

Belmont Warrant Committee Meeting Minutes
FINAL
February 11, 2010, 7:30 p.m.
Chenery Middle School Community Room

Present: Chair Curtis; Members Allison, Becker, Dash, Libenson, Manjikian, McLaughlin, Millane, Paolillo, Smith; BOS Chair Leclerc; School Committee Chair Rittenburg

Town Administrator Younger, Town Accountant Hagg and Superintendent Entwistle

Members Absent: Bruschi, Callanan, Epstein, Hofmann, and Lynch

The meeting was called to order at 7:36 pm by Chair Curtis.

Chair Curtis began by noting that budget presentations would be presented this evening.

Presentation of School Department Budget

Superintendent Entwistle: This is the Leadership Council's recommended student-needs-based budget, with an emphasis on student needs (see attachment). This has been a different budget process – the conversation has driven the budget numbers (rather than vice versa). The process has been infused with more creativity and energy. Assistant Superintendent Fitzpatrick has been ill and therefore I have worked closely with the curriculum directors and principals. Two critical questions were raised and will be answered:

- Do the current program, instructional, and operational expenditures reflect the priorities of the stakeholders of the Belmont Public Schools?
- To what extent does the projected FY11 Level Service Budget adequately meet student needs?

The following were focused on to help answer these questions:

- the community dialogue
- an articulation of long-term goals
- an improvement strategy
- alignment of on-going work with the strategy
- the reallocation of resources to support the strategy.

We see this work as fitting into an 18 month time frame. The ongoing work needs to be aligned with the strategy and some things needed to stop, while other areas needed to start up. The goals outlined below are very ambitious — we will continue to work towards them on a long-term basis.

Goals:

- to create a more common and consistent curriculum across the four elementary schools which will ensure equity as students land at the middle school
- to globalize the curriculum with an invigorating core value education
- to allocate money to technology
- to ensure that students are safe, secure, and presented healthy choices
- to attract and attain the most talented and effective teachers (classroom teachers are the most measurable difference for a quality education; we will revamp professional development and update the teacher assessment to increase efficiencies and improve the quality of teaching)
- to organize and manage accountability for using resources, improving services, and increasing cost efficiencies

Now (Superintendent Entwistle continued), to answer the first question (do current expenditures reflect priorities?) - the answer is yes, and they are continuing to improve with the back-up plan of the 18-month improvement strategy. Regarding the second question (does the present budget adequately meet student needs?): to answer this question, we needed to know what is needed now that we don't currently have. In-depth, data-based analyses was done looking at ROI (return on investment). We asked: are we getting the best bang for the buck? How does our spending compare with other like districts?

There was originally \$993K in new requests and there is now only \$376K. New requests were based on how connected the request was to the improvement strategy going forward and whether the request improves our accountability. The SC is currently looking at participation fees and the impact on kids, class size (can save short-term money here but will spend more money down the road to catch kids up), and alternative revenue sources.

In looking at "like districts," we see that the administrative cost-per-pupil is low in Belmont. The total expenditure-per-pupil in Belmont is below the state average, and Belmont is on the lower end in SPED spending.

So, yes, we are adequately meeting student needs, but is adequate OK? This is a comparatively low-cost, highly-efficient district. A good bit of work has been done on conservation measures, infused with a high level of parent/community contributions (money, volunteer labor, etc.). Some expenditures are in-flux, e.g., wages/contracts, medical insurance, fuel costs, circuit breaker loss, retirements. Revenue sources include state funding, local dollars, and federal stimulus funds.

