

Approved: 01/07/2016

**Amherst Finance Committee
Minutes of the Four Town Meeting
Saturday, December 5, 2015
9:00am – 11:38am**

ATTENDANCE:

Kay Moran (chair), Steve Braun, Bernie Kubiak, Tim Neale, Janice Ratner, Anurag Sharma, Marylou Theilman, Sandy Pooler, Amherst Finance Director

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE:

See following page.

AGENDA AND DISCUSSION

Regional School Budget

Regional Assessment Method

Minutes were taken and submitted by

Kimberly Stender

Community Liaison

Office of the Superintendent

Amherst, Pelham & Regional Public Schools

Minutes on the following pages were approved by the Amherst Pelham Regional School Committee.

**SPECIAL Meeting of the Amherst-Pelham and Regional School Committee
Four Town Meeting
Saturday, December 5, 2015
Library, Amherst Regional Middle School**

IN ATTENDANCE (by Town)

Amherst: Sonia Aldrich (Comptroller), Steve Braun (Finance Committee), Alisa Brewer (Select Board), Vira Cage (School Committee), Rick Hood (School Committee), Maria Geryk (Superintendent of Schools), Bernie Kubiak (Finance Committee), Sean Mangano (ARPS Finance Director), Kathy Mazur (ARPS Human Resources Director), Kay Moran (Finance Committee), Tim Neale (Finance Committee), Sandy Pooler (Finance Director), Doug Slaughter (Select Board), Andy Steinberg (Select Board), Mary Lou Theilman (Finance Committee), Jim Wald (Select Board), David Ziomek (Interim Town Manager)

Leverett: Philip Carter (Finance Committee), Ann Delano (Finance Committee), Peter D'Errico (Select Board), Sarah Dolven (School Committee), Kip Fonsh (School Committee), Stephen Nagy (Finance Committee), Tom Powers (Finance Committee), Julie Shively (Select Board)

Pelham: Jim Doubleday (Select Board), Tara Loomis (Finance Committee), Tara Luce (School Committee), John Trickey (Finance Committee)

Shutesbury: George Advanitis (Finance Committee), Michael DeChiara (Select Board), Allen Hanson (Finance Committee), Gary Hirschfield (Finance Committee), Weezie Houle (Finance Committee), April Stein (Select Board), Eric Stocker (Finance Committee), Stephen Sullivan (School Committee), Michael Vinskey (Select Board)

DESE School Finance Programs Administrator: Roger Hatch

A. Welcome and Introductions **9:00 a.m.**
Ms. Geryk welcomed the group and reviewed the agenda. Introductions were made.

B. FY 17 Budget Projections **9:10 a.m.**
DOCUMENT: Four Town Meeting Regional Schools December 5, 2015
Mr. Mangano reviewed the document (Powerpoint slides #3-12) and asked that questions and comments be sent to him via the feedback form (last page of packet). Ms. Geryk explained historical context points and how budget cuts impact educational programs. She also explained how facilities (energy efficiency projects), staffing models (benefits/health insurance trust fund), student demographics (ELL/special education), declining enrollment due to charter/vocational schools, range of programming (arts integration, K-12 project-based learning, GCC courses, STEM programs, Chapter 74 vocational programs, and staffing (ARHS trimester to semester shift) impact the budget. These factors resulted in the \$600,000.00 reduction to the regional budget in FY 2015-2016. Mr. Mangano reviewed the assessment information (Powerpoint slides #13-16) which indicates elementary and secondary educational spending per town budget.

C. FY 17 Capital Plan **9:31 a.m.**
DOCUMENT: Four Town Meeting Regional Schools December 5, 2015
Mr. Mangano explained the completed and approved projects indicated in the Capital Plan (Powerpoint slides #17-20). The Regional School Committee discussed this report at the November 10, 2015 meeting.

An alternative plan will be created based upon the approval of the Grades 7-12 Consolidation. Mr. Mangano explained the bonds and projected total cost of the FY 16-18 Capital Plan. He asked for feedback from the group. Mr. Nagy is concerned that capital plans will negatively impact the Leverett budget over the next five years.

D. Regionalization Update

9:38 a.m.

