

WACHUSETT REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

HOLDEN ♦ PAXTON ♦ PRINCETON ♦ RUTLAND ♦ STERLING

Minutes

Annual Budget Hearing

Monday, March 28, 2005

7:00 PM

Media Center

Wachusett Regional High School

Committee Members Present:

Duncan Leith, Chair	John Kane
John Nunnari, Vice-chair	Alice Livdahl
Cynthia Bazinet	Natalie Mello
Elizabeth Brennan	Phillip Mighdoll
Charles Capparelli	Norman Plourde
Robert Carter	Cheryl Rauh
Patricia Gates (7:15 PM)	Michael Sherman
David Gibbs	Margaret Watson
Mark James	

Committee Members Absent:

Mary Catherine Maher	Kelly Maxwell
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Administration Present:

Alfred D. Tutela, Ph.D., Superintendent of Schools
Paul K. Soojian, Deputy Superintendent and Director of Operations
Peter Brennan, Comptroller
Susan H. Sullivan, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent

Others present, who desired to be recorded as present (see attached Attendance Sheet – attachment 1)

I. Call to Order

Chair Duncan Leith called the Annual Budget Hearing to order at 7:05 PM and informed the public that speakers would be limited to three minutes in order to provide enough time for anyone to speak. Once all speakers have been heard, the Annual Budget Hearing would be

adjourned. The Regular School Committee will be called to order and the budget will be addressed immediately.

Chair Leith introduced and welcomed newly appointed Princeton representative Phillip Mighdoll.

Chair Leith advised the Committee and the public that the area legislators were invited to come to the Annual Budget Hearing. Chair Leith reported that Senator Stephen Brewer was in attendance and that a representative from Representative Harold Naughton's office had also responded.

II. Presentation of the *Proposed FY06 Appropriation*

The Superintendent reviewed the *Proposed FY06 Appropriation* and reported that the District had been dismayed at the recent release of the State FY04 Per Pupil Expenditures, as the District had the lowest Per Pupil Expenditures for regional school districts and the eleventh lowest of all school districts. In FY95 the District was above the State mean. In FY03 the District suffered a severe reduction in State Aid which resulted in the substantial lay off of staff; the District is the only municipality in the region to have laid off staff since FY02.

The Superintendent urged Member Towns to support education and to remember that the District is not a separate funding agency but an integral part of the Member Towns' fiscal responsibility. The Superintendent further stated that the District recognizes the substantial spending requirements being deferred to the Member Towns, a result of the reduction in State Aid. The *Proposed FY06 Appropriation* represents the FY02 status quo; it includes only one additional regular education staff member, a security monitor at night at the high school, as requested by the School Committee.

The *Proposed FY06 Appropriation* includes no improvements to buildings and no needed improvements to technology, two items presented as options for the School Committee's consideration. A technology upgrade plan will not be implemented due to lack of resources; major capital expenditures will be set aside for some time in the future. The Superintendent advised the Committee that these costs cannot continue to be deferred because they will begin to increase exponentially. The Superintendent informed the Committee that

educational performance improvements are stretching teachers and administrators; the path of diminishing return must stop.

The Superintendent advised the Committee that values and standards guided the development of the budget. The School Committee must strategize in order to reach collective agreement on how to achieve the lofty budget priorities in a reasonable timeframe. The Superintendent reminded the Committee that being eleventh from the bottom in State per pupil expenditures is unacceptable. If the *Proposed FY06 Appropriation* is adopted, the per pupil expenditure will still be well below the State mean FY04 per pupil expenditure. The Committee must stand on common ground, weigh the testimony, and develop the best collective strategies to achieve the budget priorities set in January.

Chair Leith invited Senator Brewer to address the Committee and the public.

Senator Brewer reported that the House of Representatives budget is to be released on April 28, 2005. The Ways & Means Committee has been conducting hearings throughout the State to gather input on budget issues. With the re-structuring of the committees, there is now an Education Committee for kindergarten through grade twelve and a Higher Education Committee. Commissioner of Education David Driscoll and representatives for the Massachusetts Association of School Committees requested an increase of \$318 million for K-12 and \$300-400 million for the next six years for higher education.

Senator Brewer reported that in FY02, one out of every four dollars expended by the State was on health-related issues; now that figure is one out of every three dollars.

Senator Brewer reported that FY06 represents the twelfth year of the Education Reform Act, an act designed for seven years. At the budget hearing, the Commissioner reported that the Chapter 70 formula needs work and the Ways and Means Committee challenged the Commissioner to make some recommendations for the Ways and Means Committee to consider.

Senator Brewer reported that he supports full funding of regional transportation, which would result in an increase of \$17 million, and

recognizes the need to increase State support for special education transportation.

Senator Brewer reported that he believes that at least \$50 per student will be added to Chapter 70 Aid and that the Pothole Fund will be funded.

Senator Brewer reported that, on the municipal side, he supports the uncapping of the lottery funds, which by law were designated to go to the cities and towns. The currently plan is to phase in the uncapping at the rate of 20% for the next five years.

Senator Brewer concluded his remarks by thanking Representative Harold Naughton, who is currently serving his country as Judge Advocate General.

III. Public Hearing

Chair Duncan Leith declared the public hearing open.

Paul Challenger, Chair, Holden Finance Committee, reported that for the last two years, all of Holden's increased growth has been dedicated to the school budget. He urged the School Committee to adopt whatever budget was appropriate but to consider the funding sources and to ask for a Proposition 2 ½ override if the increase is above 3.7% (2 ½% plus half of the new growth). If the School Committee adopts a higher budget, the Committee must be prepared to advocate for the budget and explain to the taxpayers why there is the increased need.

