

WACHUSETT REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

HOLDEN ♦ PAXTON ♦ PRINCETON ♦ RUTLAND ♦ STERLING

Minutes

Wachusett Regional School District Committee
Public Hearing – Budget

Monday, March 11, 2002
7:00 p.m.

Media Center
Wachusett Regional High School

Committee Members Present:

John Rokicki, Chairman	Alice Livdahl
Sherry Horeanopoulos, Vice-chairman	David Lowenthal
Donald Benson	Peter MacDonald
Carol Esperti	Kelly Maxwell
Kimberly Ferguson	Natalie Mello
Michael Gennert	John Nunnari
Jane James	Julie Scott
Sarah Jordan	Kathleen Singh
Duncan Leith	Margaret Watson

Committee Members Absent:

Jeffrey Gibbs	Elizabeth Pape
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Administration Present:

Alfred D. Tutela, Ph.D., Superintendent of Schools
Paul K. Soojian, Director of Operations
Brian O'Connell, Director of Administrative Services
Philip Campbell, Director of Student/Information Services
Peter V. Brennan, Comptroller
Susan Sullivan, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent

Others present:

Linda Lehans, *The Landmark*
Stacey M. Grossi, *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*
James Leger, Chair Rutland Selectboard
Louis Cornacchioli, Rutland Selectboard
Douglas Briggs, Rutland Selectboard

Clealand Blair, Chair Rutland Finance Committee
Christian deMarcken, Paxton Finance Committee
Stanley Moss, Chair Princeton Advisory Board
David White, Holden Selectboard
James Scola, Holden Selectboard
Michael Wronski, Holden Selectboard
Joseph Giotta, Holden Finance Committee
Paul Anderson, Holden Finance Committee
Lou Evangelitis, Holden Finance Committee
Brian Bullock, Holden Town Manager
Remo Rossi, Sterling Selectboard
Paul Sushchyk, Sterling Selectboard
Maureen Floryan, Holden
Larry Floryan, Holden
David Gibbs, Sterling
Mark James, Holden
Jeffrey Wentzell, Paxton
Melinda Johnson, Paxton
Edward Twarog, Princeton
Lee Merlin, Holden
Michael Esperti, Holden
Susan Duval, Sterling
David Clark, Sterling
Jean Theurkauf, Sterling
Ann Quill, Sterling

I. Call to Order

Chairman Rokicki called the meeting to order at 7:05 PM and introduced newly appointed ~~Paxton~~ HOLDEN representative to the School Committee Margaret Watson.

II. Presentation of the FY03 Budget

The Superintendent distributed a copy of the Agenda (attachment 1) and a copy of the PowerPoint Budget Presentation (attachment 2).

Chairman Rokicki turned the meeting over to the Superintendent who presented the FY03 budget, comprised of three parts:

- minimum contributions;
- recovery of excess debt; and
- debt repayment.

The Superintendent, aided by Comptroller Peter Brennan, presented the budget via a PowerPoint presentation. The Superintendent informed the Committee of changes to the FY03 budget as compared to the FY02 budget. The projected increases included:

- \$1,709,419 (5.6%) in salaries;
- \$510,212 (14.03%) in benefits (The Superintendent informed the Committee that the bids are out for health insurance and that projections in this area have been as high as a 20% increase in premiums.);
- \$4,317 (1.1%) in Fixed Charges;
- \$91,935 (17.51%) in Buildings and Grounds;
- \$16,587 (9.86%) in Custodial Services;
- \$900 (.92%) in Athletics/Student Activities;
- \$354,750 (15%) in Special Education Tuitions – Others Schools; and
- \$1,111,610 (756%) in WRHS Renovations due to Phase I of the Modular Classroom Project at the high school.

Projected decreases include:

- \$10,274 (1.52%) in Substitutes/Stipends;
- \$277,635 (10.64%) in Instructional Support;
- \$216,657 (14.74%) in Heat & Utilities;
- \$22,023 (3.33%) in Special Education Instructional Support; and
- \$1,500 (23.08% in vocational educational support.

The Superintendent reviewed the comparison slides, with and without debt service and the per pupil operating expense. He reported that he had been in contact with Senator Brewer and Representative Bunker regarding the budget, in particular the increase in special education costs. He encouraged both to support a decrease in services needed to provide special education students, commensurate with the decrease in Chapter 70 aid.

Chairman Rokicki asked for questions from the Committee.

Are the reductions in transportation reimbursement for towns as well as regional school districts? The Superintendent reported that the reductions were for regional districts only.

Where is the 100% reimbursement for transportation? The Superintendent reported that transportation includes costs for pupils not eligible for transportation, yet the District transports them.

Princeton's Selectboard requested level funding. Can the District use some of the funds for technology to help out the towns? The Superintendent reported that now was indeed the time to put money aside, as things will get worse before it gets better.

Where is the budget in relation to the projected revenues for the state? The Superintendent reported that the budget was exactly on target, using the preliminary numbers.

What accounts for the decrease in Administrative Specialists? An increase in grant funding will allow the District to fund an administrative specialist from grant funds.

What accounts for the increase in facility maintenance at the Central Office? Comptroller Brennan reported that it was attributable to the Jefferson School. The Superintendent reported that he would look into this line item further and report to the School Committee in his next report. The Central Office facility rent and maintenance is for the check printing and packaging equipment and telephone system.