DOCUMENT: Four Town Meeting Regional Schools December 5, 2015

Mr. Mangano explained the Regionalization timeline components (Powerpoint slide #21) and Ms. Geryk asked for feedback from RAWG members and Regional School Committee members. Ms. Dolven announced that a Regionalization public forum for pre-school parents/guardians is scheduled for Wednesday, December 9, 2015 at 7:45 a.m. at Leverett Elementary School. Mr. Fonsh reported that 53 people attended the Leverett public forum on October 21, 2015. He agreed with Ms. Dolven that forums must be held at times convenient to families. He stated that it is imperative to educate all families especially those with very young children about Regionalization and alternative plans. Mr. Fonsh added that Regionalization must be a topic revisited many times within a community. He reported that Leverett continues to be split around the concept of Regionalization.

E. 7-12 Consolidation Update

9:43 a.m.

DOCUMENT: Four Town Meeting Regional Schools December 5, 2015

Ms. Mazur began her presentation by asking the group (by a show of hands) if their children graduated from ARHS. A vast majority indicated their children graduated from ARHS. She then asked how many people in the group currently have children in the regional schools. The response to this question indicated that very few people in the group currently have children in ARMS and/or ARHS. Ms. Mazur explained enrollment projections (Powerpoint slide #22). She reported that the Massachusetts Office of Public Collaboration (MOPC) is assisting with the Grades 7-12 Consolidation. MOPC created a survey of which 950 respondents (students, staff, parents/guardians) completed in September. The main concern of a consolidation is the safety of Grade 7-8 students in the same space with older high school students. Currently, future use of both the middle and high school buildings is being evaluated. ARMS could become a vocational program hub and a satellite campus for Greenfield Community College. ARHS could be re-structured to accommodate areas indicative of 21st Century Learning based on feedback from students, staff, parents, architects and consultant David Stephen. The consolidation is potentially slated for September 2017. Ms. Mazur reported that currently 5 options exist:

- No change to either building or grade structure
- Create a Grade 7-8 team structure at ARHS
- Create a Grade 7 Academy at ARHS with a Grade 8-12 high school model
- Move Grade 6 to ARMS with Grades 7 and 8 and maintain the existing Grade 9-12 high school model (provisions exist in the Regional Agreement which would allow for this change)
- Create a Grade 7-12 model at ARHS

Ms. Mazur indicated that a comprehensive report including budgetary information, architectural renderings and pros/cons relating to the options would be presented to the Regional School Committee at the January 12, 2016 meeting. The public is welcome to attend this meeting. Ms. Brewer asked why moving Grade 6 students into the middle school is currently being considered. Ms. Geryk replied that parents/guardians requested that this option be explored. Ms. Mazur reminded the group that Regional Agreement is very specific to grade configuration.

F. Guidance from Member Towns

9:55 a.m.

Mr. Mangano invited a representative from each town to briefly present the current financial situation. Ms. Moran (Amherst) explained the financial guidelines report (October 2015) and provided information regarding employee contracts, negotiations and post-employment benefit needs. Amherst's annual assessment will increase to support retirement funds. She added that four large capital projects are being

considered: South Amherst fire station, DPW facility, Jones Library expansion, Wildwood Elementary School Building Project. Ms. Moran announced that Mr. Pooler will depart as Finance Director. The Town Manager's Report will be made public on January 14, 2016. Mr. Trickey (Pelham) reported that town leaders are currently devising a 7-year master plan which will support long-term viability and financial sustainability. Development of the town center and affordable housing are considerations. He added that without a comprehensive development plan, Pelham may cease to exist as a stand-alone community. Mr. Powers (Leverett) stated that the financial forecast is uncertain. All town department budgets will be reduced by 2% and an abatement request and broadband plan are being considered. Mr. Hirschfield (Shutesbury) stated that taxes could be raised by 2.5% to sustain the budget but it is too early in the process to confirm.

G. Shutesbury Assessment Method Presentation

10:05 a.m.

DOCUMENTS: Appendix D. Method for Transition to the Statutory Method; FY 17 Assessments to Member Towns

