

**Warrant Committee Education Subcommittee**

**Joint Meeting with the School Department Administration and School Committee**

**December 13, 2022 6:30 PM**

**Hybrid Meeting – Homer Building, Gallery Room and via Zoom**

**DATE: February 13, 2023**

**TIME: 9:09 AM**

## **Meeting Minutes**

### **Members in Attendance**

**Warrant Committee Education Subcommittee:** Bill Anderson, Anne Helgen, Laurie Slap, Paul Rickter, Matt Taylor, Jack Weis

**School Committee:** Kate Bowen, Amy Checkoway, Mike Crowley, Jeff Liberty, Meg Moriarty, Jamal Saeh

**School Department Administration:** Superintendent John Phelan, Finance Director Tony DiCologero, Assistant Superintendent Janice Darius, Director of Human Capital Mike McAllister

**Others:** Town Administrator Patrice Garvin, Select Board Member Mark Paolillo

### **Call to Order**

The joint meeting portion of the School Committee meeting was called to order at 7:02 PM.

### **Out-of-District/Special Education Discussion**

Tony walked through a slide presentation on Special Ed.

- The presentation began with a general overview of special education out-of-district (OOD) requirements, typical costs, and funding sources. Tony then transitioned to discussing the department's OOD experience in FY 23 and the expectations for FY 24.
- There has been an increase of about 20 students placed in OOD programs this year (FY 23). Consequently, the department anticipates exhausting all available federal and state funding sources this year, as well as dipping into almost \$500,000 of the town's SPED reserve. That would leave a balance of only \$180,000 in the town's SPED reserves to carry forward into FY 24.
- In FY 24, the department is anticipating that OOD enrollment will be similar to this year's enrollment. However, DESE has already announced that they have approved a 14% increase in the tuition rate that cities and towns will be required to pay for private OOD placements.
- Tony then presented two tables showing projected FY 24 tuition costs and outside revenue sources.
  - The projections assume the same level of OOD enrollment in FY 24, and the same distribution of enrollment amongst the various types of service providers (LABBB, other Massachusetts public schools, private schools, out-of-state schools, etc.).
  - The projections utilize the already-approved 14% increase in private and out-of-state tuitions, and assume a 5% increase in the tuition rate for the other categories of providers. Under those assumptions, total OOD tuition costs in FY 24 will be approximately \$11.0 million, an increase of about \$1.0 million over FY 23.
  - The projections assume that federal IDEA grant money is flat in FY 24 and that there is a 5% increase in state Circuit Breaker reimbursements in FY 24.
  - Utilizing those assumptions, and assuming that all of the outside federal and state funds are used in FY 24, the department is projecting that the required OOD tuition expenses that will need to be covered out of the FY 24 General Fund budget will be about \$7.6

million, an increase of about \$2.9 million (38%) over the share of OOD costs that were included in the FY 23 budget.

- In addition, the foregoing increase in the General Fund budget needed to cover OOD tuition costs assumes that there are no reserve funds carried forward into FY 25. The administration is recommending that the town plan to carry forward somewhere between \$1.0-\$1.5 million of reserves, which would commensurately increase the required General Fund budget for OOD tuitions in FY 24 to between \$8.6 and \$9.1 million.

Following the slide presentation there was an open discussion. Key points from this discussion included:

- Tony indicated that he had reached out to DESE to see if the percentage increase in OOD enrollments that Belmont has experienced in FY 23 (about 20%) is consistent with what other towns in Massachusetts are experiencing. Tony has yet to hear back.
- Anne asked if the drop in IDEA from FY 22 to FY 23 was attributable to using some IDEA money for staffing (SPED chair). Tony indicated that the IDEA funds in this analysis are different from the IDEA AARPA funds that were used in the current staffing plan.
- Anne also inquired as to whether we could reasonably expect an increase in state Circuit Breaker funds beyond the 5% in the projections given the increase in Belmont's OOD enrollment. Tony indicated that it is possible we could see an increase, but, if all districts in the state are experiencing similar increases in OOD enrollments, Belmont is unlikely to see a disproportionate increase. Tony further stated that the approved 14% increase in private and out-of-state tuitions could result in a 20% increase in Circuit Breaker expenses statewide, but that DESE is not expecting that the state Circuit Breaker budget will increase by that level.
- Laurie requested that the School Committee and School Department consider looking for ways to cut other non-OOD expenses in the FY 23 budget in order to avoid depleting almost all of the OOD reserves.
- Jeff Liberty asked whether it would be possible to pull some special education programs in-house. John indicated that we have space to do so in the new school and that we might be able to partner with LABBB, but that that is something that will take some time to work through.
- John made some concluding comments that there is still more work to do, particularly to see how OOD enrollment in Belmont might change in the months ahead, as well as to gain a better understanding as to whether the increases in OOD enrollment that Belmont has experienced are similar to other towns in Massachusetts.
- Meg and Jack will discuss the next steps regarding how the Ed Subcommittee and School Committee will interface on the development of the department's FY 24 budget, including when it makes sense for the two groups to meet again.

### **Adjournment**

The joint portion of the meeting with the School Committee was adjourned at 7:56 PM.