

MINUTES
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BOARD OF SELECTMEN
SATURDAY, MARCH 4, 2006
SPECIAL SESSION
CHENERY MIDDLE SCHOOL
COMMUNITY ROOM
9:00 AM

Call to Order

A special meeting of the Board of Selectmen was called to order at 9:04 AM in the Community Room of the Chenery Middle School. All members were present. Town Administrator Tom Younger and Assistant Town Administrator Jeff Conti were also present, along with the members of the School Committee, members of the Warrant Committee's Education subcommittee, School Superintendent Peter Holland and school Director of Finance Gerry Missal.

Action by Appointment

FY07 School Budget Discussion

Warrant Committee subcommittee member Peg Callanan stated that the subcommittee will not be commenting on the school budget today because they have not had sufficient opportunity to review it yet.

Dr. Holland reviewed with the Board a PowerPoint presentation outlining the proposed FY07 school budget. He noted that this budget will reallocate staff to address high priority needs, something that has not been done in recent years. There will also be a few new positions added. To pay for these new positions there will be savings from retirements, elimination of library aides, and reduction of four elementary classes due to lower enrollments.

The biggest factors in the cost increase for FY07 are medical insurance and utilities increases. Salary increases will amount to \$806,000, a 3.8% increase over last year.

Dr. Holland called attention to Belmont's per pupil expenditure which is lower than the state average and many other communities. He stressed his opinion that our schools are seriously underfunded.

School Committee member Scott Stratford said that the School Committee is very proud of the job that our administrators do in measuring up to the achievements of our neighbor districts despite having less funding. He also made a point of recognizing and thanking the many parent volunteers who help out in the schools, calling them a "secret weapon".

Mr. Stratford noted that our school system is caught between increasing expectations and mandates from the state and stated that we cannot continue to do more with less. The community has been very supportive but its needs continue to grow.

School Committee member John Bowe added that the schools were asked to cut down to the core and did that. Now they are cutting into the core.

School Committee member Kathleen Miller explained that the School Department is not getting the support from the state that it needs and the Town does not have the money to compensate.

Mr. Stratford noted that the Selectmen and School Committee have created a working group to talk with the unions about ways to reduce health insurance costs.

Selectman Firenze pointed out that Belmont actually pays more than other communities for our schools because our state aid figure is so low. The number of students in Belmont is high compared to the number of people in Belmont which raises the per capita spending figures. The Town needs the state to step up and pay their fair share. Belmont's average income is high but there are a lot of lower income people here. Property values are high but a lot of people have lived in those homes for generations. The state needs to recognize these factors.

Selectman Brownsberger agreed that local aid definitely needs to be expanded statewide. It is important that Belmont be able to fund a level service budget for the schools or even a little bit more.

Selectman Brownsberger talked about the proposed override for a \$3 million roads stabilization fund. If passed, it will free up \$1 million currently in the capital budget for roads, which can be applied to the operating budget and that will have a positive impact on the school budget.

Chairman Solomon noted that it is not only the school budget that is stressed every year but the entire town budget. The requirements for children's education are greater now than when those in the room were young.

Ms. Ann Jansen, a member of the Wellington PTO, noted that both the level services and reduced services school budgets propose to eliminate library aides in the elementary schools. She said that the library aides order all the books. If there is no central command, all the parent volunteer efforts will not be effective.

Ms. Anne Madden, a member of the Butler PTO, said that the children in her after school class started to cry when she told them that the library aide might not be back next year. She urged the School Committee to cut anything else, but please keep the school library. She expressed her desire to march on Beacon Hill for more state aid.

Selectman Brownsberger clarified that the current budget gap for level services is \$1.7 million. Passing the override would free up \$1 million which would reduce the gap to \$700,000, which can be closed with a transfer from free cash and other measures. Without the override, he does not see how it would be possible to restore the library aides.

School Committee member Diane Stafford said that the School Committee does not want to close the school libraries. The question is how to find the funds to put the library aides back in? That is a discussion that needs to be had about priorities. For example, Belmont could be losing 10 teachers and all freshman sports at the high school.~That debate cannot be had today, but it will be necessary to talk about this continually until the budget is finalized.

