

MINUTES
BOARD OF SELECTMEN
SATURDAY, MARCH 10, 2007
SPECIAL JOINT SESSION
COMMUNITY ROOM, CHENERY MIDDLE SCHOOL
8:00 AM

A special meeting of the Board was called to order in open session at 8:05 AM in the Community Room of the Chenery Middle 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 to hear from Town departments regarding their FY08 budget requests.

Education

8:00 AM Minuteman Regional Vocational School

Superintendent Bill Callahan and Assistant Superintendent Tom Markham appeared for the Minuteman Regional Vocational School. Mr. Callahan reviewed an executive summary of the school's FY08 budget. The budget is increasing by about 3.8% over last year to a total of \$16.75 million. The majority of areas are seeing decreases in their budgets.

Phil Curtis asked about transportation costs. Mr. Callahan said they are split equally among the towns. Minuteman is hoping that the state may increase funding for regional transportation above the 80% that was budgeted.

Selectman Firenze asked why Belmont's enrollment has decreased. Mr. Callahan said that Belmont is one of only three towns that do not send all 8th graders on a tour of the school.

Mr. Markham reviewed the calculation of Belmont's assessment. He began by reviewing the school's revenue assumptions for Chapter 70 aid, transportation reimbursement, non-resident tuition, and other income. The total anticipated revenue is \$6.77 million. This leaves a gap of \$9.97 million to be filled by assessments of the member communities. Of the 446 full time students at Minuteman, 22 are from Belmont or roughly 5%. Belmont's total assessment is made up of its share of the school's operating cost for these students, plus costs for capital equipment, special education, and non-full time students. The total FY08 assessment is calculated at \$502,174, which is slightly lower than the figure that had been assumed in the Town's initial budget, and does represent roughly 5% of the \$9.97 million. This amount is a significant reduction (about \$100,000) from the FY07 assessment.

John Bowe asked why the per pupil costs of Minuteman are much higher than other vocational schools. Mr. Callahan said that the school has excess capacity to handle more students than are currently enrolled - if enrollment increases, per pupil costs will decrease.

Selectman Firenze asked about the structure of Minuteman's health insurance. Mr. Callahan said the contribution split is 75-25. Minuteman combines with other vocational schools to purchase health insurance collaboratively.

Ann Mahon said Minuteman has better student-teacher ratios than the public schools and she would like to see the school make the hard choices and reduce the number of teachers to reduce the costs and free up more money for the Belmont Public Schools. She said the Minuteman district is a contract that the Town cannot get out of and a lot of people would love to get out of it.

8:40 AM Belmont Public Schools

Superintendent Holland and Director of Finance Gerry Missal appeared for the Belmont Public Schools. Most members of the School Committee and several school administrators were also present.

Mandated cost increases such as special education, salaries and benefits including health insurance, and utilities, are 4.4% over FY07 levels. Step increases and an additional 2 elementary teachers to cover increased enrollment are another 3.2% increase. The overall budget increase after adjustments is 8.9% over FY07. This includes requests for full-day kindergarten, a new director of guidance, and an assistant network administrator to be shared with the Town.

There was discussion of the school's obligations under No Child Left Behind and MCAS when any subgroup underperforms. At the middle school level there is a current obligation in this area; at the high school there is an attempt to be proactive with incoming students because of the high stakes of underperforming on the 10th grade exam.

There was discussion of the merits of a full-day kindergarten. While more and more communities are moving in this direction, and 57% of Massachusetts students now participate, the research is a bit equivocal. Bruce MacDonald said it's not just about adding more time, it's making changes in the program to make better use of that time. Diane Hobbs asked if we could charge for the extra half-day. Dr. Holland said this was looked at, but that might mean the kids who need it the most might not get it.

Paul Roberts pointed out that kids now have more pre-school and day care than in the past and a half-day of kindergarten is almost like a step back.

Lynn Bodmer said class sizes at 24-26 children are unacceptable. It is unacceptable to not fund new textbook supplies and limit the range of academic offerings to the bare basics. It is unacceptable to send our children to schools that are in need of repair. If the proposed 8.9% increase is not approved, we are sending the wrong message to our children.

Marissa Andersen said her children have not been in day care and doesn't feel they would benefit or be ready for a full day of kindergarten.

There was discussion of student-teacher ratio and class sizes. John Bowe said among 25 communities Belmont was fourth worst in this area.

Lisa Boyce said full-day kindergarten can help parents and teachers but the research suggests that by third grade the advantages to kids have disappeared. She feels that addressing class sizes should be a higher priority.

