

## **Finance Committee Meeting Minutes Thursday, February 16, 2023**

**Present:** (Z – zoom)

**Finance Committee**

Roll Call 10 in attendance

Dennis Crowley (Chair)

Douglas Shea (Vice Chair)

Josette Burke (Clerk)

Kathleen Foley Greulich

Leigh Ann Luetzen (Z)

Lawrence Pitman

Adrienne Rogers (Z)

Mark Sullivan

Mark Trudeau

Lisa Van der Linden

**Absent:** Brian Bain, Audrey Grace, Steve Hendricks, Jean Kenney, Scott Wassel

**Additional attendees:**

Jim Johnson, Bridget Gough, Mike Friscia, Nancy Gallivan, Kristen Syrek, Sean Ahern

The meeting was called to order by Dennis Crowley at 7:00pm.

Meeting minutes of recorded meetings include time stamps from the video for viewing actual content.

The video can be found at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4xU\\_Gp6xg0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4xU_Gp6xg0)

*\*Approval of minutes is based off of the printed word and not the video\**

**Education Budget Review (6:16)**

School Superintendent Dr. Bridget Gough and School Business Administrator Mike Friscia gave an overview of the FY24 Schools Budget and highlighted new programs and changes to the curriculum. Demographics-wise, the school system is becoming more diverse, with a growing number of students who do not speak English as a first language.

Mark Sullivan asked if well-meaning groups are helping people in need globally but then sending them off to Walpole for the Town to provide for and manage. Dr. Gough stated that Walpole is not the only town seeing an increase in these types of students, and the numbers are consistent statewide.

Josette Burke asked if the Town gets any reimbursement for testing students who are part of the Home for Little Wanderers program. Dr. Gough stated that the Town does not receive any reimbursement.

Mike Friscia stated that the budget increases for this year are largely due to the collective bargaining of salaries and the loss of Medicaid reimbursement due to changes in policy. Goods and services have also jumped due to an increase in prices across the board, including transportation, utilities, and technology.

(26:00) Dennis Crowley asked why the School Department and the Town Administrator consistently come up with different numbers for the education budget. Mike Friscia stated that the budget development process is long and they are leaving the door open in case funding sources like state aid change. Nancy Gallivan stated that this is not unique to Walpole, and every town deals with fluctuations in the school budget because it is a procedural necessity.

Lawrence Pitman asked if the Schools could provide more data to show trends in energy consumption so the Finance Committee can have a better idea on how much is appropriate to fund the electricity budget. Dr. Gough agreed to do so, in addition to sending graphs showing changes in demographics.

(38:50) Mike Friscia talked about the Out of District Special Education Program and explained why the costs are rising significantly in recent years. The needs are constantly changing and the program coordinators have to be ready to adapt to these changes on the fly.

Lisa Van der Linden asked what the schools will do next year to pay for some Special Ed students that are being covered by a surplus this year. Mike Friscia stated that he will try to find money in the operating budget to pay for that line item.

Mark Sullivan asked if all the students who utilize Special Ed services truly need them. Dr. Gough stated that each student is thoroughly tested in-house, and cases can go to a hearing if parties disagree.

(50:35) Leigh Ann Luetzen asked how wide the spectrum of disabilities with which Special Ed helps is. Dr. Gough stated that it really varies, but there is a wide range of students who take advantage of the resources. She stated that by law, if a parent requests Special Ed testing for their child, the school district has to comply and pay for the tests.

Josette Burke inquired about the school's obligation to fund the tuition of students who move from out of district. Mike Friscia stated that if the student arrives after April 1<sup>st</sup> then the district they were in previously has to fund that particular student for the following school year.

Mark Sullivan asked if federal ESSER (Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief) Funds would disappear soon. Mike Friscia stated that they knew beforehand that these funds would only last during COVID, and they are prepared to move on without these funds when it does indeed end.

Dennis Crowley questioned whether the Schools were receiving adequate state and federal funding for Special Ed. Mike Friscia stated that in terms of the transportation of Special Ed students, funding has been very helpful. However, other areas are not being fulfilled quite as well.

Lawrence Pitman asked if districts with lower Average Median Incomes get more funding from the state or federal government for the Special Ed Circuit Breaker program than those with higher AMIs. Nancy Gallivan stated that funding is not based on the need of the district and each town pays the same per student.

(1:02:15) Mike Friscia stated that some increases in personnel line items are due to grants not keeping up with typical salary increases or grants being reduced or eliminated entirely. Other increases are due to the escalation of the needs of certain types of students.

Lisa Van der Linden about the school district's ability to serve the needs of LGBT+ students. Dr. Gough stated that the schools have hired some counselors who specialize in this area in the past, but they will continue to take steps to provide aid and guidance to this growing population in the future.

Dennis Crowley asked if ESPs (Educational Support Professionals) are town employees. Mike Friscia stated the ones outlined in the budget are, but because they have trouble finding and hiring new ESPs, they also employ Agency ESPs which appear in the goods and services portion of the budget. These cost twice as much as regularly-hired ESPs.

Adrienne Rogers shared her experience working currently as an ESP at Fisher School and described how she assists the Special Ed teachers.

(1:12:11) Mike Friscia stated that the van driver program is going well, and it is really important to students for whom transportation is an issue.

Lawrence Pitman asked about the difference between Team Leads and Team Chairs. Dr. Gough stated that Team Chairs are part of the Special Education Department, while Team Leaders are the teachers who lead the curriculum.

Mark Trudell asked if van drivers are considered part-time or full-time. Mike Friscia stated that it depends on what route they drive, but many of the ones who are considered full-time and qualify for benefits don't take advantage of it.

(1:21:42) Lawrence Pitman asked how custodian overtime is budgeted. Mike Friscia stated that he takes the total number of dollars he needs and allocates the corresponding number of people to that account.

Leigh Ann Luetzen asked if the extended day program is run in-house or sub-contracted out. Mike Friscia confirmed that it is run entirely in house by the extended day coordinator.

Lawrence Pitman asked about the many grants that the school department receives. Mike Friscia stated that they are not outlined in the budget overview, but he can provide copies of a more detailed outline to the Finance Committee at a later date.

Lawrence Pitman asked why the FY22 Fiscal Year was so irregular compared to the surrounding years. Mike Friscia pointed out that this year was in the heart of COVID and there was a lot of variability.

Douglas Shea asked about the decreases in the Central Services budget. Mike Friscia stated that they used to do a lot of advertising in the local paper for open positions, but now they use another service that replaced these press ads.

(1:29:52) Mark Sullivan asked about the increase in the testing and assessment budget. Dr. Gough stated that the jump reflects a change in state policy that mandates dyslexia screenings for all students K-12.

Douglas Shea asked about the All-State Music Conference. Dr. Gough stated the costs vary depending on where the conference is located and how many students end up qualifying for the music conference.

Mark Sullivan asked if the Special Ed outplacement costs are audited. Dr. Gough stated that a packet goes out and the Out-Of-District Coordinator ensures that the placement and costs are appropriate.

Leigh Ann Luetzen asked if there are any ways to save money in the transportation budget. Mike Friscia stated that they've tried to cut down on bus routes, but it proved difficult to renegotiate the contract with the bussing company.

**Adjournment (1:38:27)**

**Motion** by Mark Sullivan and seconded by Mark Trudell to adjourn.  
The motion passed 10-0-0.

The Finance Committee adjourned at 8:30pm.