A concern was expressed that the budget did not reflect the concern for inequity among member towns. The Superintendent explained that he is charged to present a budget to the School Committee responsible to the education of children.

A question was raised as to whether increases would be recommended in the After School Music Program. The Superintendent reported that not only are there no increases, but that this program would probably be eliminated if cuts need to be made to the District's budget. The Superintendent has increased the staffing authorization for a middle school strings teacher to be shared among the middle schools. A further concern was raised that the additional person should be a coordinator of music rather than a strings teacher. The Superintendent reported that a music teacher staff of sixteen does not require a coordinator or supervisor. In a K-12 curriculum when cuts are needed, extra programs will be cut first. The Superintendent reminded the Committee that no special education services can be reduced.

Is the budget level programmed? The Superintendent explained that it was level programmed, with the addition of the one middle school strings music teacher.

A concern was raised in reducing Heat & Utilities. The Superintendent explained that an analysis of use was done by District staff and a decision was made that a reduction could be made in that account.

A concern was raised as to what would be cut if a reduction was necessary. The Superintendent explained that reductions would have to be made later if the funding is cut as predicted and that the time to cut would be then and not now. To threaten cuts now is not fair to a dedicated staff. Of all the municipal bodies, the District is the most vulnerable. Member towns do not rely on Chapter 70 funding to the same extent as school districts.

A question was raised as to the timing of voting on the budget appropriation. The Superintendent reported that the Paxton Selectboard was expected to change its Annual Town Meeting to June. If that occurs and no other member towns change their annual town meetings, the budget must be voted on at the next meeting in March. Member towns can vote the budget up or down; only the School Committee can vote to lower the budget amounts; the assessments cannot be raised once voted.

A member suggested that a policy be adopted which would establish the priorities of the Committee. The Superintendent concurred.

Chairman Rokicki complimented the Superintendent on the budget presented and informed the Committee that no votes would occur at the Budget Hearing but are on the agenda of the regular meeting to follow. He would address the budget at the beginning of the regular meeting.

A concern was raised as to whether the budget is the School Committee's budget or the Superintendent's. The Superintendent reported that he is charged to present a budget to the School Committee for adoption and to implement it once approved by the member towns.

Since the Paxton Selectboard may be rescheduling their Annual Town Meeting, the budget could be referred back to the Business/Finance Subcommittee for further review. A meeting is already scheduled for Tuesday, March 19, 2002 at 6:30 PM at the Curriculum Center at the Central Office.

A question was raised as to the expenditures for textbooks. The Superintendent explained that the textbook account is part of the principals' discretionary funds and that each principal can allocate the discretionary funds appropriately for each school.

A concern was raised as to the increase in staffing for the high school (i.e. custodian and assistant principal). The Superintendent explained that the custodian is based on square footage and that the assistant principal is based not only on enrollment but on the ability to adequately monitor students in the new facility and to adequately evaluate staff. Although the enrollment at the high school has increased, the assistant principals at the high school have not increased since 1996.

A question was raised regarding the student/teacher ratios. The Superintendent explained that although research clearly indicates that the lowest student/teacher ratios should be in the lowest grades, the high school is lowest due to the negotiated agreement. The School Committee can adopt policy regarding the ratios but with budget reductions coming, the ratios would probably be increased not decreased.

A concern was raised regarding the process and the short amount of time for the School Committee to review the budget presented. The Superintendent explained that the budget was prepared as soon as the preliminary numbers from the Department of Education were made available.

III. Public Hearing

Susan Duval, Sterling, expressed concern about the class size in Sterling in the lower grades and also expressed concern regarding the After School Music Program. The Committee needs to find money for music.

Michael Wronski, Holden Selectboard, reported that the Holden Selectboard voted unanimously a way to assess the funds above minimum net contributions. He encouraged the use of the "Martin Opinion". He encouraged the Committee to address this issue before town meetings. He agreed that there are shared values: there is no impact on budget; agrees that the District works; removal of an impediment to move forward on the high school project. This is the local solution. He urged the Committee to support this proposal.

Larry Floryan, Holden, strongly urged the Committee to not support the “Martin Opinion”: justification of proposal – the state is paying the difference; the proposal is illegal – Jeff Wulfson stated that the assessment comes from the School Committee and must follow the Regional Agreement. He spoke with Debra Comfort, legal department of DOE, and she indicated that it was illegal.

Brian Bullock, Holden Town Manager, asked if the public would be able to speak when the issue came forward. The Chairman indicated that he would permit members of the public to speak at that time.

Louis Cornacchioli, Rutland Selectboard, asked if the motion will be made tonight.

IV. Adjournment

Motion: To adjourn.

(S. Jordan)
(J. Nunnari)

Vote:

In favor:

John Rokicki
Sherry Horeanopoulos
Donald Benson
Carol Esperti
Kimberly Ferguson
Michael Gennert
Jane James
Sarah Jordan
Duncan Leith
Alice Livdahl
David Lowenthal
Peter MacDonald
Kelly Maxwell
Natalie Mello
John Nunnari
Julie Scott
Kathleen Singh
Margaret Watson

Opposed:

None

(Motion passed unanimously)

The meeting was adjourned at 9:04 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Alfred D. Tutela, Ph.D.
Superintendent of School

ADT:ss