

AMHERST FINANCE COMMITTEE MINUTES
April 3, 2010

CALL TO ORDER

The joint meeting of the School Committees, Select Boards and Finance Committees of Amherst, Pelham, Leverett and Shutesbury was called to order at 9:05 a.m. in the library of the Amherst-Pelham Regional Middle School.

FINANCE COMMITTEE MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

Kay Moran, Marilyn Blaustein, Douglas Slaughter, Andy Steinberg (chair), Marylou Theilman.

TOWN STAFF IN ATTENDANCE: John Musante, Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director; Larry Shaffer, Town Manager

SCHOOL STAFF IN ATTENDANCE Maria Geryk, Acting Superintendent of Schools; Rob Detweiler, Director of Finance and Operations

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE: Amherst Select Board members Stephanie O’Keeffe, Diana Stein, Alisa Brewer, Jim Wald; Amherst School Committee member Richard Hood; members of the School Committees, Select Boards and Finance Committees of Pelham, Leverett and Shutesbury; Becky Torres, Shutesbury town administrator; State Representative Ellen Story; school staff

Report from Boston. Story said to expect state aid cuts for FY 11 of up to 4%, the assumption on which the regional budget is based. She thinks that in two weeks the Legislature will debate a gaming bill, which as currently worded would allocate 30% of new gaming revenue to local aid. While she opposes the whole idea of increased gambling, she expects the bill in some form to become law because legislative leaders and the governor favor it. After that the Legislature will debate municipal control of health care plan design, and then the FY 11 budget.

FY 11 Regional budget voted by School Committee 3/25/10

Detweiler said that by mistake a \$175,000 deduction for teacher contract “give-backs” was not deducted. Therefore, the budget voted 3/25/10 is \$175,000 more than it should be, and so, in total, were the assessments sent to treasurers of the four member towns. Detweiler and Farshid Hajir, Leverett School Committee member and Regional School Committee Chair, said the Regional School Committee intended to make that deduction, and that the committee would vote on the corrected budget at their meeting April 13. In a straw vote, all five members of Regional School Committee at this meeting – a majority of the whole committee – indicated support for the revised budget.

Assessments to member towns. Using the regional agreement assessment method, assessing a per-pupil cost according to a five-year rolling average of numbers of pupils, the corrected assessments for FY 11 would be: Amherst, \$13,112,795; Pelham, \$1,127,285; Leverett, \$1,197,275; Shutesbury, \$1,414,617. Town Meetings in all four towns must agree to use this

method. If not, the statutory method would be used, with Amherst charged \$50,945 less, Shutesbury charged \$167,955 less, Leverett charged \$20,613 more, and Pelham charged \$167,955 more, an amount Pelham simply couldn't pay. Four years ago, a committee with representatives from all four towns studied various assessment methods and concluded the one in the regional agreement is fairest and easiest to understand. No one at today's meeting foresaw a problem getting their Town Meeting to approve it.

In response to a question from Hajir, Finance Committee members from Leverett, Shutesbury and Pelham said they were OK with the assessments stated above, and Steinberg concurred.

Update on Regionalization Study Committee. Last year the Regional School Committee organized a Regionalization Study Committee comprising members of the School Committees, Select Boards and Finance Committees from each of the four towns to evaluate whether K-12 regionalization, a four-town elementary school union, or some other reorganization would be worth doing to improve curricular coordination, save money or streamline operations. This group's report may be ready to present to the Regional School Committee as early as May or June. Hajir said preliminary indications are that little if any money would be saved by making such changes. He also said that the Citizens Budget Advisory Committee appointed by the Amherst School Committee earlier this year is apparently unaware of the Regionalization Study Committee's work and wants the schools to study various regionalization options.

Another option under discussion is moving sixth graders into the Middle School. Hajir noted that such a move would require prior approval by the Amherst, Pelham, Leverett, Shutesbury and Regional School Committees, amendments to the Union 26 and Union 28 agreements, and approval by Amherst, Pelham, Leverett and Shutesbury Town Meetings of resulting changes to the Regional School Agreement.

Hajir noted an item on the agenda for the Amherst School Committee's April 7 meeting, to seek legal counsel to explore the Union 26 agreement with Pelham.

Other topics and discussion among member towns.

John Trickey of the Pelham Finance Committee said that he expects state revenues, and therefore state aid to cities and town, will be even lower in FY 12 and perhaps FY 13, and he asked the school committee to take that into account in upcoming contract negotiations. Others concurred, and Hajir agreed.

Detweiler said the Regional School Committee recently voted to adopt a capital planning process which he hopes will be in place for FY 12.

Hajir and others expressed appreciation for Amherst voters' support of the March 23 override, which prevents even more devastating cuts to the regional school budget.

Leverett holds its Town Meeting April 24, Pelham and Shutesbury hold theirs May 1, and Amherst's starts May 3.

There was some general discussion about curriculum and educational proposals.

ADJOURNMENT: The meeting adjourned at 11:16 a.m.

Kay Moran, Acting Clerk