



Joint meeting of the Town Council and Finance Committee

May 7, 2021 1:00 p.m.

Virtual Meeting

Minutes

Pursuant to Governor Baker's March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §18, this meeting of the Town Council & Finance Committee is being conducted via remote participation.

Finance Committee members attending remotely: De Angelis, Griesemer, Pam, Schoen, Steinberg, and resident members Hegner, Kubiak, and Sheffler

Member absent: None

Councilors Present: DuMont, Hanneke, and Ryan

Others attending remotely: Finance Director Sean Mangano, Comptroller Sonia Aldrich, Clerk of the Council Athena O'Keeffe, Amherst Regional Schools Finance Director Doug Slaughter, Superintendent of Schools Mike Morris, and Senior Services Director Mary Beth Ogulewicz.

1. Call to order

Steinberg declared the presence of a quorum, called the meeting to order at 1:01 p.m., confirmed all members can hear and be heard, and announced audio and video recording. Griesemer declared the presence of a quorum, called the meeting of the Town Council to order at 1:04 p.m., and confirmed Hanneke and Ryan can hear and be heard.

2. Budget Review: a. Elementary Schools

Superintendent Morris spoke about the overall budget, referencing presentation charts:

- The Amherst Regional Public Schools mission
- Leadership team
- Student demographics
- Key district initiatives
- Overview of the schools budget and spending
- Cuts to level services for FY22

Sheffler joined the meeting at 1:15 p.m.

Total Budget: Steinberg stated the budget is part of the Town budget, and matched the Council's budget guidelines. Funds that might be available from federal sources due to the pandemic are in a separate pot of money and are not included in the budget. The Council cannot add to the Town Manager's budget and can only confirm or reduce the Town Manager's proposed budget. Hanneke stated the MGL includes a way to increase school budgets but requires the coordination of the school committee and they have not indicated they seek that avenue at this point. Schoen asked if there is any way to come back and revisit decisions that have been made, asked about an increase in special education payroll, and asked if Amherst is disproportionately high in special education and if the state will help if that is the case.

Schoen noted that Special Education costs have increased rapidly and asked whether more students and/or cost per student due to needs. And whether a change in the Circuit breaker formula is needed: Morris responded that more students are coming in with special learning and health needs. Morris, Slaughter, and members discussed the state-wide circuit breaker program that provides supportive funding for schools in specific situations. Morris added that Federal funds have also fallen short.

Griesemer asked about the rise in cost and decrease in staff for special education. Slaughter stated the salary lines are still reflecting the values in the reductions list. Griesemer asked about special education staffing costs. Slaughter spoke about salaries and staffing costs in response.

Hanneke asked about the cause of the personnel costs increases relative to increases in Town revenues. The responses noted the contract terms and step increases, particular for newer staff.

Schoen asked about students transferring to charter schools and increasing the per student allotment which increases the costs that are sent to charter schools when students opt to attend charter schools. Morris responded that yes the Charter formula was of concern: the Charter schools do not have the resources nor programs for serving special need students. Thus, the district loses regular students but pays an average costs that that reflects much higher costs of special needs students.

Morris answered a question about higher heating costs in Wildwood to explain this school still heats with oil. The others use natural gas.

Schoen asked about central administration costs rising faster than school administration, and whether the allocation or staffing has changed. Slaughter responded that the allocation for elementary and Regional has not changed much but some costs previously billed to School administration have been shifted to Central. (He did not provide totals).

Griesemer asked what is being done at the elementary schools to make COVID safety accommodations.

Slaughter spoke about utility costs, and about how the schools have maintained safety and distancing due to COVID.

Sheffler asked whether there had been pay cuts for principals and assistant principals. Slaughter responded that last year's budget lines for those lines were incorrect and have been corrected in the FY22 budget.

Hanneke expressed concern about payrolls increasing much more than 2.5% every year, and asked what the plan is to address payroll increases above 2.5%. Slaughter acknowledged the issue with the structural problem with step increases and cost of living increases, and spoke about the estimates used for the projections.