James Covello, President, Wachusett Regional Education Association (WREA), encouraged the School Committee to support budget as presented. Mr. Covello presented the perspective of the teachers:

- kindergarten classrooms have increased in size and support has decreased;
- in grades 1 through 5 the number of students increased, as well as the special needs of special education students, requiring teacher meetings and special education meetings, all of which take away from teacher time with kids;
- middle schools have team teaching but for all practical purposes, there are no teams, as there is no common planning time, in order to provide more classes with fewer teachers; and

- high school enrollment has dramatically increased and the teaching staff has decreased, causing classes to be larger, even in areas such as science, which require smaller sizes in order to do experimental work.

Mr. Covello advised the Committee that teachers need instructional materials and time to do the job. He urged the Committee to stop the bleeding and to allow the District to return to a time when Wachusett was considered the premier district in the State.

Jennifer Lish, Holden, reported that she is a parent of students at Dawson Elementary School and that there were classes of twenty-five students. The teachers are overwhelmed. Education is a community decision and responsibility.

Joanne O'Brien, Holden, read a prepared statement (attachment 2).

Edith Howard, District-wide Music Teacher, read a prepared statement (attachment 3).

Jean Gough, District-wide Music Teacher, read a prepared statement (attachment 4).

Alan Berg, Holden Finance Committee, questioned the use of Per Pupil Expenditures, indicating that like communities should be compared not all communities in the State. Mr. Berg also questioned whether increased funding automatically would result in higher MCAS results.

Larry Floryan, Holden, reported that groups can be compared, especially similar socio-economic groups and that there is a direct mapping of decreased funding resulting in decreased MCAS results. Mr. Floryan expressed concern as the students are the ones who have been penalized. He reminded the Committee that the restoration budget presented is still 15% below the State Per Pupil average. Mr. Floryan recognized the significant hit on the municipalities but urged all involved in the process to not pit one side against the other.

Kimberly Ferguson, Chair, Holden Selectboard, reported that the Selectboard has a job to do on the municipal side; five out of five Member Towns have agreed to support the Joint Resolution. The increase in the school budget represents a 16% increase to Holden's

budget. She reported that there is no way that the town could support the school budget without an override. She reminded the Committee that the Holden Selectboard values education and recognizes that this is a difficult situation for all.

Maureen Floryan, Holden, read a prepared statement (attachment 5).

Charles Gruszka, Principal, Dawson Elementary School, reported that the new staff positions in the proposed budget are critical. He reported that he is now telling parents that children are not receiving the same education as a few years ago and that he will no longer make a promise to parents that students will pass MCAS. Principal Gruszka reported that scores have gone down, with the teaching staff remaining constant. The difference is the reduction in funding and, therefore, the reduction in MCAS support programs for children. He urged the Committee to let this budget come from the School Committee to the Member Towns and beyond.

Joseph Sullivan, Holden Selectboard, acknowledged his support of education over the years and commented that as a municipal official he tries to diffuse the emotion. His concern rests on the lack of response by the School Committee to the Joint Resolution and School Committee Members participation in signing the petitions submitted to the Town of Holden. He urged the School Committee to consider the funding source when appropriating a budget; a Proposition 2 ½ override will be necessary to support increases to the education budget. If the Committee is convinced of the reasons for increases, ask the citizens for support.

Kenneth O'Brien, Holden Selectboard, reported that the municipal side of the government never has enough to fund education. He reported that he is solidly behind the School Committee in support of what is important for students. It is the responsibility of the Member Towns to fund education.

Stanley Moss, Chair, Princeton Selectboard, questioned why school debt was not included in the per pupil expenditure numbers. Chair Moss reported that Princeton has added 1.5 employees in the last twelve years, with a 20% increase in population.

Douglas Briggs, Rutland Selectboard, reported that Rutland will always present to the Town Meeting what the School Committee appropriates. The Rutland Selectboard voted to support the Joint Resolution and in Rutland the increase overall, between 2 ½ % increase and new growth, is 7%. At this time Rutland is looking at a Proposition 2 ½ override of \$1.1 million, a debt exclusion of \$300,000 and a transfer of \$300,000 from the stabilization fund.

John Malone, Chair, Paxton Selectboard, reported that a RASA of \$480,000 more is more than Paxton can afford. Paxton has always supported education; difficult decisions must be made and the School Committee must do what is right.

Sheila Despres, Sterling, is a parent of four children and has first hand knowledge that the education in the District has eroded. She urged the School Committee to please consider restoring services.

David O'Brien, Holden, read a prepared statement (attachment 6).

Lisa Call, Sterling, asked the School Committee to be more specific in its explanation of the budget; a better marketing plan to the community should be developed. She urged the School Committee to use class sizes, rather than student/teacher ratios.

Charles Blanchard, Paxton Town Administrator, reported that the increase requested of Paxton is too large and the restoration must be done over several years.

Melinda Johnson, Paxton, thanked the Superintendent and staff for the dedication to education; she thanked the School Committee for adopting standards for what is best for children. She urged the adoption of the proposed budget.

Richard Fenton, Chair, Paxton Finance Committee, read a prepared statement and distributed graphs (attachments 7 and 8).

IV. Adjournment

Motion: To adjourn the Annual Budget Hearing

(C. Capparelli)

(D. Gibbs)

Vote:

In favor:

Duncan Leith
John Nunnari
Cynthia Bazinet
Elizabeth Brennan
Charles Capparelli
Robert Carter
Patricia Gates
David Gibbs
Mark James
John Kane
Alice Livdahl
Natalie Mello
Phillip Mighdoll
Norman Plourde
Cheryl Rauh
Michael Sherman
Margaret Watson

Opposed:

None

(Motion passed unanimously)

The Annual Budget Hearing adjourned at 8:50 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

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