

**Budget Coordinating Group
Minutes of February 4, 2010 Meeting
Town Hall – First Floor Meeting 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, Andy Churchill, Bonnie Isman, Larry Shaffer

Members of the Public and Press: Stan Gawle, Larry Kelley, Vince O’Connor, Walter Wolnik, Diane Lederman (Press)

Meeting called to order at 11:33 a.m.

Public Comment:

Walter Wolnik stated that the Facilitation of Community Choices Committee recommended a menu override and that he hoped that the 3 members of the BCG who were a part of the FCCC would comment as to why the committee made that recommendation. Kelley asked when the amount and structure of the override question for the ballot would be set and if the amount had been determined. O’Keeffe responded that Monday February 8th the Select Board would take up the matter and that the amount had not been set. O’Connor commented that given the economy and the budgetary constraints that people are under he felt that a menu override would give the best shot at the most money, especially for the Regional schools, versus a single question large override amount.

Comments from Elected Boards:

O’Keeffe asked each of the elected boards to comment on their status and process with regard to the Summary Points, budget development and recommendations to the BCG regarding override amounts. Rhodes commented that the Summary Points had been disseminated but had not been on either of the School Committees’ agenda and thus had not been discussed. Hajir stated that a point that was not clear to the School Committees was that specific amounts approved by each committee for the override were expected. O’Keeffe noted that the explicit request for support for a specific amount was new. Churchill stated that amounts for Amherst and Regional Schools were set in BCG discussions without having a discussion at full School Committee meetings, hence the discomfort by the Committees regarding the current state of the process. He added that the School Committees will discuss specific amounts at their next meetings on the 8th and 9th of February. Rodriguez added that a specific discussion of the cuts lists will be had at the meetings and he will recommend amounts to be voted on by the committees. Hajir reported that the Regional School Committee was seeking legal advice regarding how best to make a recommendation to the BCG since the other member towns did not want to dictate to Amherst what and how it should resolve its financial matters. Holland reported that the Library Trustees

had voted to support the amount necessary to reach the Municipal Appropriation Requirement but that they intentionally took no position on the override itself. Holland and Hoffman reported that the recent gifts to the Library from the Woodbury estate would in no way change the amount necessary to satisfy the MAR. Weiss reported that the Select Board voted their recommendation for an amount for an override for the Municipal budget after reprioritizing one item on the cuts list presented to them by the Town Manager.

The Summary Points below articulate in detail the remainder of the meeting.

Next Meeting and Adjournment:

The next BCG meeting will be February 10, 2010 at 10:15 a.m. The meeting adjourned at 1:47 p.m.

**Amherst Budget Coordinating Group
Summary Points – February 4, 2010**

At our February 4th 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 recognizes that the process we created for determining override recommendations has impacted the existing budget processes of the School Committees and the Library Trustees. We are grateful for their accommodation.
- That our current working total for recommended restorations is \$1,821,282, representing:
 - \$488,830 for the Town (with one restoration -- 50% of street lights, totaling \$48,000 – eliminated from the prior restoration list);
 - \$1,087,315 for the Regional Schools (Amherst’s share of restorations that would total \$1.4 million for the Region);
 - \$176,000 for the Elementary Schools;
 - \$69,137 for the Libraries (with three restorations eliminated from the prior list – Office Assistant hours, COLAs for temp staff and office supplies, totaling \$19,995)

These numbers are subject to further refinement with next week’s School Committee meetings, and a worksheet with updated numbers will be provided at Wednesday’s BCG meeting (10:15 a.m. – location TBD)

- That in response to inquiries regarding delay of an override vote, general agreement among BCG members was to keep the March 23rd date. (Several spoke in favor of keeping the date; some offered no opinion; some noted that the question was raised by their home committees; no one spoke in favor of a later date.) Reasons cited for keeping the date included:

- The extensive joint financial planning process that has been working toward this date for many months;
- That uncertainties remain with any date;
- That knowing whether or not money from an override would be available before going to Town Meeting is preferable;
- That having an override vote occur during Town Meeting would be complicated and distracting and would necessitate suspending the meeting to postpone budget consideration;
- That a later date would impact the other three towns in the Region, which would have already had their Annual Town Meetings;
- That there has been significant organizational focus on preparing for March 23rd, including staff anticipation of that date as when they will know if their jobs will be saved or lost;
- The difficulty in justifying special election expenses when the point of the override is a shortage of funds;
- That the sooner the override result is known, the sooner budget and programmatic adjustments can be made;
- Better voter participation to be expected at the Annual Town election.
- That after considering pros and cons of different question structures, the group's support has generally aligned around a single ballot question specifying the amounts for Towns, Elementary Schools, Regional Schools and Libraries.

Consideration was given to a Menu style; with points raised in support including:

- It lets voters choose the areas they prioritize for funding;
- It allows voters who might oppose one budget area to support the others without having to vote against the whole thing;

Points raised against a Menu included:

- A single question presents an opportunity to bring the community together to support all its services, instead of potentially pitting one against another;
- The potential for divisiveness leading up to the vote, and the bitterness afterwards if some budgets win and others lose, is damaging to the community;
- A single question is consistent with the cooperative and coordinated BCG process that considered the budget needs and priorities of all Town services.
- That as Town leaders seeking an override because we believe the projected revenue shortfall makes it impossible to adequately fund core services town-wide, our recommendation to the voters should offer a town-wide solution.

Brief consideration was given to a Pyramid style, in which a higher and lower number are offered to voters, and that was regarded as antithetical to our process of trying to identify the smallest possible amount needed to maintain vital programs and services.

- That we will discuss reserve policy at our next meeting, and whether we should address the end-of-year surplus that conservative budgeting typically yields: by seeking to spend some of it, or by making a statement in support continuing to it accrue to reserves. If possible, the Finance Committee will provide a recommendation on the topic.

-- Respectfully submitted by Douglas Slaughter