Bill Hoffman pointed out that if revenues only go up 3% and the school budget goes up 9%, something is going to have to be cut to pay for that increase. The money has to come from somewhere. He also noted that Belmont is one of only two towns in the Commonwealth that pays 90% of health insurance while Minuteman pays 75%.

Selectman Firenze said that compared to other communities, Belmont is an incredibly well-run town including schools and town administration.

Revenue and General Discussion

Town Accountant Barbara Hagg shared some data on revenues going back over several fiscal years and revised projections for FY08. She has increased estimates for building permits by \$100,000 and for Chapter 70 state aid by \$25,000 based on the Governor's budget. The total increase in projected revenue is \$145,000.

There was discussion about how to appropriate the \$5 million in free cash that the Town currently has available. Ralph Jones' proposal was \$1 million for the operating budget (including the \$800,000 already assumed), \$2.5 million for pavement management, \$1 million for capital, and \$500,000 for the unfunded OPEB liability. Phil Curtis, Lynne Doblin and Will Brownsberger would take the \$2.5 million and use it for the operating budget.

Selectman Firenze clarified that since \$800,000 has already been allocated to the operating budget, we are really dealing with about \$4.2 million.

Mike Widmer said he supports using some additional money for the operating budget but wants to know what the gap (and hence the need for an override) will be in FY09. There was discussion of what that number might be. Selectman Brownsberger said it will be somewhere between \$5-6 million.

Mr. Younger said the Town administration is making structural changes to find small amounts of savings here and there. He also noted there could be some one-time revenues coming in FY08 and FY09 such as Woodfall Road sale proceeds and ARC building permits.

Mark Paolillo said he is in favor of using somewhere between \$1 million and \$2.5 million for operating but the Town cannot afford to neglect its infrastructure.

There was discussion over whether it might be more appropriate to put an override question on the ballot for this year than to wait until FY09.

The Board expressed its desire to have a substantive budget discussion on March 26 with the goal of making a recommendation from the Board about how much free cash to use for the operating budget. The Board requested the Capital Budget Committee to make a recommendation as to how much to use for capital needs.

There was discussion of the agenda for the upcoming Capital Projects Planning Group on March 19. Chairman Solomon has proposed that the Group hear one presentation from the Pavement Management Committee and a brief report from the Permanent Building Committee on all other projects. Next, the Board would discuss a mandate for a small Capital Projects Overview Committee to review the list of proposed projects to examine possible combinations of projects and siting changes and report back by October 1.

There was disagreement as to whether that mandate should include the Senior Center. Selectman Firenze felt it should, the others did not. Pat Bruschi said the voters decided on the Senior Center project just 15 months ago, that should be a settled issue. There was agreement that the school projects could be considered, although it was felt it is unlikely that any changes would be recommended.

The Board moved: To amend the charge of the Capital Projects Overview Committee to exempt only the Senior Center from review.

Motion carried 2-1. (Solomon and Brownsberger aye, Firenze nay.)

The Board moved: To create the Capital Projects Overview Committee with the charge as amended.

Motion carried unanimously (3-0).

The Board discussed the sale of land on Sherman Street and Lamoine Street as approved by Town Meeting. The Sherman Street parcel is ready to be auctioned with a minimum bid of \$5,000.

The Board moved: To authorize the auction of land on Sherman Street with a minimum bid of \$5,000.

Motion carried unanimously (3-0).

The Lamoine Street property remains in question whether combined with a neighboring parcel it could be a buildable lot, which would change the assessed value of the property. This makes the setting of a minimum bid problematic because the value to the owner of the neighboring parcel would be higher than for anyone else. That abutter has said it is not their intention to build on the property. The Board could instruct the assessors to put a restriction on the sale that the parcel cannot be built upon.

Selectman Firenze suggested a minimum bid of \$20,000 which was the sale price of the adjacent parcel.

The Board moved: To request the assessors to assess the property based on comparables and determine a value for the parcel as a stand-alone property and without any restrictions on sale.

Motion carried unanimously (3-0).

The Board signed the contract for Light Manager Tim Richardson which they had previously voted to do.

There was brief discussion of the methodology used to arrive at the individual local aid increases for municipalities in the Governor's budget. Selectman Brownsberger said he did not feel the large increases received by a small number of towns (of which Belmont was not one) will prove to be sustainable.

The Board adjourned at 12:50 PM.

Thomas G. Younger, Town Administrator