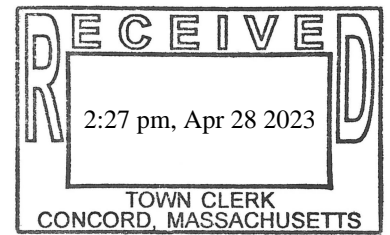


Town of Concord
Meeting of the Public Hearing and Finance Committee
Meeting Minutes – March 9, 2023
Hybrid Meeting



The Public Hearing was called to order at 7pm by roll call vote.

Members present:

Peggy Briggs, Chair
Parashar Patel, Vice Chair
Dee Ortner
Brian Taylor (remote)
Christine Reynolds
Don Kupka
Eric Dahlberg
Kathy Cuocolo (remote)
Lois Wasoff
John Garofalo (remote)
Lyndsey Lis
Suresh Bhatia
Amrith Kumar (remote)

Members absent:

Greg Guarriello

Ms. Briggs opened the hearing at 7pm and provided a summary of the agenda, which focused on the proposed capital and operating budgets for Minuteman, CCRSD, and the CPS Schools. The town's Enterprise Funds (Beede Center, Light Plant, Water, PEG) will present on March 15th. Time was made for questions by the Finance Committee and members of the public for each article presented.

Article 15: Minuteman Regional Technical High School District Budget

Mr. Steve Ledoux, Vice Chair of the School Committee, Chair of the Finance Subcommittee and Chair of the Faculty Negotiations Committee. He turned the presentation over to Dr. Kathleen Dawson, Superintendent. The superintendent provided an overview of the article, which is to determine whether the Town will vote to transfer from available funds the sum of \$1,643,006 for the necessary and expedient purposes of the Minuteman Regional Technical High School District for the Fiscal year 2024. Dr. Dawson highlighted that the budget request represents a 6.18% increase with primary drivers being, increased staffing (3 FTEs) increased health insurance costs (10%) and increases in utilities (8%). She further reviewed the trends in number of students, with a steep increase in students from member towns. Per student cost is and should remain constant.

Finance Committee Questions

- Don Kupka asked if the 4.5% overall increase vs the 6.18% operating budget (primarily due to a \$500,000 grant) could be maintained in the coming years. Nikki Andrade, business manager for Minuteman, responded that there were a few variables going forward. Clearly the 3 FTEs would be in the following years budget, but changes in OPEB, grants and utilities are unknown. Mr. Kupka asked the total number of staff and Ms. Andrade responded 144.

- Christine Reynolds asked about the postgraduate and animal studies programs, and if they were to be implemented as a way to raise revenue. Dr. Dawson responded that the animal studies program is part of the normal curriculum. The postgraduate program is tuition paying.
- Ms. Reynolds further asked about the fields as a source of revenue. Dr. Dawson responded that that was and is the intention but currently they are not generating the types of income that had previously been projected.
- Ms. Reynolds then asked about the necessity of adding 3 new teachers. Dr. Dawson responded that the animal studies program requires a minimum of 2 teachers and that their math program needed the additional position.
- Ms. Reynolds asked about member towns entering or exiting the program. Dr. Dawson advised that no member towns had exited and that while there are discussions with new towns the process could take two full years to implement.
- Next Parashar Patel asked about the growth in expense. Could we understand how much was attributed to student enrollment vs actual growth of various expenses? Ms. Andrade responded that the two major components are the minimum requirement set by the state and the operating costs. She said that assessments are aligned with the rolling 4-year average of participating students.
- Dee Ortner asked if the current 628 students was their maximum. Dr. Dawson responded that full capacity would be 720 students. Ms. Ortner then asked about the renovation of an additional building that was discussed last year and its impact on enrollment. Dr. Dawson advised that the North building was expected to be completed in the upcoming school year. It will house welding classes and will offer more enrollment opportunities.
- Eric Dahlberg questioned the numbers in the Town Warrant article versus the numbers in tonight's presentation. Ms. Andrade noted that there may be a difference of a few thousand dollars due to refinements after the publication of the warrant.

Questions from the public

- Matthew Johnston, 21 Winter Street, member of the Select Board, speaking on his own behalf. Commented on the use of a rolling 4-year average masks that our costs are increasing and asked for comment. Ms. Andrade reviewed the enrollment figures and noted that the number of Concord students in the freshman class is far larger than in the senior class and the averages will change over time to reflect those changes.

Article 16: Concord-Carlisle Regional High School Budget

Tracy Morano, Chair of the Concord-Carlisle Regional School Committee, and a member of the Concord School Committee opened the discussion by introducing Dr. Hunter, Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Bob Conry.

