

DATE: March 27, 2023  
TIME: 9:05 AM

Minutes of the  
Town of Belmont  
Warrant Committee Meeting  
Wednesday, February 15, 2023  
7:30pm



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

**Call to Order:** Mr. Lubien called the meeting to order at 7:30pm.

Member	Present	Member	Present
Geoffrey Lubien, Chair	Yes	Conor McEachern	Yes
Paul Rickter, Vice-Chair	Yes	Robert McLaughlin	Yes
Elizabeth Dionne, Secretary	Yes	Lynn Peterson Read	Yes
William Anderson	Yes	Laurie Slap	Yes
Tom Caputo	Yes	Matthew Taylor	Yes
Christine Doyle	Remote	Marie Warner	Yes
Anne Helgen	Yes	Jack Weis	Yes
<b>Staff</b>		Mark Paolillo, Ex-officio Designee - Select Board	Yes
Patrice Garvin, Town Administrator	Absent	Michael Crowley, Ex-officio, School Committee	Yes
Jennifer Hewitt, Asst Town Admin & Finance Mgr.	Yes	<b>Others Present</b>	
		Meghan Moriarty, School Committee Chair	Yes

### Detailed Discussion of FY24 budget: Town & Schools

Mr. Lubien summarized the status of the budget process and what Subcommittees have been working on. He explained that the Q2 numbers for the schools came out yesterday which will impact the upcoming budget.

Mr. Lubien outlined next steps, including a joint meeting with the Select Board on March 6, 2023.

Mr. Weis presented the Q2 School Budget Results, with the forecast being a \$900,000 negative variance to the budget. The main driver of this is the Special Education costs because of out-of-district tuitions (due to a 21% growth in student participation). He explained the spending plan that still leaves the deficit in this budget line. Special education transportation costs are also expected to be significantly higher, mostly based on the contract costs, more student participation, and some of those students needing extra transportation services. Another big driver is Administrative Salaries which increased by about \$100,000 from last quarter, mostly due to retirements and vacation time due to those individuals.

Mr. Weis said the Administration has taken a number of actions to address this situation. No open positions will be filled, no supplies or materials can be ordered without approval, and they are trying to shift General Fund monies into revolving accounts. Mr. Weis discussed their efforts and what needs to be done.

Mr. Crowley said the district will be applying to the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) for Circuit Breaker relief. This was discussed, as well as other cost-saving actions that the district is trying.

There was a discussion of the school department budget and expenditures.

Ms. Moriarty explained that the Superintendent will put together more information about students going out of district for Special Education services. She added that there has been a significant increase in Public Day, and that students with autism are being diagnosed better which adds to that increase. Many districts are seeing this trend. She added that the conversation about whether Belmont can serve these students in district is very exciting and is supported by the School Department. She pointed out the trend of students coming out of IEPs after 3 years, and that students are being identified more in the elementary years and not in the middle or high school years. There was a discussion of Special Education issues and expenses.

Education Subcommittee Review of the School Budget: Mr. Weis outlined the process that the Subcommittee has been following and explained that their discussions to date have been high level, and focused on the Draft 2 budget.

He explained that:

- They considered Ms. Helgen's comment that after removing Special Education out-of-district (OOD) expenses from FY23 and FY24, the change is over 6%, which is not sustainable.
- The Subcommittee believes that with the addition of \$4,000,000 from Free Cash, the School Department has sufficient funding to get through FY24.
- That it is not the role of the Subcommittee to mandate how the School Department funds are used, although some of their comments are about reallocations or efficiencies to minimize service impacts.
- They recognize that saving services and staff could increase the challenge faced in the following fiscal year.

Staffing: Mr. Weis reviewed the areas that the Subcommittee focused on, especially staffing. He said the Superintendent explained that the 6% increase was the result of it being a contract year, although Ms. Helgen said this point needs further discussion.

There was a discussion of the 6% budget increase and staffing costs including positions that are being moved to Shared Services.

Mr. Weis pointed out that a perennial issue is Staff Exchange. He explained that there are unanticipated needs that arise during the year and that the School Department needs flexibility to address these needs through Staff Exchange. There was a discussion in the Subcommittee about whether to use these funds to instead preserve positions. The Superintendent told the Subcommittee that they are intentionally saving this funding in order to maintain the flexibility. This was discussed.

Ms. Moriarty said the School Committee had a difficult vote on the Draft 2 of the budget, and there is not currently agreement on where the \$2,100,000 in reductions will come from.

Mr. Weis provided a definition of Staff Exchange, which was discussed.

Ms. Dionne said she thinks it's appropriate for the Warrant Committee to make recommendations about the School Budget even though the Town has no approval authority. This was discussed.

Out-of-District Expenses: Mr. Weis summarized the Subcommittee's understanding going into this.

