

Warrant Committee Education Subcommittee
May 15, 2023 7:00 PM
Town Hall, Select Board Conference Room

RECEIVED
TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA

DATE: July 20, 2023
TIME: 9:19 AM

Meeting Minutes

Members in Attendance

Bill Anderson, Anne Helgen, Paul Rickter, Laurie Slap, Matt Taylor, Jack Weis

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 7:05 PM.

Discussion of FY 24 Warrant Committee Budget Report

The School Department decided that, rather than meeting in person, it would be more efficient and a better use of their time for the individual School Committee members to send us their thoughts in writing. So, the Ed Subcommittee decided to use the scheduled time to discuss the topics of FY 24 budget risks, issues facing the department in FY 25 and beyond, and our subcommittee's recommendations.

Key points of discussion were as follows:

- **FY 24 Budget Risks:**
 - OOD enrollment increases beyond what is currently projected and/or there are other unanticipated tuition increases.
 - The department and School Committee conclude during the year that there is a need for additional unbudgeted hiring, to meet SPED or ELE needs, or otherwise.
 - Fringe benefits being removed from the School Department budget removes a source of budget flexibility. Because that line item often had a positive variance, savings in that account previously could be used to cover unexpected costs in other areas.
- **Issues for FY 25 & Beyond:**
 - Salary increases built into the current union contracts exceed the growth rate of recurring revenue to the town. The current union contracts expire at the end of FY24 and FY25, respectively, so must be renegotiated.
 - Continued increases in staffing levels add to the town's structural deficit.
 - Funding for the positions currently paid for using federal COVID-relief funds runs out after FY25. It is possible that the department will argue that the positions being funded with those dollars are permanent needs, rather than temporary needs, and advocate to fund those positions using General Fund dollars, thereby imposing additional strain on the General Fund budget.
 - When retiring or departing senior staff are replaced by more junior staff, while there is an initial salary savings, the growth rate in salary in future years for the junior staff is higher than the salary growth rate for the person that they replaced, putting added pressure on the budget.
 - Future enrollment trends – overall, by age cohort, or by individual student populations – are unknown and could have unforeseen impacts on departmental operations and budgets.

- Recommendations:
 - Work collaboratively with the Town Administrator's office and the Warrant Committee to incorporate best practices utilized by other neighboring communities to improve the budget development process and to complete the process earlier in the fiscal year. Examples of such enhancements could include a more explicit salary budget development model that provides a clearer understanding of the components of the budgeted salary increases and better incorporation of current fiscal year actuals into the budget. Additionally, like the School Department did in this year's budget, continue to ground the volatile OOD tuition budget numbers in explicit assumptions about projected enrollment by placement type and projected costs by placement type.
 - Work collaboratively to enhance the on-going reporting throughout the year, including providing information on unbudgeted hires added throughout the year (such as rationale and cost impact) and potentially also including budget-vs.-actual numbers by budget category.
 - While the Warrant Committee recognizes that the School Department and School Committee believe that there are myriad unmet needs, at the same time the School Department's rate of budget growth is not sustainable in comparison to the town's projected recurring revenue growth rate. The hiring of a new superintendent next year might present an opportunity to take a fresh look at the department's operations and seek out ways to provide services more efficiently and cost effectively.
 - The School Committee and members of the public have suggested looking for ways to provide more special education services within the Belmont schools. The Warrant Committee supports those efforts. While doing so is primarily rooted in keeping students engaged with their peers and connected to their community, from a budgetary standpoint, it may also be less expensive to meet those SPED needs within the district versus sending students out of district.

Jack will summarize the evening's discussions and send it to the subcommittee by tomorrow morning (May 16th). Subcommittee members should send any comments or suggestions on that summary to the editing subgroup as soon as possible.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 9:37 PM.