Mr. Conry provided an overview of the article, which is to determine whether the Town will vote to transfer from available funds the sum of \$26,357,846, or any other sum, for the necessary and expedient purposes of the Concord-Carlisle Regional School. Mr. Conry gave an overview of the 3.48% increase over FY 23. He pointed out that the largest component of expense is salaries which have risen 3.5% in accordance primarily with teachers' salary contracts. Increases in insurance costs (17.6%) and retirement plan assessments (15.8%) were partially offset by reduction indebt service (2.5%) and transportation (22%).

Mr. Conry reviewed the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds (ESSER) that the town had received of grants totaling \$697,832 over the past three years. A language based special education program was an illustration of the use of these funds (\$192,025)

Finance Committee questions

- Ms. Briggs inquired if the staff added for the grant-supported language-based special education program would have to be added to the budget after the expiration of the grants in FY25. Mr. Conry affirmed that that would be the case.
- Mr. Patel inquired about the contingency account that was being drawn down to as a budget offset. Mr. Conry described its use and responded that the account would not be replenished.
- Mr. Kupka asked if the contractual increase in teachers' salaries would be similar in FY25. Dr. Hunter noted that the current contract is up for renewal and Mr. Kupka pointed out that given the current inflationary environment we should be mindful that a 2.75% increase may not be achievable.
- Mr. Kupka asked about the 9% increase in Carlisle's share of costs based on changes in the student mix. Looking at our student demographics at the middle school, should Concord expect such a sharp increase in future? Dr. Hunter responded that based on current information that was not likely.
- Chris Reynolds asked about the balance in the circuit breaker account. Mr. Conry said that it was \$1,000,276.
- Ms. Reynolds then asked Dr. Hunter about her plan to add a new Dean of Students. She responded that was not an addition to staff but would be funded through a reallocation of current staffing level.
- Ms. Wasoff asked about reducing E&D down to 4% and what amount of funding would that free up. Mr. Conry stated approximately \$100,000.

Questions from the public

- Dean Banfield, 73 Walden Terrace – Mr. Banfield inquired about on the suggestion of moving to a rolling average for enrollment in determining to Concord/Carlisle allocation (as is done with Minuteman), to smooth out fluctuations in enrollment. Dr. Hunter responded that over many years there has been little interest to do so.
- Dr. Hunter added a note concerning students arriving from the homeless shelter. We expect 31 children, 22 of which are requesting transportation back to their home schools. She noted that we will be receiving \$18,000 per student from the state.

Article 17: Concord Public Schools Budget

Ms. Alexa Andersen, Chair of the Concord Public Schools Committee, opened the discussion. She stated that the budget to be presented by Dr. Hunter was a zero-based budget that would deliver the same level of services year over year. Special needs education rose 14%, utilities \$108,000 and inflation was 8%. Finance Committee guidelines were at 3.3% however the budget being presented represents a 4.7% increase.

Dr. Hunter began her presentation stating that the CPS request for FY 2024 is \$45,047,146, a \$2,036,690 (4.7%) increase. The largest segment of the budget is teachers' salaries. CPS's cost per student was \$23,269 and compared that cost to 13 neighboring towns (ranging from a high of \$30,296 for Weston to a low of \$18,958 for Acton-Boxborough). She reviewed the status of ESSER grants of \$2,060,619 of which \$1,609,753 will have been expended by the end of FY23.

Dr. Hunter concluded her presentation by noting that the budget approved by the School Committee was \$585,000 above the guidelines provided.

Questions from the Finance Committee

- Questions from Peggy Briggs and Don Kupka concerning the reduction from an average of \$735,000 which is what is appearing in the Town warrant vs the \$585,000 just quoted. Dr. Hunter relayed that the largest factor was \$100,000 that she released from the schools reserves account.
- Mr. Patel noted that while Dr. Hunter and Ms. Andersen highlighted expense increases as mandated by law the correct characterization was that they were the result of negotiated contract obligations.
- Don Kupka asked about the impact of the State homeless residents moving into town. She stated that there will be ESL needs, but there are currently no known factors upon which to budget.
- Chris Reynolds asked about the line between the schools supporting students' mental health needs and the responsibility of health care. Dr. Hunter talked about the need to support students so they are able to be receptive to learning. She referenced the Risk Behavior Survey where 25% of students report having had thoughts of doing self-harm. All acknowledged the line between student life and health care was a tough one and Dr. Hunter pointed out that getting appropriate health care can be difficult and doctor's appointments are not always available.
- Don Kupka asked if there were adds to staff to meet these needs. Dr. Hunter said they were retooling existing counselors to work with these students.