***Bottom line:* The FY11 budget projection is \$42,217,868, which does not include salary increases.**

Chair Curtis clarified that the number above assumes a 0% increase in salaries, and represents a \$3.9M increase in the budget over last year. Member Allison noted that it is challenging to interpret the phrase "student needs" and then to "operationalize" that concept into the budget. Superintendent Entwistle agreed that it is not quantifiable. He

added that, through the insights gleaned from the community dialogue, it has been possible to improve the level of service to students right now. Member Paolillo noted that there are costs that can be controlled and costs that we can't control. Two new teachers and supplies/texts are added costs that we can control. Member Allison noted that, with regard to the "like communities," Belmont has lower average household income than many of these towns – Weston and Wayland, for example, have per capita income levels approximately twice those in Belmont. Other towns in the group have substantial industrial and commercial property, and thus have instituted a two-tier tax-rate system. What is "like," she said, are similar levels of academic achievement. Member McLaughlin noted that the spending in this budget is way over the available revenues and can't be done without an override. BOS Chair Leclerc said that, as an educator, he appreciates the educational value placed in this budget, but that the bottom line is sobering.

Presentation of Town Budget

Town Administrator Younger: We looked at comparative town budgets, saw some things we liked, and have made some changes to our usual presentation style (see attachment). This budget focuses more on program analyses, and has more charts.

Younger reminded the WC that he was asked to provide a "needs based budget" – and that is what he did. The FY10 budget reduced eleven positions, seven of which have been restored in this FY11 proposed budget. Belmont's revenues are based largely on residential property taxes (85%), state funds, and miscellaneous sources which include earnings on investments, building permits, departmental receipts, and some permit fees. Regarding state funds, he said he is "hopefully optimistic" that the number will come in near what the Governor proposed.

Town Accountant Hagg: health and retirement are going up by 7-8%, motor vehicle excise tax revenue doesn't change much from year to year, and the FY11 property tax will increase due to the Wellington debt exclusion. The town's debt service was up with the new senior center, new fire stations, and town hall renovations. The School portion of the debt will rise with the new Wellington. We have used our reserves to not have an override, but we should not draw them down any lower. Salaries (including benefits) are a big part of the budget's expenses.

Nondiscretionary expenditures include Minuteman, retirement, debt service, state assessments, and overlay. Discretionary spending is largely salary-driven. We propose to reinstate seven previously cut positions: 2 police, 2 fire, and 3 public works. We would like to hire a part-time budget analyst and a full time Council on Aging (COA) coordinator. Building services needs more custodial services at the Beech Street Center (BSC) and we need to increase nighttime staff at the BSC. The Information Technology position has been funded from the BMLB, but there is work on the town side for that position as well, so the town will absorb the benefits.

Regarding the three public works positions, Mr. Younger noted that mechanics are needed on staff to keep the snow plows running. He said that the seasonal budget analyst position is very important and he would make cuts elsewhere to keep this position. Regarding the COA, we now have a facility that can provide more robust services to the community. In order to have full use of the building, including leasing it for revenue, more custodial services are required. Regarding the Town Hall campus, there is a need to consolidate plowing, mail delivery, and mowing for this campus so that the work is not split between Town and School. There is also a plan in the works for regionalization of the Health Departments of Lexington, Belmont and Arlington. This will save money.

Ms. Hagg: Also under the FY11 expenditures is the addition of Social Security insurance for the town's part-time employees who have no retirement and no disability but are currently paying into 401(k) type accounts. This will enable those employees to earn SS quarters as well as have a minimal disability benefit. She reviewed the percent increases across the departments.

Chair Curtis noted that the combined amounts put forth from both budgets equal \$87.1M and that there are about \$84.4M in projected revenues – which means a \$2.7M revenue shortfall.

Member Paolillo asked how the “needs budget” was defined? Mr. Younger replied that a needs determination was made by looking at what was lacking. This budget is supportive of the needs identified, with the exception of Capital maintenance and facilities – where much more is needed. Younger asked: when did we last *plan* to build/improve a building? We still need to look at the library, the police station, the pool, the rink. We need to plan to upkeep our facilities in the future.

Structural Change Proposals

Chair Curtis noted that next week the WC will address structural changes: e.g., how to become more efficient as a town, and as a department. He asked that everyone come in with ideas to share on potential structural changes. Member Allison distributed cards for WC members to write down ideas for structural change. The cards will be gathered and read aloud, then posted under appropriate categories.

Other

Member McLaughlin moved to adjourn at 9:40 pm.

Submitted by Lisa Gibalerio
WC Recording Secretary