



**Minutes of the
Town of Belmont
Joint Open Meeting of the
Select Board
with the School Committee,
Warrant Committee and
Comprehensive Capital Budget Committee
February 8, 2024**

**RECEIVED
TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA**

DATE: March 4, 2024
TIME: 9:30 AM

Approved by the Select Board:
Monday, February 26, 2024

To view the recording of the meeting, please click [HERE](#).

Call to Mr. Epstein called the meeting of the Select Board to order at 7:00pm.

Order: Ms. Moriarty called the meeting of the School Committee to order 7:01pm.

Mr. Lubien called the meeting of the Warrant Committee to order at 7:05pm.

Ms. Doyle called the meeting of the Comprehensive Capital Budget Committee to order at 7:07pm.

Select Board Members	Present	School Committee Members & Staff	Present
Roy Epstein, Chair	Yes	Meghan Moriarty, Chair	Yes
Elizabeth Dionne, Vice-Chair	Yes	Amy Checkoway, Secretary	Yes
Mark Paolillo, Member	Absent	Jeffrey Liberty	Yes
Warrant Committee Members		Jamal Saeh	Absent
Geoffrey Lubien, Chair	Yes	Jung Yueh	Yes
Paul Rickter, Vice-Chair	Yes	Amy Zuccarello	Yes
Conor McEachern, Secretary	Absent	Jill Geiser, Superintendent of Schools	Yes
William Anderson	Yes	Lucia Sullivan, Asst Superintendent of Schools	Yes
Tom Caputo	Yes	Anthony DiCologero, Schools Director of Finance	Yes
Fitzie Cowing	Yes	Comprehensive Capital Budget Committee (CCBC)	
Susanne Croy	Yes	Chris Doyle, Chair	Yes
Deepak Garg	Yes	Claus Becker	Absent
Anne Helgen	Remote	Patricia Brusch	Yes
Robert McLaughlin	Remote	Susan Burgess-Cox	Yes
Melissa Morley	Yes	Jill Geiser, Non-Voting, Superintendent of Schools	Yes
Lynn Peterson Read	Yes	Jennifer Hewitt, Non-Voting – ATM/Finance Director	Absent
Matthew Taylor	Yes	Deepak Garg, Warrant Committee	Yes
Marie Warner	Yes	Lawrence Link	Absent
Jack Weis	Remote	Aaron Pikcilingis	Yes
Roy Epstein, Ex-officio Designee, Select Board	Yes	Mark Paolillo, Ex-officio Designee - Select Board	Absent
Meghan Moriarty, Ex-officio, School Committee	Yes	Jung Yueh, Ex-officio Designee - School Committee	Yes
Staff Members			
Patrice Garvin, Town Administrator	Yes	Matt Haskell, Budget Analyst	Yes

Ethics and Open Meeting Law Compliance

Mr. Epstein said this item was on the agenda by accident but did encourage Town appointing authorities to get tough on Ethics and Open Meeting Law training for their members, as the Select Board is doing. He particularly asked that minutes be filed on time and spoke about why this is important.

FY2025 Preliminary Budget Recommendation by the Town Administrator and School Superintendent with an Override and without an Override.

Town (click [HERE](#) to see the Town Slides): Ms. Garvin reviewed the key points to consider while listening to the presentations at this meeting:

- Growing expenses and constrained revenue growth since FY2021 have led to a continuously growing budget deficit.
- The Town has restructured its departments through "smarter, faster, better" efforts.
- \$8.4M override request is on the April 2nd Ballot.
- 3-year financial plan will cap annual growth rates:
 - Town 2½%
 - Schools 5%
 - Shared Services 2½%

She then provided details of the budget challenges, and the history of Town-side budget planning since FY20. She went on to explain why the \$8,400,000 override is important, providing details of what will be funded by this override, and the impacts if the override fails. Ms. Garvin then summarized:

- The Town has controlled costs by restructuring departments, evaluating delivery of services, right sizing and merging school and Town employee benefits.
- As a result, the Town can maintain its growth within Prop 2½ with an \$8.4M Operating Override with a tax impact of \$74 for \$100k assessed value.
- The use of one-time funds created an unsustainable deficit.
- If the override fails Annual Town Meeting will be presented with a budget that is reduced for the Town by \$800k in FY2025.
- In FY2026 an additional \$1.3M will need to be cut.

