

Approved by Select Board:
March 6, 2023

**Minutes of the
Town of Belmont
Joint Open Meeting of the
Select Board, Warrant Committee
And Comprehensive Capital Budget Committee
Budget Summit 5
Thursday, February 9, 2023
7:00pm**



**RECEIVED
TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA**

DATE: October 11, 2023
TIME: 2:37 PM

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

CALL TO ORDER:

Mr. Paolillo opened the Joint meeting at 7:00pm.

Mr. Paolillo called the Select Board to order with a quorum.

Mr. Lubien called the Warrant Committee to order with a quorum.

Ms. Moriarty called the School Committee to order with a quorum.

Ms. Doyle called the Comprehensive Capital Budget Committee to order with a quorum.

Select Board Members	Present	School Committee Members	Present
Mark Paolillo, Chair	Y	Meghan Moriarty, Chair	Y
Adam Dash, Vice Chair	Remote	Amy Checkoway, Secretary	Y
Roy Epstein Member	Y	Catherine Bowen	Absent
Warrant Committee Members		Michael Crowley	Y
Geoffrey Lubien, Chair	Y	Jamal Saeh	Y
Paul Rickter, Vice-Chair	Y	Jeffrey Liberty	Y
Elizabeth Dionne, Secretary	Y	Comprehensive Capital Budget Committee (CCBC)	
William Anderson	Y	Chris Doyle, Warrant Committee, Chair	Y
Tom Caputo	Y	Susan Burgess-Cox, Vice Chair	Y
Christine Doyle	Y	Claus Becker, Energy Committee	Absent
Anne Helgen	Y	Catherine Bowen, School Committee	Absent
Conor McEachern	Y	Pat Bruschi	Y
Robert McLaughlin	Remote	Adam Dash, Select Board	Remote
Lynn Peterson Read	Absent	Melinda Huang	Absent
Laurie Slap	Y	Larry Link	Remote
Matthew Taylor	Y	Aaron Pickilingis	Remote
Marie Warner	Y	Staff Members	
Jack Weis	Y	Patrice Garvin, Town Administrator	Yes
Michael Crowley, Ex-officio Designee, School Com.	Y	Jennifer Hewitt, Asst Town Administrator & Finance Manager	Yes
Mark Paolillo, Ex-officio Designee - Select Board	Y		
Other Officials Present			
John Phelan, Superintendent of Schools	Y	Kathleen Keohane, Library Trustees	Remote
Anthony DiCologero, Schools Director of Finance, Business & Operations	Y	Corinne McCue Olmsted, Library Trustee	Remote

Presentation of the Preliminary FY2024 Operating Budget for the Town of Belmont Presented by Town Administrator and Superintendent of Schools

Ms. Garvin outlined what would be presented during the meeting.

Before the start of the presentation, Mr. Paolillo addressed some inaccuracies that are being shared in the community, including:

- Schools were not asked to cut \$6.1M - original gap; Feb. 3rd budget reflects \$7.2M increase.
- Eliminate educator positions - School working through details
- \$15M in Free Cash - yes, that is correct, and \$11.4M is already being used.
- \$2M from Fair Share amendment - amounts per community will not be known for quite some time, we have to budget on known facts.
- Federal funding - \$1.5M in ESSER funds spent in FY2022 and FY2023; \$8M in ARPA dedicated, with more than \$2.8M used for the schools.
- It is false that "General Fund expenditures toward education in Belmont have decreased by nearly 2%" - Education General Fund budget has increased each year.

Mr. Paolillo explained that both the Schools and the Town have been asked to reduce the amount of the increase. The goal is to work together to focus on the need for an operating override for the FY25 budget, and how does the group get to that.

Ms. Garvin shared the FY24 Revenue Allocation slide which now includes the \$4M of additional Free Cash to address the shortfall in the School budget. She reviewed the slide and the allocations.

Ms. Garvin then reviewed the Municipal Budget Highlights, explaining that this budget has not seen any significant growth in over 5 years although the workload has increased. She explained that staff is covering multiple positions and the impact of that and the recently cut positions.

Mr. Paolillo said the Select Board is very concerned about the multiple vacancies in Town and the ability to provide services, especially for public safety. He asked that residents please be patient when seeking services.

Mr. Garvin went on to review the larger increases on some of the Town Budget Highlights. She also reviewed Committee Requests from the Energy, Economic Development, and DEI committees. There were also Program Improvement Requests from the Facilities, Fire, Police, Library, and Council on Aging departments. These are not being funded.