Selectman Firenze noted that the Board of Selectmen relies very heavily on the Superintendent and the School Committee for their advice as to how school funds should be spent. The decision about the library aides is something the Board will rely on their guidance on.

He went on to ask about the balance in the school's revolving account. School Committee Chair Elizabeth Gibson said that the subcommittee wants to discuss this with the School Committee and the School Committee will report back after that discussion.

She added that the School Committee's challenge is to try to identify what constitutes a core service. She personally sees a teacher in a classroom as core. The Committee has raised the question of whether a library aide is core, but also values the input of the community and is happy to hear from the community on this issue.

Town resident Martitia Barsotti said that more families will be deciding if Belmont is the right place to buy a home based on what the Town is doing for our children.

Selectman Firenze commented that this is not a problem that is unique to Belmont. The state is trying to make education equal in the communities, but they're doing it by driving the Town's ability to educate its kids down.

Ms. Callanan said she wished that as many people from the community as are here today would attend the other Saturday morning meetings that we have had to get a better feel for the issues facing the rest of the Town.

Dr. Holland pointed out that in Lexington where he resides, per pupil spending is about \$3,000 more than in Belmont.

Mr. Bowe urged residents to speak to their Town Meeting members and let them know how they feel.

Warrant Committee Chair Ralph Jones said that he has been meeting with finance committee chairs from around the area and they are all saying their schools are crumbling. Belmont is not doing that badly compared to other towns.

Town resident Lisa Cunningham asked what citizens can do to advocate for more state funding? What is the best way to get the word out that passing the roads override might help the schools?

Chairman Solomon confirmed that if the roads override passes and the Town can reallocate the \$1 million from the capital budget, the schools will definitely get some of that money.

Selectman Firenze stated that a disproportionate amount of the increase in revenue the town is getting over last year is going to the schools. That reflects the Town's commitment to fund the schools to the best of its ability.

Warrant Committee member Mike Widmer said that he has participated recently in a municipal finance task force which highlighted that there is a long term squeeze on municipal finances stemming from Prop 2 ½ and limited state financial resources. This environment is not likely to change any time soon. The allowable growth in property tax revenue is being consumed by increases in health insurance costs. The voters cannot be asked to support an override in order to cover the increases in health care costs. The Town has now taken a leadership role in dealing with this issue, but it is the number one issue Belmont is facing. The Governor is proposing a 17% increase in local aid across the Board. There is no way the Legislature can increase this significantly, though they may be able to increase Belmont's Chapter 70 funding by decreasing some other town's. The public school systems in our state are declining and it is not just Belmont.

Mr. Stratford noted that the collaborative spirit between Mr. Younger and Dr. Holland, the Warrant Committee, the School Committee and the Board of Selectmen has been great in a very difficult budget year.

Chairman Solomon thanked everyone for coming and noted that this group will have to meet again for a more detailed discussion.

The Board took a five minute recess.

The Board returned to session at 10:50 AM.

Chairman Solomon stated that Police Chief Andrew O'Malley will be resigning effective May 1. It is necessary to find a replacement. Board members also need to discuss the letter they are going to send about the roads override.

There was discussion about the progress of the financial software project. A steering committee may be created to move this project forward including Mr. Younger, Mr.

Missal, and representatives from the Information Technology Advisory Committee and the Assessor's office. The Board asked for weekly updates on the status of this project.

Chairman Solomon said that Board will also discuss the bike path project, and then go into executive session to discuss litigation.

The Board discussed the process for hiring a police chief. Some of the issues that need to be addressed are: Internal vs. external candidates? Using a search firm? Preliminary review of candidates by a search committee or by the Town Administrator/Human Resources Director? Use of an assessment center? (for a cost of about \$15,000) Is this a contractual position or a long-term position? How close should the police chief live to Belmont?

The Board agreed to include internal and external candidates with the goal of finding the best possible candidate for the job.

Selectman Firenze said he would like to see someone who is going to be in this position for a long period of time – at least five years. He does not think the Town needs to use a search firm, but believes the search committee model has been successful with other town positions. He stated he would support use of an assessment center if it's an important component of finding the best person. He would have no problem with the Police Chief as a contract position as long as both parties have an escape clause. He noted that the current Police Chief does not live in Belmont, and as long as the Chief lives nearby it should be fine.

