

MINUTES OF THE HINGHAM SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING

February 11, 2020

7:30PM

School Department Conference Room
220 Central Street
Hingham, MA 02043

School Committee members present: Michelle Ayer, Nes Correnti, Carlos DaSilva, Libby Lewiecki, Kerry Ni, Liza O'Reilly, Ed Schreier.

Administrators present: Dr. Paul Austin, John Ferris, Dr. Suzanne Vinnes, Rick Swanson, Mary Eastwood, Derek Smith, Dr. Beth Wilcox, Melissa Smith, Tony Keady.

1. The meeting was called to order by Michelle Ayer at 7:35PM.
2. The Committee discussed the upcoming presentation to the Board of Selectmen and Advisory Committee. It was noted that while Massachusetts General Law delegates the allocation of school budget funds to the School Committee, because the budget is tight, it is impossible to prioritize one program without destroying another.
3. The Committee joined the Board of Selectmen and the Advisory Committee for a joint meeting in the Central Meeting Room of Town Hall, 210 Central Street, at 8:00PM.
 - Mary Power gave an overview of the FY'21 Municipal Revenue and Expense analysis, highlighting a revenue shortfall of \$1.7 million. School Committee and Advisory Committee members were invited to comment. Liza O'Reilly noted that meeting the needs and challenges of the education budget has been a persistent issue and inquired whether it was time to work together toward a long term financial plan to fund the many community needs and wants, and to develop potential solutions. Mary Power (BOS) responded that the Board of Selectmen had determined that it was not worth putting together a financial plan until the MSBA had decided whether or not to invite Foster School into its program. Libby Claypoole (AdCom) inquired whether a long term plan should address the operating budget, and not just capital projects; a long term financial plan should encompass everything. Mary Power opined that the town should start with capital. Members of the public were then invited to comment. Leslie Wittman (resident) inquired why property tax rates have decreased. The response was that taxes as a whole can only increase by 2.5%, so as property values increase, the tax rate decreases. Sara Ader (resident) addressed the 47% senior citizen statistic mentioned in the Revenue and Expense analysis. She believes that it is misleading because it includes

citizens 50 and older. 65 and older is the age bracket where citizens are seeking senior services. Hingham is a growing town with young families so we need an accurate picture of our demographics. She would like clarification on how the Board of Selectmen developed that statistic. Mary Power responded that the statistic came from a pie chart in the South Hingham study group report. Karen Johnson (BOS) stated that whether it was 47% or closer to one third of the population, it is just another metric that informs the Board's decision making, similar to school aged children and the middle class. The Board will clarify that information. Libby Lewiecki stated that she would like to understand the community's feelings about an override. Although proposition 2 ½ prevents communities from raising taxes at a higher rate, an override would allow the town to raise taxes at a higher rate to meet the needs of residents, a potential solution. Karen Johnson stated that the Board of Selectmen does not intend to recommend a budget that would require an override; if the Advisory Committee looks at the budget and comes to a different conclusion, that would be another discussion, but the Board intends to recommend a budget within the 2 ½% tax levy. Mary Power stated that taxpayers will be asked for significant contributions in the near future because of the debt exclusions needed to fund the many capital needs and that there is a limit to what they can support.

- Town Administrator Tom Mayo updated the Committees and Board on the town Financial Forecast. There is currently a \$1.7 million deficit as the town budget goes to the Advisory Committee for their review period.
- FY'21 School Department Budget Presentation: Michelle Ayer gave an opening statement. She thanked the Board for their presentation which highlighted the needs of the town. She noted that it is the School Department's responsibility to meet the needs of all students, and it is required by law. Many of the needs presented by Dr. Austin are not new, but had been presented by Dr. Galo in past years. She thanked the town for valuing education and supporting our schools. The School Committee appreciates that the town resources are limited. The goal tonight is to explain what we need, why we need it and the consequences if those needs are not met. Superintendent Dr. Paul Austin gave an overview of the proposed School Department budget and thanked the administrators and principals for their work during the budget development process. He gave an overview of the budget process, student enrollment, and the strengths and challenges of Hingham Public Schools. He presented potential budget levels including a 4.44% increase which would maintain the status quo, Tier 1 which would cover the most critical needs of the district (a 6.15% increase), Tier 2 which would cover highly critical needs (a 6.78% increase) and Tier 3 which would cover critical needs (a 8.73% increase). A breakdown of the FY '21 budget showed that 83% of the budget covered personnel costs and 14% covered other contracts, leaving 3% for all other expenses. Dr. Austin then gave an overview of the grant and revolving account offsets and presented some future focused budget concerns.