Griesemer asked for enrollment trends by school and by grade for the past 5 years.

Pam asked about limits on special education and incentive to get other students to school in Amherst. Pam also asked about class size compared to neighboring towns. Slaughter spoke about requirements for schools to provide what is necessary for a child to access the curriculum and the schools' obligation to serve students that are enrolled in Amherst schools.

Ryan commented that enrollment decline began earlier than 5 years ago, and the trend can be seen beginning over the past 20 years. Ryan added that the group that negotiates salaries and the group that makes the budget appear not to be working in unison. Slaughter responded that the School Committee are the negotiators and encouraged members to reach out to School Committee members.

Public Comment: Toni Cunningham requested the Council fully fund arts and technology teachers, spoke about the value of those programs, and the need to keep the programs fully funded with staff at Crocker Farm. Cunningham suggested the use of federal funds to support the funding of those subjects.

Steinberg spoke about Elementary and Secondary School Emergency and Relief (ESSER) Funds and noted that there are rules under which those funds can be utilized. Kubiak stated the School Committee has broad latitude in regard to spending money that is allocated for the school budget.

Kubiak suggested separating steps and COLAs to create a moderating effect on the budget. Kubiak stated the Town does not have an ample supply of middle-income housing and that is a bigger factor in enrollment than pre-k. Hegner spoke about sustainability, declining enrollment, and increasing salaries.

Slaughter spoke about the use of one-time funds to support the departments, and the risks associated with that practice.

Hanneke noted that the Council funds a bottom-line budget and the Council and School Committee's roles in approving and spending the budget presented by the Town Manager.

Pam asked why school choice was not offered. Slaughter responded that school choice is used to fill slots in smaller classes, and the schools kept the choice students from the previous year but did not add choice spaces last year.

Members spoke about ESSER funds and how the funds are allocated. Mangano responded that they are still waiting to hear about these funds and the allocation will all be to schools

Members discussed the timing of the discussion of the Community Safety Working Group's recommendations.

Hanneke left the meeting at 2:56 p.m. Griesemer adjourned the meeting of the Council at 2:57 p.m.

De Angelis was disconnected and reconnected at 2:58 p.m.

Griesemer asked about how the committee will report on the budget review process prior to the final recommendation to the Council. De Angelis asked about what the Council is capable of doing in terms of increasing, decreasing, and reallocating funds within the budget.

b. Senior Center

Ogulewicz spoke about the need for a plan for aging in Amherst, the rising senior population, and the philosophy of caretaking within the decisions that the Town makes. Ogulewicz spoke about diversity and inclusion at the Senior Center - with broad support of volunteers. She described how the Senior Center plans to scale up and reopen, and sector-specific precautions and guidelines as the center reopens. Ogulewicz spoke about vaccination efforts and the overall wellbeing of Amherst seniors, and the teamwork with Town staff assisting. Members asked about programs and assistance for seniors.

Steinberg asked about CARES Act funds and other federal funds that have been used for seniors.

c. Veterans Services

Steinberg asked about benefits and reimbursement. Mangano spoke briefly about benefits and reimbursements, and outreach. There was no presentation on this topic

d. Social Services – moved to a future meeting agenda

Steinberg spoke about what the committee will report to the Council through the budget review process in response to an earlier question from Griesemer. Members discussed what would be reported to the Council during the budget review process.

3. **Public Comment – taken earlier in the meeting**
4. **Topics not anticipated by the Chair 48 hours before the meeting: None**
5. **Adjourn**

Steinberg declared the meeting adjourned at 3:42 pm.

Respectfully submitted, Athena O’Keeffe
Clerk of the Town Council

Record of agenda packet materials and documents presented

05-07-2021 Finance Committee Agenda

Elementary Schools Charts, presented during the meeting. **NEED TO ADD TO PACKET**

Elementary School Budget: **LINK**

FY22 Budget materials <https://www.amherstma.gov/3584/Upcoming-Budget>