

BUDGET COORDINATING GROUP
MINUTES – DECEMBER 3, 2009
Amherst Room, Jones Library

COMMITTEE MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE: Andy Churchill, Rob Detweiler, Farshid Hajir, Chris Hoffmann, Patricia Holland, Bonnie Isman, John Musante, Stephanie O’Keeffe, Andy Steinberg, Gerry Weiss.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS ABSENT: Irv Rhodes, Alberto Rodriguez, Larry Shaffer, Doug Slaughter

OTHERS PRESENT: Claire Bertrand, Walter Wolnick

POINTS OF AGREEMENT:

- That BCG representatives agree that last year’s budget cuts represent an important context for considering and communicating our override recommendations, and hence, we will need a clear list of those for the Town, Schools and Libraries – with dollars and details.
- That the Town, Schools and Libraries will continue to adjust their individual budget process calendars as necessary – and send updates to John Musante for the compiled calendar -- to enable recommendations to be made in time for the February 8th Select Board meeting, when finalizing of the override ballot language is scheduled.
- That the BCG Co-Chairs will draft a plan and calendar for how the group might proceed, given the challenges of coordinating complex information and scheduling in a compressed timeframe, and will distribute that in advance of the December 17th meeting. The plan may suggest that a subcommittee of BCG, or that another committee such as the Finance Committee, undertake discrete tasks.
- That John Musante will create a chart detailing the costs of different override amounts for tax payers at different property assessment levels, and to include net impacts when offset by Federal income tax deductions at different tax rates, as a resource that will help inform the BCG’s recommendations.
- That progress is being made on models for a uniform Town, School and Library staffing and compensation report, and that a draft is planned for the December 17th meeting.

Meeting called to order at 11:40 a.m. by Co-chair Stephanie O’Keeffe

Public Comment: Mr Wolnick presented data on previous override and debt exclusion votes in Amherst.

Member Reports:

Musante reported that the town is working on a budget proposal and planned to have Shaffer preview this to the Select Board on its meeting on December 14th. Shaffer is meeting with all employees of the town to discuss where we are.

The state legislature adjourned without taking actions on cuts, so we do not expect to know more until January. He is assuming that Quinn and regional transportation will be cut at that time.

Detweiler reported that they are looking at three levels of cuts at the regional level: \$2.4, \$2.6, and \$3.2 million dollars. They have figured out a set of cuts that would get to the \$2.6 million level, but reaching the \$3.2 level is very difficult.

Isman points out that due to reduction of state funding and decreases in the library endowment, even with the best case scenario of an increase of 5% in town funding, the overall library budget will decrease by 1%. With worst case reduction of 3% in town funding the library would be \$184K less than level services (8.4% decrease from last year). Departmental heads have been asked to prepare budgets with 10% cuts and these will be reported to the trustees on 12/15. Fortunately, private fundraising has been doing very well so far this year.

Consolidated Budget Calendar.

The latest revision of the consolidated calendar was reviewed, and brought up to date. Musante will provide another version.

Supporting Info Needed to Respond to Questions from Voters.

Musante reported that he can't be sure when we will know about givebacks from the unions. Weiss noted that the public will likely expect to see substantial givebacks from unions if they are going to support an override.

Churchill asked what the budget gap closed last year, and how that compares to what we will need this year. Estimates among the members ranged from \$2.5 to \$3.8 million. This year it will probably be between \$4 and \$4.6 million. The group agreed that a key point was to clearly specify the cuts that were made last year and to make sure the magnitude of this year's gap and the specific cuts that would be needed to close it must be made clear to the voters.

Additional information to assist the budget process.

Musante reported that the assessors will recommend continuing using a single tax rate for business and residential properties.

O'Keeffe noted that February 16th was the last day for override to get on the ballot and confirmed that the schools and library would be able to get cut info by then. The BCG will make a recommendation on the override that the Select Board will presumably take much stock of. Steinberg pointed out there is a very narrow window between the time our budget proposals are supposed to be completed and when the BCG will need to make its recommendation.

Isman asked if the override would be a single figure, a menu, or what. O'Keeffe replies that we'll need to wait until the cut lists are available before deciding. Isman noted that the date for this decision should be on our consolidated calendar, leading to the observation that all scheduled BCG meetings should also be in the calendar for easy reference.

Holland asked if an override amount would be enough for level service budgets. Several members expressed the opinion that this wouldn't be politically feasible.

Weiss said he thought that an override would probably have to be part of a package of substantial budget cuts and significant wage concessions from employees for voters to approve it. Musante said that they have target amounts they would like to reach, and they will be working on negotiations through January, but can't say when they may have decisions by the unions.

Once cut lists are available, Churchill suggested putting all information in a table showing what is being cut and what could be restored at various override levels. This can be used to help decide what amount(s) should be on the ballot and also used as a public information tool. A subcommittee of the BCG may be created to concentrate on this and similar issues.

Staffing/Compensation Data

No update yet, we hope to have by next meeting.

Minutes

The minutes of 9/17, 10/15, 11/5, were all approved by consensus.

Future Meeting(s): December 17 at 11:30am.

Other Business. O'Keeffe reviewed the keys points to be reported back to Boards.

Adjourned at 1:05 p.m.

Reported by Chris Hoffmann