Schools (click [HERE](#) to see the Schools slides): Dr. Geiser acknowledged that it will be difficult for the community whether or not the override passes. She explained that the goal is to invest in the system and ensure that there is purpose to the level of funds that would come from an override.

Dr. Geiser shared what she learned from her entry process and the major themes that were identified:

- Literacy & Math Curriculum
- Early Targeted Instruction & Supports
- Specialized Instruction
- Responsible and Responsive Budgeting

She reviewed the reductions that have occurred over the past 3 years and how those reductions are impacting the current budget.

She then explained the budget priorities that are connected to her entry findings, above:

- Academic Excellence
- Early Targeted Instruction & Supports
- Special Education: New In-District Programming
- Budget Efficiencies & Investments

Dr. Geiser provided details of the plan for new in-district Special Education programming including potential savings over one to 3 years, and how the out-of-district tuitions have increased over the last few years. She pointed out that the plan will reduce reliance on out-of-district placements but that this model speaks to reducing *future* placements, not bringing current placements back into the district.

Dr. Geiser then explained the need for updated curriculum especially as it relates to Special Education, and strategies for Controlling Costs – Identifying Efficiencies.

Regarding a non-override scenario, Dr. Geiser explained how the School Department approached the expected \$2,700,000 in cuts. She pointed out that there would be significant cuts in FY25 but even more (at least \$1,700,000) will be needed in FY26, which she detailed.

Dr. Geiser then summarized the presentation with information about what would be gained if the override passes, and what would be lost if it fails.

Ms. Moriarty presented “*A day in the Life of Belmont Students*” in FY25 if the override passes and if it fails. Categories were Getting to School, At School, and After School. Click [HERE](#) to see the slides.

Capital (click [HERE](#) to return to the Town slides Start on slide 15): Ms. Garvin then reviewed the Capital benefits that will be realized with a successful override:

- A balanced approach to Capital budgeting utilizing additional override funds.
- Adds an additional \$250k sidewalk maintenance.
- Allows annual appropriations into the newly created Capital Stabilization Fund.
 - Capital Fund Current Balance: \$763k.

She then reviewed the budget details with a successful override, and the multi-year forecast/financial plan. She also explained why using one-time funds for recurring expenses creates the need for an override. She then went on to explained efforts that are underway to ensure fiscal health:

- Continue to look for ways to increase revenue and reduce expenses.
- Working Group to Develop Community Compact - commitment to make the override last 3 years.
- Working Group on Out-of-District Enrollment Budget Strategies.

Mr. Epstein explained if there is no override there will be an accelerated drawdown of Free Cash which would create a “cliff” in year 3 where no “excess free cash” will be available. He went on to speak about the challenges and uncertainties of those later years.

Ms. Dionne explained that there was consideration of other override amounts and how the \$8,400,000 amount what chosen. She went on to speak about the number of students who are placed out-of-district and the impact to these students from being excluded from full participation in their community, including missed extra-curricular activities. She acknowledged and spoke about the town’s efforts to find efficiencies and to increase income from sources other than real estate taxes. She then warned about the dire consequences to town services if the override fails.

Ms. Doyle asked for confirmation that all Free Cash would be gone by FY27. Mr. Epstein clarified that all excess free cash would be gone although there would still be about \$4,000,000 left. Ms. Doyle pointed out that if all Free Cash was used, then the town would not be able to do any borrowing. Ms. Garvin pointed out that if the Bond Rating gets downgraded because of the low Free Cash amount it would be more expensive to borrow.

