middle school. She said we worked for many years and by the time it passed, were working for the benefit of other people's children because ours had moved on to high school. She said we wanted a new school so our children wouldn't have 27 or 28 students in a classroom. She said she appreciated that people are looking at the tax rate and that some cuts have to be made – but this cut brings back overcrowding.

David Frothingham (Craig Drive) told the Committee that when making cuts, one should look at what can be deferred and then caught up later but he felt you couldn't catch up on a child's education. He said he understood the replacing the roof at Reeds Ferry has been talked about for a while and can't be put off, but kids don't get a do over. He said the District spent a lot of money to build the middle school, and he thought the district should use it.

David Rodgers (Klara Drive) told the Committee that he thought the budget process was an important process and that the result of the back and forth process is a quality budget with integrity. He said people compare the budget increase to a cost of cup of coffee, but this money is an investment, which the town gets back by graduating well-trained people who hopefully stay in town. He said it is important to do the best we can for the school system and make the school system something we can be proud of.

Cindy Thomas (Baboosic Lake Road) told the Committee that each of its members and the School Board was an elected official, elected to represent the people of Merrimack. She said she respects that the School Board asked the Administration to find more budget cuts, but she felt the reality was the people of Merrimack were at this budget hearing speaking. She ended by saying the Committee's agenda needs to be what the people are asking for even if it is not what Committee members personally wanted.

There were no additional comments on the petitioned warrant article for reinstating the middle school teaching team.

Operating Budget Article

S. Heinrich stated the operating budget, as currently recommended by the Budget Committee vote of 7 – 5 – 1 was \$64,173,352. He said that the Committee had added \$21,918 dollars to fund a part-time business teaching position that had been cut by the School Board. He said the Committee vote to add this money was 9 – 4 – 0. He indicated the default budget is \$65,424,662 and that amount is \$1,251,310 more than operating budget. He further indicated that the Budget Committee does not prepare or vote on the default budget. He said during the Budget Committee work session on the budget, there was a move to add money for middle school teaching team which failed 5 – 7 – 1, a move to add the part-time business teaching position and deduct funds for some math books which failed 3 – 10 – 0 and a move to add funds for the high school math teaching position which failed 4 – 9 – 0. He said that the District gets revenues from interest, investments, out of district student placement tuitions, food services, student activities, state building aid and catastrophic aid but the Committee really has no say over how much revenue is projected. S. Heinrich indicated that one of the major increases in the budget is the guaranteed maximum health insurance increase of 19.8%. The District budgets for the full increase, but if the increase comes in lower, the extra money will go back to reduce the school portion of the tax rate. He also said other major increase in the budget was due to an increase in what the District will have to pay to the NH Retirement System. He said the District has no say in the amount and that the only way to change they system would be through legislative action. He ended by saying the Committee has gone through the budget books, page by page, line by line and that by law, it is the Budget Committee’s operating budget that is presented to the voters.

S. Heinrich opened the floor for public comment.

Jody Vaillancourt (Coleman Path and also School Board Chair) said that she was very pleased to see so many people come out to take part in the process and wished that the School Board had input like this all year long. She invited people to come to the Deliberative Session on March 2nd and to vote on April 9th. She said that members of the public should become educated and informed about the issues and could do so by attending or watching meetings, requesting minutes or contacting members. She said that it is the intent of the Administration not to have 27 students in any instructional classroom next year.

Mrs. Thomas told the Committee any given moment in time could be an instructional moment and that every time a teacher is with a child could be an instructional moment.

Mr. Swonger said that having the middle school teaching team and the high school math teacher as petitioned warrant articles gives the School Board a more accurate gauge of the will of the electorate. He thanked those that had put together the petitioned warrant articles. He indicated that a 2% decline in enrollment is projected for next year and that over the last several years enrollment has gone down at the middle school from 805 to 660. He said that 27 students in a class, while not optimal, is do-able. He said if you look at the NECAP scores, you will see that the District is doing fine. He indicated that the District is living in a time of declining enrollment and intense fiscal pressure. He also said that comments that the second round of cuts had been rushed was an insult to the many hours of time the Administration and School Board had put into them. He said that homeroom class sizes of 27 students would exist for just one year at the

middle school and that Principal Woelflin has indicated that she will use other staff to reduce class sizes. He ended by saying that the middle school warrant article might only mean \$36 to a taxpayer, but for some that is a tank of gas and that \$36 is on top of \$80 that each taxpayer will have to pay for the school budget as currently proposed. He encouraged everyone to come out and vote.

Emily Coburn (Windsor Drive and also a School Board member) said that this year's budget cuts were unprecedented. She said that enrollments do not decline equally over the various grades. She told the Committee that in 2006-2007 the School Board projected 184 students less and cut 8 teaching and 2 support staff positions. She said in 2007-2008, the School Board projected 71 students less and cut 9 teaching and 6 support staff positions. She said in 2008-2009 the School Board projected 92 students less and cut no teaching positions. She said in the current budget, the School Board projected 117 students less and cut 2 teaching positions and 1 support staff position. She indicated, for the proposed budget, the School Board had given the Administration a directive to come in with a budget below the default, while focusing on furniture, technology and infrastructure. She said Administration had done that and she supported the budget as first proposed by Administration and did not support the additional cuts.

Ms. Bergin told the Committee that the reason she had started the petition for the middle school teachers was people wanted the positions back. She said they had gathered over 70 signatures in less than 4 hours. She said people didn't want to sacrifice the education of the middle school students. She said even with penny pinching and rising costs, people want these positions. She said that she knew how much time and thought went into the Superintendent's original budget proposal and she supported that budget.

Andria Zona (Gerard Drive) told the Committee that when given a choice of optimal or doable, she would choose optimal.

Mrs. Thomas told the Committee that support staff recognized that times are tight and that even with the small raise in the contract, some may actually see a pay cut due to the increased contribution to health care. She said that people are willing to tighten their belts, but not at the expense of the education of our children. She said she hoped that the elected officials would listen to what the people are telling them.

Rochelle Rossman (Windsor Drive) told the Committee that she was a teacher in another district. She said that middle and high school years are particularly difficult years for children. She said that more students in a class means that teachers spend more time managing class size issues and less time teaching. She said every child added to a class means more work for the teacher. She indicated that she had turned down teaching positions due to large class sizes and that she, not only didn't want large classes for her own children, she didn't want them for other children as well.

Tim Tenhave (Amherst Road) told the Committee that he had sent the Committee several emails and had been hoping that the Committee would take a look at revenue. He said the reality is that revenue does go up and down and is a figure used in October to help determine tax rate. He said he thought the Committee needed to think about revenue when it put the budget together and

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that, possibly, the Committee should meet with the School Board and the Town Council early on next year to discuss the process and look at the whole picture. .

Morgan Chantler & Tia Gaumont (Berkley Street & Profile Drive) told the Committee that didn't think teachers should be cut. They said that they may not like some of the courses they have to take, but they thought they would probably help them in the future. They also said that, if there were 27 students in each class, students would get the attention they need.

There were no additional comments on the operating budget.

S. Heinrich thanked everyone for attending and closed the Public Hearing at 8:53 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Pat Heinrich