Questions/Remarks from the Public

- Terry Ackerman asked why CCRSD's increase was at 3.3% but CPS is at 4.7%. Clearly both schools are subject to the same inflation, special education needs, and other factors cited in the CPS presentation. Dr. Hunter responded that CPS had lagged on mental health staffing in past years while CCRSD was already well staffed to handle the current needs.
- Wilson Kerr, 20 Damon Street, stated that the inflation rate was over 8% and that the guideline of 3.3% seemed unrealistic in that regard. He also stated that the Town budget was increasing 5.8% and commented that he did not understand why the disparity.
- Matt Johnson, 21 Winter Street, began by explaining the guidelines process is intended to recognize the ability of our townspeople to pay for services. To the extent that the cost of services exceeds guidelines we are asking our citizens to not live by a level set budget, but to reduce their available dollars below their own current needs. He asked how we can do that, and Dr. Hunter retorted that that is not her job, her job is to run the schools. The townspeople will make that determination. Mr. Johnson noted that he is hearing that several long-term towns people are talking of moving elsewhere as they will no longer be able to live here.
- Dean Banfield, 73 Walden Terrace, made the observation that our town's cost per student is \$2,000 to \$1,800 greater (approximately 10%) than Needham, Bedford or Lexington and that those towns costs include high school students whom he believes need more sophisticated education.
- Liz Kroll, 212 Hubbard Street, spoke of her support for the schools and their difficult job.
- John Peachy, 44 Bedford Court, spoke of his support for the schools and the excellent education our town provides.
- Don Kupka offered that the discussion of budget levels should never pinpoint specific individual jobs as that put undue stress on persons working for the town.
- Todd Benjamin, Sudbury Road, asked for clarification on the cost of Professional Development. He stated that Concord provides 30 days of paid PD while other towns like Brighton provide half as much.
- Mary Hartman, 16 Concord Green asked about possible additional sources of revenue. Dr. Hunter responded that the schools are always looking for and applying for grants.

- Casey Atkins, 477 Lawsbrook Road, spoke to her support of the schools and gave a personal example of when the schools were there for a mental health crisis in her family.

Article 18: Concord Public Schools Capital Projects

This article provides for a capital appropriation for Concord Public Schools K-8 as part of the Town Manager’s five-year Capital Plan with the debt service to be funded within the Levy Limit. Bob LeLacheur, Interim Finance Director spoke to this article. He stated that each year the town grants the schools \$900,000 and they manage their capital improvements around that line item.

Questions from the Finance Committee

- Dee Ortner asked if the schools could defer some of these projects and use \$585,000 for the CPS budget shortfall. Mr. LeLacheur explained that the funds requested in this article would be raised through borrowing, so deferring the projects would not free up available funds; rather, it would reduce the amount borrowed.
- Don Kupka stated that the schools should get 30 years rather than a 20-year life out of boilers and we should not be replacing them prematurely. Mr. LeLacheur commented that they are under pressure to move towards higher sustainably infrastructure.

Questions/Comments from the Public

- Dean Banfield, 73 Walden Terrace, reviewed prior year discussions of the Thoreau and Alcott boilers and he inquired of the status of the study. Mr. LeLacheur conveyed that various options for high efficiency and/or all electric boilers were being looked at.
- Diane Proctor, 57 Sudbury Road, reminded the group that the \$900,000 is granted to keep our buildings in good repair.

Article 19: Concord Public Schools Capital Projects – Fields and Landscaping

To see if the Town will appropriate \$1,802,000 for the purpose of installing new natural grass athletic turf fields, landscaping, and other expenses, related to the new middle school, if the athletic fields and landscaping are removed from the scope of the Concord Middle School Project under the “alt/delete” procedure if their removal is necessary to bring the construction bids within the current authorization.

Dr. Hunter explained that should the bids for the new middle school come in at a level that fits within the approved budget, this article would be unnecessary and would not be moved at Town Meeting. Peggy Briggs mentioned that the Community Preservation Committee might be willing and able to fund this, and Dr. Hunter acknowledged that that was an avenue to pursue.

Questions from the Finance Committee

- Dee Ortner asked if the schools could move this request to the following year, which is closer to the time the funds would be needed. Ms. Andersen responded that the thinking is that by getting the bids now they could lock in prices and eliminate the risk of future year costs being higher.
- Parashar Patel asked what future large capital projects the schools foresaw in the coming years.

Questions/Comments from the Public

- Mary Hartman, Concord Green, Select Board member described the process for major capital projects in excess of \$5 million. She noted that the committee had met twice in 2022 and neither time did the request for \$1.8 million get raised. Dr. Hunter responded that the schools

wish to be in sync with the process but that the timing of this years needs assessment made that unworkable.

- Diane Proctor, 57 Sudbury Road, commented on the application process to the CPC and a multi-year approach to approval.

Article 20: Appropriation to Middle School Stabilization Fund

To determine if the Town will vote to transfer from Overlay Surplus \$750,000 and from Free Cash \$250,000 for a total transfer of \$1,000,000 to the Middle School Stabilization Fund.

Ms. Briggs gave a summary of the Stabilization Fund’s establishment in 2020 and its funding year by year.

No questions from Finance Committee or public

Meeting was adjourned at 10:02pm.

Kathy Cuocolo
Finance Committee Member