There was further discussion of what might happen in FY2027 with and without an override.

Mr. Pikilingis asked how providing more in-district Special Education services will be measured for success. Dr. Geiser explained that these costs will need to be pulled out separately so it does not get absorbed into the larger budget, and explained how that might happen. He then asked if Dr. Geiser’s non-override budget takes into account the likelihood that out-of-district placements would jump due to fewer town resources. Dr. Geiser said that had not really been included because it is unpredictable although other impacts had been accounted for. There was further discussion of how in-district services would be provided.

Ms. Checkoway acknowledged the opportunities and amazing staff that Belmont has and the budget challenges that many Districts are facing. There was a discussion of the possibility of losing qualified staff and department leaders.

Ms. Garvin provided details of Free Cash and the plan to use it over the next three years. There was a discussion about Free Cash.

There was a discussion of access for activities such as club and sports if they become fee based.

Ms. Warner asked when the Town might need another override. Mr. Epstein said it has not been modeled but he estimated that it would be in the 3-5 year timeframe although it would be smaller than the one being currently proposed. There was a discussion of this question and future possible overrides, the need for financial planning, and financial discipline.

Mr. Taylor asked what would happen in the immediate aftermath of a no override vote (between April 2 and the start of the next fiscal year). Ms. Garvin and Dr. Geiser provided outlines of the schedule of cuts if there is no override. There was a discussion of the Town Meeting that would follow a no override vote.

Mr. Taylor asked about funding the Chenery boilers and pension issues, which were discussed.

Mr. Weis pointed out that employees expect 2.5% increases just to keep up with inflation, but most employees expect more especially with annual step increases. He added that often more experienced and expensive employees leave or retire and those positions are filled by lower-salary hires and asked if rollover savings have been budgeted by the Town and Schools and recommended that this be included.

Ms. Garvin explained the work that her departments have done to stay within 2.5%, which has been consistently achieved.

Dr. Geiser explained that there is no deadline for staff to notify the Department about retirements, so it is difficult to predict.

There was further discussion about Mr. Weis' comments and questions.

Ms. Checkoway asked what the next steps are for the community compact, and how to people could have a voice in that process. Mr. Lubien explained that the Warrant Committee hopes to provide a high-level framework before the override, but the compact would be flushed over the summer and a long-term committee might be established for this.

A resident asked how many overrides Belmont has had in the last 20 years, and Mr. Epstein replied that there had been four since 1990, although the resident pointed out that there has only been 1 in the last 20 years. She then asked other questions about the Schools budget, which Dr. Geiser answered.

Ellen Schreiber spoke about the loss of FY26 of the extracurricular programs that survive the FY25 cuts.

Ira Morgenstern spoke about the possibility of another override in 3-5 years and expressed his concern that there is no plan to solve the financial problem. Ms. Dionne outlined the steps that are being taken to develop a plan and the components that need to be in place before this is done, which she and Mr. Morgenstern discussed.

Ade Baptista pointed out that over the last 45 years inflation has been under 2.5% only 11 times, and asked people to think hard about what kind of town they want to live in.

Kim Haley-Jackson asked what the cuts to the DEI initiatives would be, which Ms. Garvin provided.

Ellen Schreiber asked if library cuts would put the town below the MAR threshold, and Ms. Garvin confirmed that they would since it is already funded at the MAR level.

Mr. Epstein announced that the Override is Ballot Question 1, and the Elected to Appointed Assessors is Ballot Question #2 and asked that anything published about the override be factual.

Adjournment

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting of the Belmont Select Board, and the motion was seconded and passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 9:07pm.

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting of the Belmont School Committee, and the motion was seconded and passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 9:07pm.

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting of the Warrant Committee, and the motion was seconded and passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 9:08pm.

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting of the Belmont Comprehensive Capital Budget Committee, and the motion was seconded and passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 9:08pm.

Respectfully submitted by,

Susan Peghiny, Recording Secretary