Ms. Garvin then summarized the \$232,503 in savings that were found by looking at the departments through police staff exchange saving (she pointed out that this number could change because of overtime costs if the vacancies continue), fuel savings from hybrid cruisers, and the removal of the Library Assistant Director position. Ms. Garvin warned that the library may lose Minuteman accreditation by the removal of this funding.

Ms. Keohane explained that the Library self-funded the Assistant Director position through cuts in other areas, and outlined the work they have done to correctly structure their organization. She said the loss of Minuteman accreditation just as the town is poised to build a new library would be a shame. She asked that there be creative work to restore funding for this position. She also outlined what is happening regarding temporary space, and that this will cause additional burdens.

Ms. Garvin reviewed the School Budget Requests which reflects the \$2,121,675 shortfall.

Mr. Paolillo pointed out that the year over year increase of the Schools is about 13%.

Presentation by Superintendent Phalen

Mr. Phalen presented details of the Rollover of Existing Staff including positions added, redeployment of existing staff because of class size, position reduction from Revolving Fund to General Fund, and the 14% increase in Special Education costs.

Next, Mr. Phalen explained how they are migrating custodial and maintenance staff to the Town Shared Services budget. An MOA is being worked on to determine how this will happen.

Reconfiguration data was presented for the costs for positions at and opening/operating the new Middle and High School, and the change to Chenery. There have been no requests for increases in texts, materials, and supplies.

Reductions that will be made to meet the available revenue include requested and existing positions were detailed.

Mr. Phalen said the proposed budget meets the available revenue. The School Draft 2 budget request is \$63,090,797. This will result in the loss of 20.6 FTE, and 9.1 FTEs. He shared some of the details of the positions including required positions that will be kept, positions that will not be added, needs that might arise depending on enrollment, and existing positions that will be reduced.

Mr. Phalen shared some other considerations including Rental, User, and Transportation Fees. He then summarized the reductions the Schools made to cover the \$2,121,675 shortfall.

Mr. Phalen outlined the Technical Assumptions used to build the budget and said that the District leadership understands the fiscal reality being faced by the Town, that the budget does not meet “reasonable level services”, and that the District leadership is deeply concerned about the negative impact this budget will have on students and families of Belmont.

Mr. Paolillo asked Mr. Phalen if he had heard anything from Senator Brownsberger or Representative Rogers about the mandated 14% increase in DESI costs. Mr. Phalen said he believes they are working actively on this issue, shared the meeting plans to discuss this issue.

Ms. Moriarty explained that creating the budget was difficult for the School Committee and that it reflects the financial needs but not the values of the School Committee.

Mr. Paolillo discussed the struggles with providing Town services.

Ms. Helgen asked if Belmont is eligible for the Emergency Circuit Breaker. Mr. Phalen said they will meet with the Commissioner in March but does not know how much funding might be available or when a decision will be made.

Mr. Saeh pointed out that almost 90% of the budget is paying the contracts that were negotiated and the out-of-district costs. That means that the remaining areas that can be cut feel it very deeply. This was discussed.

Mr. Crowley shared his views on the proposed budget and its impacts and recommended that more Free Cash be used for the Schools. He also discussed the implications of proposing an override this year versus waiting until next year.

Mr. Garvin explained the Multi-Year Forecast based on Revenues and Expenses. She pointed out that there will be an \$11,000,000 deficit in FY25 which grows to \$12,000,000 in FY26. There is currently about \$15.5M in Free Cash, and she provided details of this amount on how it is planned to be used.

A discussion of Free Cash and possible overrides followed.

Ms. Garvin explained that Governor Healey will be releasing the State budget on March 1st, and what steps would be taken once State Aid information is known. This was discussed.

Ms. Doyle said she doesn't think it's responsible to reduce Free Cash because of the repercussions if an override fails. She said there needs to be visible cuts to Town services so that residents without children in the Schools see that there has to be an override.

Mr. Pickilingis asked some questions to solidify his understanding of what was presented, which Ms. Hewitt, Ms. Garvin and Mr. DiCologero answered.

Mr. Liberty asked if Free Cash includes revenue projections from development of the McLean property or the new cannabis facility, and if not when will it be included. Ms. Garvin said she will include it when there is more certainty about them as no building permit has been pulled for McLean, and the cannabis company is waiting for State authorization which might not hit until 2025.

Mr. Liberty also commented on Ms. Doyle's suggestion that residents without children in the schools needs to experience service cuts for them to support an override.

Ms. Dionne said the Town has to develop the Revenue stream, and there is work being done in this area especially around being more business friendly. She also spoke about efficiencies that can be identified and residents supporting an override if there is a sustainable fiscal plan. She believes there is the will, the talent, and the dedication to make it happen.

