

MINUTES
TOWN OF BELMONT
DEPARTMENT BUDGET HEARINGS
MARCH 1, 2008
9:00 AM
Community Room, Chenery School

I. CALL TO ORDER

A special meeting of the Board was called to order in open session at 9:10 AM in the Community Room of the Chenery School. All members were present. Town Administrator Tom Younger and Assistant Town Administrator Jeff Conti were also present. The Board met in joint session with members of the Warrant Committee and School Committee to hear from Town and School Departments regarding their FY09 budget requests.

Human Resources

Human Resources Director Diane Crimmins appeared before the Board. The Department handles benefits administration for Town and school employees and retirees, as well as recruiting of Town employees and setting Town personnel policies and salary classifications. The FY09 budget includes standard salary increases but otherwise remains the same as FY08.

Minuteman Regional High School

Chairman Firenze pointed out that the Minuteman budget is determined by the Minuteman Regional School Committee and is a non-discretionary item on the Town side of the budget.

Minuteman Superintendent Ed Boquillon said the school is committed to working toward a more transparent budget process. Minuteman has a pilot half-day program where students spend half a day at Minuteman and half a day at their sending school. They also have adult and after-school programs.

Belmont's assessment is driven by enrollment and a municipal growth factor. This year, Belmont's assessment is higher than last year. Minuteman has not had significant staff increases but overall enrollment is up and enrollment from Belmont has increased. At Minuteman 97% of students pass the MCAS in 10th grade, and 100% pass by the time they graduate.

Warrant Committee/School Committee member John Bowe asked why per pupil spending is so much higher than at most schools in the state. Mr. Boquillon said Minuteman is achieving great things but is not as efficient as it needs to be. Also, some of the categories of people the school serves are not allowed to be counted when the Department of Education compiles its statistics.

Peg Callanan asked about Minuteman's outsourcing of its food services. Mr. Boquillon said he is not happy with the program either in financial or quality terms. It may be that the number of students served is too small to make this a profitable operation.

On health care, Mr. Boquillon said the school pays 75% of employee health care premiums and is seeing a 6% increase in premium costs.

Selectman Leclerc said Minuteman is a superb school and a model for vocational education around the country. Many Belmont students could benefit from what the school has to offer, so the Town might get more value out of our assessment if we were sending more students to Minuteman.

There was a brief recess to better accommodate the large number of audience members.

Belmont Public Schools

Chairman Firenze gave an overview of the budget process to date and explained that the initial budget deficit for this year was \$3 million. For the last few weeks, we have been trying to close this gap by reducing expenditures and identifying additional revenues that may be applied to the operating budget, including money from the overlay account and "free cash" reserves.

He stressed that this is the first time the Board of Selectmen has formally been presented with the schools' proposed budget.

Phil Curtis explained that the Town and schools have been asked to prepare budgets based on the net available revenue so that we can come to an understanding of what the impact will be.

Scott Stratford pointed out that much of the additional money that has been used to "close the gap" is one-time revenue that will not be available in future years. Jim Heigham agreed and said the Town has essentially been deficit spending for three years now.

Superintendent Peter Holland summarized what the school budget proposes to eliminate in order to meet the target funding amount specified by the Warrant Committee. The list includes elementary library aides, instrumental music, a 17% cut in athletics, an increase in the school bus fees, and two elementary teaching positions that had been added but were not in the FY08 budget. The schools have a second version of their budget which proposes to use \$100,000 in additional LABBB credits and \$150,000 in anticipated savings from a reduction in health insurance premiums. This would allow the restoration of the teaching positions as well as two new teaching positions, which would keep class sizes from increasing.

There was discussion of whether the health insurance reduction is plausible or not. Chairman Firenze said the numbers right now suggest that the Town may be able to reduce the annual health care premium increase from 7% to 4% but that determination has not yet been made.

Regarding full day kindergarten, the schools have received a state grant which combined with tuition could pay for this program and will allow it to stay off-budget.

In response to a question from Chairman Firenze, Superintendent Holland said salary accounts make up 80% of the school budget and other non-discretionary items such as utilities and special education costs are another 12%. This leaves only 8% of the school budget where discretionary cuts can be made that don't involve personnel cuts - and that has to come from things like textbooks, maintenance, and athletic programs. The schools have very little leeway in trying to find areas where reductions can be made, because the administration has already been streamlined over the past several years.

Mr. Holland said when he became Superintendent in 1988, Belmont was in the top quartile of towns in school spending, now we are in the third quartile. Ralph Jones said that is because the state now gives substantially more money in state aid to other towns that had been in the third quartile and now are ahead of us - not because the Town suddenly stopped trying to fund its schools.

Liz Allison pointed out that Belmont is in the top decile in the state in teacher salaries. Mr. Holland said that is because we do without teachers' aides and other administrative staff that other districts have.

Several residents spoke in favor of doing whatever is necessary to fund existing school programs and maintain class sizes, including an operating override. Some residents objected to shifting programs such as sports and music to a user-fee basis, which would discriminate against low-income families and essentially "privatize" public education. School Committee member Ann

Rittenburg said that any time there is a user fee for a school program, low-income families can apply for a waiver.

Chairman Firenze and Selectman Solomon stressed that the Board believes that both the roads and schools need to be funded. Their concern is how to manage the process so that one override does not damage the chances of another one passing. A resident suggested perhaps a combined roads/schools override could be placed on the ballot.

Phil Curtis pointed out that the Warrant Committee cannot endorse an April 7 operating override without knowing what the amount would be. The School Committee has not even voted on the budget proposals presented today. The Warrant Committee feels that April 7 is not a reasonable timeline and if an override is going to be considered it should be in the context of a special election. School Committee member Scott Stratford said the School Committee would not be prepared to put forward an amount for an override at this point.

The Board briefly recessed.

Roads Override Discussion

Chairman Firenze said at this point it seems like a roads override in April is likely to fail. Also, the Board is not in a position today to put an operational override on the ballot not knowing yet what the amount should be. He suggested that if the budget gap cannot be closed in the next weeks without devastating the schools, he might support a special election with overrides for both roads and the operating budget. However, he is afraid if they are both on the ballot, both will be defeated so his preference would be to close the gap and only have the roads override in May.

Selectman Solomon agreed that there should not be a roads override in April, as much as he supports having one at the proper time. He also agreed that there is not sufficient time to assemble an operating override for April. He said it may be best to go for an operating override this spring of enough magnitude that the Town won't need another one next year. Chairman Firenze suggested it would need to be about \$3 million.

Selectman Leclerc agreed with his colleagues and stressed that any overrides must not jeopardize passing the Wellington School override in the fall. He worries that an operating override for schools now might create override fatigue, and would prefer to see further efforts made to close the gap and only have a roads override in the spring if it has a chance of passing. He envisions a larger operating override next year to address the structural deficit. But he would not be in favor of a roads and operational override at the same time.

Ralph Jones said he would prefer to see the roads override and the operating override done as soon as possible because the costs will only go up with any delay. He feels that the Wellington project is compelling enough on its own merits that it will not be endangered by other override votes.

The Board adjourned at 2:01 PM.

Administrator

Thomas G. Younger, Town