Selectman Brownsberger said that he agreed on the matter of a contract with an escape clause, on the residency question, and on the goal of having someone who will serve for a long period of time. However, he stated he feels that the Town should use a search firm because it will bring into play some additional candidates who might not apply on their own because they are not unhappy where they are. This is a sensitive process and the more isolated the Board is from it the better. He added he can go either way on having a search committee.

Selectman Firenze commented that the Town could get additional experienced input from a committee with town residents on it, and could let that committee decide if they want to use a search firm or not.

The Board agreed that it would like to have three candidates recommended to it from the process.

There was further discussion about the pros and cons of having a search committee. Mr. Younger noted that there are some search firms who will push certain candidates and are not as objective as they should be. He stated he could go either way on a search committee as long as picking the committee members does not delay the process.

The Board agreed that it does not want to be pressured into making a decision based on the timing of Chief O'Malley's departure. It was felt that the Police Department has qualified people who can step in if necessary until we find the right candidate.

The Board asked Mr. Younger if he felt he could select a good search firm without the input of a search committee and he said that he could. The Board agreed to charge the Town Administrator with bringing a recommendation of 3 quality search firms, all of whom could also run the assessment center, back to the Board which will make a selection.

Chairman Solomon noted that the Town does not have a contract for the fire chief and asked if that is an issue if a contract is planned for the police chief? There was discussion. Selectman Firenze favored leaving this question open. Selectman Brownsberger felt the Police Chief should be a contract position as it is a high level, sensitive position. He noted a contract protects the Town and the Chief, and that the Superintendent of Schools, Town Administrator, and Light Department Director are all on 3 year contracts. Chairman Solomon agreed.

The Board agreed it was not particularly concerned about where the police chief lives as long as he can be here extensively.

The Board asked the Town Administrator to prepare a draft of qualities that are desired in a new police chief.

Board members discussed the letter they are proposing to send out regarding the override. Warrant Committee members Diane Hobbs and Jim Heigham have volunteered to help Selectman Firenze with the letter. Selectman Firenze noted that he would like to see the letter expanded to include a chart or graph and some data from Community Development Director Glenn Clancy, but needs to hear from the Warrant Committee members to get their thoughts. It is important to place this question in the context of the overall status of the town. Selectman Firenze said he would like to see this mailed to residents, printed in the newspaper, and possibly do a cable TV show on it. The Board agreed to have the letter finalized for the Board to vote on March 13th and for the Warrant Committee on the 15th.

The Board agreed that the numbers Selectman Brownsberger has worked out for the tax impact need to be reconciled with the ones Town Accountant Barbara Hagg and Warrant Committee member Robie White have come up with.

There was discussion of creating a neutral ballot question committee to expend the funds to do a mailing and generally work to disseminate the letter. The Board agreed that Mr. Firenze, Dr. Solomon, and Mr. Brownsberger will work as individuals, not as the Board, to disseminate the statement.

The Board discussed the Belmont-Cambridge-Somerville Bike Path project. There is an amendment to the TIP which proposes putting off the Cambridge portion of the path until

2007. Mr. Conti gave an update. He said that a reduction in federal funding has led to a reassessment of what projects should go on the TIP for 2006. Because the Cambridge portion has had the most issues, the Metropolitan Planning Organization wants to go ahead with the other two sections for 2006.

The Board moved: to express its desire to move the whole project forward as soon as possible, but if that is not possible, to move the Belmont portion forward as soon as possible.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Selectman Firenze gave an update on the capital budget. Capital Budget Committee Chair Pat Bruschi has categorized capital requests and identified some \$1.8 million so far of items the Committee feels should be funded. There were also some “super-capital” requests totaling \$1.9 million, and other requests which might be more properly considered operational items. The total of requests was about \$5 million.

There was discussion of the dispute between building services and the Historic District Commission over replacing the doors to the Town Hall. Short of an appeal, the Commission has the final say and they are adamant about using wooden doors rather than fiberglass. The Board asked Mr. Younger to clarify what the appeal process is.

The Board moved to go into executive session at 12:10 PM for the purpose of discussing litigation and not to return to open session.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

(During the executive session one substantive motion was made and passed unanimously. The Board adjourned at 12:23 PM.)

Thomas G. Younger
Town Administrator