Mr. Paolillo spoke about his commitment to the schools, even though he no longer has a child in the system, and how he believes others also feel this way.

Mr. Paolillo recommended that turn backs start to be looked at, and that the Town needs to move away from reliance on Free Cash because of the AAA rating that will be needed to finance the new library.

Ms. Helgen pointed out that, without the OOD tuitions, the school budget increases by 6.1% which is not sustainable even with an override. She spoke about the difficulty of seeing reductions in the schools.

Mr. Phelan responded to Ms. Helgen's comments, explaining why and how various reductions were done, which they discussed.

Mr. Lubien reiterated the issue of using Free Cash, and what the Town can afford in the next 3-5 years.

Mary Lewis, Town Meeting Member for Precinct 1, asked why there is no override on the ballot for the spring. Ms. Paolillo said this was considered but because of the debt exclusion for the rink it seemed wiser to wait on an override for later. He outlined some of the factors that affected the override vote last year.

Ben Lebetsky, Precinct 6, spoke to support the Grade 4 Strings Program.

Cliff Gallant, Teacher at the Burbank School, spoke to support keeping aids in the kindergarten classrooms instead of moving them to higher grades.

Suzanne Ackerman, 3rd Grade Teacher at Wellington, spoke about her concerns about the cuts to the elementary program and the services that those students will need when they are older.

Mariola Magovcevic, resident, asked for clarification on why an override is not on the ballot this spring. She also asked why the rink is returning to the ballot which could increase the chances of the override failing. Mr. Paolillo spoke about the situation and the plan to address it.

Mr. Epstein said he is concerned that there is not enough time to have a successful override process for the fall and the focus has been to have the override in the spring of 2024.

Ms. Moriarty said she would like to see a plan for future overrides. Mr. Lubien said this was the goal of the Financial Task Force and agrees that there needs to be a long-term financial plan.

Mr. Paolillo reviewed the history of recent overrides and also supported a long-term financial plan.

Mr. Liberty said the current budgeting process is out of synch with how schools operate, and suggested that an override should happen in the fall so residents will have concrete evidence of what will happen if it fails. He also supported having a fiscal plan in place.

Ms. Helgen said successful overrides in other communities often have a compact/pledge that says how the money will be spent and what the budgets will go up by. If the Town carries out the pledge, future overrides are easier to achieve.

Mr. Crowley pointed out that if an override is delayed until next year, the results of a failure will be calamitous.

Ms. Werner said nothing has changed since the failed override, and pointed out that the Arlington override includes a promise that there won't be another override request for a number of years and that this creates trust.

Mr. Paolillo said the Town has to do a better job informing the residents of the fiscal situation, and show a plan to move forward.

Mr. Taylor said one of the proposed cuts is for 11 aids at the kindergarten level and that last year 30% of these students were ELL. However, this percentage drops at the 8th & 9 grade levels which means an intervention at the elementary level works. He suggested splitting the Kindergarten Fee of \$3500 to fund the aids.

Mr. Taylor pointed out that the Town is caught between immediate and long-term needs and supports moving away from the use of Free Cash.

Mr. Pickilingis said the Structural Change Impact Group spent dozens of hours looking into efficiencies, and there is not much there. He added that the cost of doing business is going up more than 2.5% and this is not impacted by efficiency.

Ms. Dionne said she believes there are efficiencies, but they will not solve the problem. They will demonstrate to the voters that the Town is trying to be responsive and identifying these will help build trust. She also spoke about the impact of the reserves on the override vote.

Ms. Dionne suggested that funding for the Office of Community Development be targeted for funding so a long-term business plan can be developed. She also asked if specific amounts can be pledged to develop special education capacity.

Mr. Liberty said he keeps hearing about a roof falling in, and unless this is an actual possibility that the group should stop using this language. Ms. Dionne said the Chenery roof is at the end of its useful life, although there is no danger. There was a discussion of the ages and condition of various roofs in Town.

NEXT MEETINGS

March 6, 2023: Joint meeting of the Select Board and the Warrant Committee to discuss Free Cash.

ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting of the Comprehensive Capital Budget Committee. The motion passed unanimously.

Mr. McLaughlin moved to adjourn the meeting of the Warrant Committee. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously.

A motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting of the School Committee, and the motion passed unanimously.

A motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting of the Select Board, and the motion passed unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:0pm.

Respectfully submitted by,

Susan Peghiny
Recording Secretary