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Town of Belmont
Warrant Committee Education Subcommittee
Minutes for Thursday March 9, 2107 7:30 am
Town Hall, Conference Room 1

Members Attending: Roy Epstein (RE), Jim Gammill (JG), Anne Helgen (AH), Laurie Slap (LS)

Member Absent: Michael Libenson

1. JG called the meeting to order at 7:30 am.
2. The minutes of February 8th were approved. The minutes of February 28th were approved as amended.
3. JG reviewed the agenda and asked for initial expressions of interest regarding possible topics for the WC report. AH cited enrollment trends and incremental impact of enrollment changes on school resources, and whether there had been work done on this that could be included in the WC report.
4. The members discussed the funding of Special Education (SPED) out of district tuitions, and SPED expenses more generally. Several different vehicles were discussed: the warrant committee reserve fund, the circuit breaker account, the proposed SPED reserve fund, general fund appropriations through the annual budget process, and special draws from free cash and stabilization funds. JG said he is ready to turn the page, and explained this meant focusing on the issues of SPED spending and funding, as opposed to the process issues related to how the initial budget shares for FY18 were developed and communicated to the Warrant Committee. The committee discussed different possible paths, such as whether to accept the school draft 2 budget as is, to have a formulaic approach for allocating circuit breaker grants across fiscal years, and whether to target a specific year end circuit breaker balance. The committee noted that all approaches required some assumptions about SPED expenses and prospective grant levels. The committee discussed the implications of SPED expenses continuing to grow at recent historical levels of 8.5%, and how, if it continues, it will force choices in the future about budget allocations between special education, regular education, and town services, and about the urgency of an operating override.

JG noted that the school finance subcommittee meeting is not meeting next week, and he said his next step would be to reach out to one or two members of that subcommittee to continue these discussions.

5. The members raised specific questions about the draft 2 budget presentation:
 - (a) AH asked for additional detail about out of district student placements, similar to the monthly reports the subcommittee had received in past years.
 - (b) LS asked about the status of the "student services" funding mentioned on page 6, bullet point 6.
 - (c) The nature of the increase in the LABBB expenses was raised: to what extent is it due to new service provisioning, versus higher prices. Also, what is the current credit Belmont has on the LABBB books; JG said the superintendent estimated it around \$100,000.
 - (d) An update about new pilot programs and their effectiveness to date.
 - (e) Understanding the recently yearly spending on ELL instruction and the reason for the substantial increase in the FY18 budget.

6. The members discussed the topics that the subcommittee may wish to investigate this spring. RE cautioned about the Warrant Committee appearing to replace the judgment of the Town Administrator and the School Superintendent in such areas operational details of the different departments.

JG noted that the school's budget presentation spent six pages discussing inter-town per pupil spending comparisons. He noted that these comparisons were based on FY15 data (before the override) and that he had FY16 data from DESE for Belmont and 15 other municipalities, which could be used for closer study of the inter-town differences and similarities.

AH and LS identified the rising enrollment as a continuing topic for study, referring again to whether or not there are existing studies by the school administration about the incremental costs.

7. The members discussed how to present requests for additional information to the school administration. JG said he would prepare a first draft of a request.

8. The meeting adjourned at 9:09 am.