Michelle Ayer noted that the School Department must meet the needs of all students, especially the most vulnerable students who are at greatest risk. She also noted that parents pay fees for their students to participate in school activities, in addition to property taxes. It was inquired what impact the proposed addition of personnel, such as a Fine Arts Director, would have on the town budget, in addition to the School budget, as insurance and benefit costs are paid by the town. John Ferris will do some research. Mary Power complimented Dr. Austin on his effort to be in the schools and in the community. She also inquired about whether there are any anticipated retirements. John Ferris anticipates three, but the deadline to inform the district is in early March. Mary Power asked about why the department was not tapping into several of the School Department revolving accounts more. Members of the public were invited to comment. Karen Johnson inquired whether the School Department could share a Human Resources Director with the Town. Dr. Austin responded that because of the level of need on both sides, that would be an impossible job. Tom Mayo agreed, but said that it may be possible to collaborate on a benefits coordinator. Dr. Austin stated that he and Tom Mayo would continue to work together to find budget efficiencies. Jane McGrath (resident) inquired whether the town could find new space for the TRACES program, since Building 12 was abruptly declared unsafe in December. Tom Mayo responded that they are looking at the old Hingham Light Plant and would likely propose an article to bring that building up to code in a few weeks. Josh Ross (resident) raised the point that the PTOs raise approximately \$250,000 per year from parent donations to support the schools. He inquired about special education out of district placements. Peter Howell (resident) shared his family's experience and noted that Hingham parents pay a great deal to support students when they struggle. He noted that if we all pay a little more in taxes, we would all pay much less out of pocket, and that the community would pay more to see all critical needs addressed. Ray Estes (resident) commented that the needs presented in this budget are not new and have existed since his time serving on the School Committee. He noted that the approach to the school budget was conservative and took more of a level services approach. He applauded Dr. Austin for taking a fresh look at the budget and presenting the real needs of the schools. Many of the budget asks this year have been presented in past years but have not been funded. Finally, he noted the importance of providing funding for a Fine Arts Director. Arts credits are a graduation requirement. If the state thinks it is important enough to make it a graduation requirement, then certainly the department is as important as the other academic departments, which all have directors. Monica Tesler (resident) spoke to a scheduling issue at Hingham High School, and the difficult decisions students and families make, as music electives conflict with special education strategies courses. Because Hingham lacks a Special Education Director and a Fine Arts Director, there is no leadership to address this issue. Libby Lewiecki

noted that because the budget is so tight, the Selectmen are asking the School Committee and administration to take from one child to meet the needs of another. She respectfully asked the Selectmen to find more revenue. Discussions across town indicate that there may be less resistance than expected to raising taxes to meet the needs of all of our citizens, not just students.

- At 10:30PM, the Advisory Committee went into recess.
- John Ferris gave an overview of a proposed submission of a Statement of Interest to the MSBA to replace windows at Plymouth River Elementary. The Board of Selectmen unanimously approved supporting the SOI.
- John Ferris gave an overview of proposed Warrant Article S to increase the funds available for the Foster School feasibility study. The Board of Selectmen unanimously approved the article.
- John Ferris gave an overview of a Warrant Articles II and JJ to transfer insurance funds paid to the town from the fire at Hingham High School and the flood at East Elementary to the School Department. The Board of Selectmen unanimously approved those articles.

4. On a motion by Michelle Ayer and seconded by Kerry Ni,
It was
Voted: To adjourn at 11:04PM.

Respectfully Submitted By:
Kerry Ni

Documents:
Agenda