

**Budget Coordinating Group
Minutes of November 19, 2009 Meeting
Town Hall – Town Room**

Present: Andy Steinberg, Doug Slaughter, Irv Rhodes, Farshid Hajir, Pat Holland, Chris Hoffmann, Gerry Weiss, Stephanie O’Keeffe, John Musante, Alberto Rodriguez, Rob Detweiler (arrived late)

Absent: Larry Shaffer, Andy Churchill

Members of the Public: Walter Wolnik, Clare Bertrand

Meeting called to order at 11:05 a.m.

Public Comment:

Walter Wolnik said that it would be a mistake to make “a unilateral declaration of core services.”

Member Reports:

Schools: Hajir distributed copies of a letter from the Regional School Committee to Governor Patrick urging reconsideration of mid-year “9C” cuts that disproportionately cut state aid to regional school districts. At a meeting with the Governor, Kulik suggested that the Governor’s proposed regional transportation aid cut instead be funded with federal stimulus funds. He also reported that the state Senate had adopted a budget amendment sponsored by Sen. Rosenberg that would limit future regional school transportation aid cuts to an amount no greater in percentage terms than any cuts made to Chapter 70 aid. It is believed this would protect this program from even deeper future cuts.

Detweiler recapped the 11/17 Regional School Committee meeting at which staff presented FY 11 scenarios/cut lists and said that staff would be doing the same for the elementary schools budget at the 11/24 Amherst School Committee meeting. Rodriguez reported that superintendents and MASS consultants at a recent Connecticut River Valley Superintendents Association meeting were speculating on the possibility of up to a 20% education aid cut in FY 11.

Finance Committee: Steinberg reported that he had distributed the Amherst Finance Committee’s preliminary FY 11 budget guidelines for the Town of Amherst to the other three towns of the regional school district to keep them informed of Amherst’s budget planning.

Town: Musante reported that the Town had earned a bond rating upgrade from Standard & Poor’s to “AA with a Stable Outlook” in conjunction with its upcoming bond issue. This is a very positive independent assessment of the Town’s financial condition and its financial management.

Libraries: Nothing new to report.

Isman, Hajir, and Rhodes all spoke favorably to a suggestion to develop a multi-year budget plan through at least FY 12 (two years).

New Consolidated Budget Calendar and Next Steps

Musante reported no changes to the Town's budget calendar. Isman distributed an updated Jones Library budget calendar. Trustees are scheduled to vote a preliminary FY 11 budget recommendation on 1/19/10. Detweiler reported that the only change to the Schools' budget calendar is rescheduling of the 4-Town Meeting to 12/12 at 9 a.m. at the ARMS Library. A joint meeting of the Amherst and Regional School Committees is scheduled for 11/24 to discuss budget guidelines with the superintendent. Preliminary budgets will be presented to the school committees at their 1/5 and 1/19 meetings.

Direct Information Needed for Recommendations: O'Keeffe suggested that the BCG should develop recommendations for override size, structure, and reallocating shares of the "budget pie," if at all, and understand all of this in a multi-year context so that we do not pass an override and still have large budget gap the next year (FY 12). Rhodes agreed that we should "paint a 2-year picture." There was consensus that staff should develop a 2-year budget projection with refined assumptions. Hajir said that this "will help voters make an informed decision." Steinberg suggested that the Finance Committee would work with Musante to refine a multi-year revenue/expense projection by mid-January. All agreed that specific budget and override recommendations from BCG should wait until specific preliminary budget proposals are received and reviewed in January.

Supporting Information Needed to Answer Voter Questions: O'Keeffe said that the Select Board, School Committees, and Library Trustees would each be scrutinizing all parts of their budgets and gave as examples Town efforts at regionalization of services, controlling health insurance costs. Hajir agreed that one of the Regional School Committee's goals is "transparency" and suggested that the RSC would be vetting such issues as the trimester system, special education costs, and the number of administrators. Several members of the committee asked for staff to develop wage/benefits trend data presented in an apples to apples way for Town, School, and Library staffing over the past ten years. After discussion about the complexities and limits on staff time to prepare such a document, it was agreed that staff would develop a condensed chart for 2002, 2006, and 2010.

Next Meeting and Adjournment

The next BCG meeting will be December 3, 2009. The meeting adjourned at 1:10 p.m.

**Amherst Budget Coordinating Group
Summary Points – November 19, 2009**

At our November 19th meeting, the members of the Budget Coordinating Group agreed that the following points would be conveyed to our home boards and committees:

- That the BCG representatives agree that we can't formulate recommendations regarding the size and structure of an override question (or questions,) or any potential reapportionment among the Town, School and Library budgets, until we receive the budgets and cut lists in January, as requested by the Finance Committee guidelines; and that we acknowledge that this will require intense work from mid-January through early February;
- That BCG representatives recognize that a key consideration is the projected effects of a successful or unsuccessful FY11 override on FY12; and that this consideration will inform our discussions and ultimately, our recommendations. As such, we request that the Finance Committee refine projections for FY12 and FY13 before the budget submissions are due in January. We recognize that projections for future years include significant variables and unknowns including the outcome of the FY11 override vote, State aid amounts, new union contracts, etc.
- That BCG representatives acknowledge the necessity of being able to address public questions and concerns about Town, School and Library expenses. We will try to jointly address those that cross all budget sectors (such as staffing and compensation trends) in a uniform manner; and we will help each other to identify potential questions and concerns in our respective budgets, which each of us might otherwise be too enmeshed in to recognize;
- That BCG will continue to clarify the information we believe will help to address questions about staffing and compensation trends, in order to be able to present comparable information across the Towns, Schools and Libraries.

-- Respectfully submitted by John Musante