Mr. Weis said the Subcommittee asked if it is smart to use \$1.1M of the Free Cash allocation (of \$4M) as carry over into Special Education reserves. This makes sense from the School Department's perspective, but the Committee asked if it was a smart thing to do from the Town's perspective. If other funding is included the reserve totals about \$1.3M. Mr. Weis explained the implications of this which was discussed.

The issue of Special Education out-of-district costs was discussed.

Mr. Weis and Ms. Helgen outlined the Subcommittee's discussion of user fees and supplies & materials.

Mr. Weis said his big takeaway was the strategic decision to reduce positions in order to maintain flexibility. He recommended that these be better reflected in the narrative because that is not happening now.

Finally, he advised that there is likely to be a Draft 3 budget. There was a discussion of a potential Draft 3.

### **Continued Discussion of Use of Free Cash in FY24 Budget**

The Committee discussed the amount of Free Cash being allocated to the School Department and Town budgets, and the information the Select Board needs to approve the Free Cash allocations at the March 6<sup>th</sup> joint meeting. Ms. Doyle recommended breaking this decision into pieces and made some suggestions on how to do that.

Mr. Crowley suggested giving the process two more weeks for reconsideration, which was discussed.

Mr. McEachern asked how the FY25 budget will be balanced if the override is not approved with this level of reserves being used and recommended working to use less than \$4M of free cash. He said there are only two options available: reduce the use of free cash to a level that the Committee is comfortable using in order to buy flexibility for FY25, or stay at the current level and use potential additional state aid to replenish free cash

There was a discussion of Mr. McEachern's suggestion and the issues around an override.

Making the decision on how much Free Cash to use was discussed again.

Mr. Caputo recommended looking at the incremental expense related to recent OOD increases first, and then looking at what the impact is on the rest of the School and Town budget if those cuts are made. He thought the first part could be done by March 6<sup>th</sup> which would be helpful and keep the process moving forward. Mr. Crowley said he could ask, although he's not sure it could be done by that date. This suggestion was discussed.

The impact of the State budget numbers becoming available on March 1<sup>st</sup> and how to proceed was discussed.

Ms. Helgen asked if the application process for Emergency Relief will be done on time. Ms. Moriarty said it would. Ms. Moriarty outlined the work she and the Superintendent are doing to obtain other circuit breaker relief funds.

### **Approve Minutes**

January 11, 2023: There was a question about what Ms. Hewitt said on line 46.

**Motion:** *Ms. Dionne moved to approve the minutes of the January 11, 2023 Warrant Committee meeting with a correction by Ms. Hewitt on line 46. Name seconded, and the motion passed by show of hands with Mr. Crowley and Ms. Werner abstaining.*

January 25, 2023: Mr. Weis recommended removing Mr. Connor's description, and on page 2 the word "likeness" should be replaced with "likelihood".

**Motion:** *Mr. McLaughlin moved to approve the minutes of the January 25, 2023 Warrant Committee meeting as amended. Ms. Dionne seconded, and the motion passed by show of hands vote with Mr. Rickter abstaining.*

### **Updates, if any, from subcommittees, working groups, and/or committee liaisons, including:**

- A. Superintendent Search Committee: Mr. Lubien reported that they had met to discuss criteria, competencies and characteristics. The firm is training the Committee on how to critically look at the applicants. They will meet again on Saturday. There was a discussion of the timeline and process to find a new Superintendent.
- B. Select Board: Mr. Paolillo reported that they voted to put the Rink Debt Exclusion on the ballot. There is a request from the Retirement Board to adopt home rule petition to increase COLAs, and this must be decided by June 30, 2023. This was discussed.
- C. Middle/High School Building Committee: Mr. McLaughlin reported that the new construction should be done in April, although the contingency is getting very low.
- D. Community Preservation Committee: Ms. Dionne said it has been a challenging year, and the CPC is recommending projects that will require all currently available CPA funds. The CPC decided not to adopt a policy on reserves, as the CPC has typically recommended spending of funds collected in the prior fiscal year, leaving current year revenues available in the event of an emergency. There will be a full presentation to the Committee in March.
- E. Structural Change Implementation Committee: Mr. Rickter reported that they will have their first meeting on Tuesday.
- F. Rink Committee: Mr. Caputo summarized the meeting of that committee. There was a discussion of the project. Mr. Paolillo provided a status update on the fundraising activities.
- G. Capital Committee: Ms. Doyle said the group has been developing, and they will be bringing a draft report to the Warrant Committee.

**Public Comment** – there was no public comment.

**Adjournment:** **Motion:** *Mr. McLaughlin moved to adjourn the meeting of the Warrant Committee. Ms. Helgen seconded, and the motion passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 9:37pm.*

**Next Meeting:** Wednesday, March 6 at 7:00pm. Joint session with the Select Board.

Respectfully submitted by,  
Susan Peghiny, Recording Secretary