Mr. Advanitis, Mr. Hirschfield, Ms. Stein and Mr. Stocker presented information regarding assessment methods. Ms. Stein explained that the reason behind this discussion was because Shutesbury residents were curious to know why the standard assessment method negatively impacted the town. These residents requested that an alternative assessment method be considered to save money for the town. Mr. Hirschfield presented the history of assessment methods. He explained Chapter 70 and the criteria surrounding statutory and alternative methods. Mr. Mangano reminded the group that all four towns must vote on an alternative method in five years. Mr. Powers advocated for Regionalization as it would bring relief to all four towns. Mr. D'Errico asked the Shutesbury reps what is the current leadership's position on Regionalization. Mr. Hirschfield explained that, to date, there was limited discussion on this topic and leaders want to do what is best for the town. He stated that the core issues are ability to pay and rolling averages. Mr. DeChiara stated that Regionalization is a separate issue from the assessment and budget discussion. He recalled that RAWG members were disinclined to support Regionalization on governance points and not budgetary concerns. Mr. D'Errico stated that the Shutesbury RAWG members actively opposed Regionalization and that Shutesbury receives more Chapter 70 funding than Leverett. Mr. Hatch provided a brief explanation of Chapter 70 and enrollment equity. Mr. Trickey determined the statutory method is not feasible as Pelham has the smallest population (1321 residents). He then compared the current financial situation in Shutesbury which is better than that of Pelham. Mr. Mangano referenced the FY 17 Assessments to Member Towns document and explained what both methods would mean for each town. Mr. Fonsh stated that all towns must help each other through difficult financial times in good faith. He stated that Shutesbury's failure to consider Regionalization to help all towns and to educate residents on this topic is appalling. He suggested that the reason Shutesbury town forum attendance was so low was because leaders did not publicize the event. Mr. Steinberg stated that all towns should think of the others as family. The real issue at hand is the ability to pay. He reminded the group that UMASS and Amherst College are tax-exempt entities. The Amherst DPW, Police and Fire Departments cost a tremendous amount of money to operate each year. Mr. Steinberg added that schools (both elementary and regional) are the backbone of the four communities. He continued that RAWG was a failure because finance was not a main point of discussion. Sustainability was the main discussion point and a RAWG consensus was never reached. Mr. Steinberg stated that all four towns must create a sustainable method to fund a PreK12 model. If the towns fail to do this then PreK-6 model will become too expensive for each community to adequately fund the regional schools. Ms. Houle was surprised by the opinions of the other towns regarding Shutesbury's assessment plan. Mr. Hatch explained the financial history since 2007. Mr. Pooler referenced FY 17 Assessments to Member Towns and noted minimal contributions in Amherst as well as other towns. Mr. DeChiara appreciated the comments of Mr. Pooler, Mr. Hirschfield and Mr. Steinberg and stated that the assessment method conversation was worth a re-visit. He stated that he personally opposed Regionalization while on the Regional School Committee and was very vocal about this. Ms. Luce stated that Regionalization should not be ignored as it is needed for all towns to survive. The four

towns must save the school system as the current and future situation is horrendous and the ability to pay conversations are horrific. Ms. Theilman reminded the group that the 5-year rolling assessment model was created in the 1960s. She inquired about the dates of Town Meetings in the four towns. Dates will be confirmed soon. Ms. Dolven implored Shutesbury leaders to become educated on the Regionalization issue. All residents must be aware that Regionalization is a two-step voting process. Mr. Hirschfield stated that town leaders will re-visit Regionalization. Mr. D'Errico remained concerned about Shutesbury's ambivalence to Regionalization and why residents remain uneducated about this topic. Mr. Hood urged all to consider both long term and short term financial implications. Mr. Sullivan stated that Shutesbury residents need more information regarding Regionalization prior to a vote. Mr. Doubleday advised that Shutesbury send out postcard reminders to all residents inviting them to a public forum to discuss a potential tax increase. This would assure a large turn-out to a forum. Mr. Nagy questioned Amherst's education budget and COLA increases. Ms. Geryk stated that if the State lifts the cap on charter schools it would create dire implications for the schools. She then asked the Regionalization discussion to end. Ms. Brewer asked if the four towns could meet again in February 2016. She also inquired about Shutesbury's timeline regarding the Regionalization proposal. Mr. Fonsh also wanted to know about Shutesbury's communication plan to residents regarding Regionalization. Ms. Moran proposed that all towns should prepare two budgets based on both assessment methods. Mr. Steinberg asked that the Regional School Committee provide leadership and analysis to create another Regionalization forum for residents of all four towns to attend. Ms. Geryk and Mr. Mangano will discuss a potential forum prior to the town meetings with the Regional School Committee.

H. Adjournment

11:38 a.m.

Ms. Geryk thanked the group for their continued commitment and support throughout the years. She urged all future conversations surrounding Regionalization and assessments methods to be of a positive and collaborative nature. She reminded the group to return the feedback forms to her or Mr. Mangano. She adjourned the meeting at 11:38 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Kimberly Stender

Approved by the Amherst Pelham Regional School Committee on December 15, 2015.