

**Budget Subcommittee Meeting Minutes
February 8, 2023**

Present: Lynn Cavicchi; Frank DelVecchio; Diana Bren; Sara Walsh; and Walter Wilk
Also Present: Kevin Dumas, Barry LaCasse and Ed Donoghue

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School Committee Members Present: Kiera O'Neil, Lynn Cavicchi, Lauren Scher and Jenn Walsh (Vivian Webster was not present at start of meeting but arrived at 6:32PM)

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Finance Committee Members Present: Sara Walsh, Scott Feely, Walter Wilk, Greta Thurston, Melinda Tarsi and Jack Cooney

Select Board Members Present: Diana Bren, Frank DelVecchio, Jess Aptowitz, and Michael A. Trowbridge, Sr.

1. Open Meeting

The Select Board meeting was called to order at 6:00PM by Michael Trowbridge with four members present. Ms. Sara Walsh called the Budget Subcommittee meeting to order at 6:04PM with all six members present. The School Committee meeting was called to order at 6:04PM by Kiera O'Neil with four members present. The Finance Committee meeting was called to order at 6:04PM by Sara Walsh with six members present.

2. Consideration to Approve Meeting Minutes from January 11, 2023

Motion: To approve the meeting minutes of January 11, 2023. (J. Walsh/Bren) **Passes 6:0**

3. Discussion and Consideration of the Special Education Stabilization Fund Policy

Ms. Walsh stated that this item would be postponed until the February 16th meeting.

4. School and Town Budget Presentations

Mr. LaCasse began the presentation by going through the January 11th presentation for those that were not present at the January presentation. (Please refer to the January 11, 2023 meeting minutes for a full summary.) Mr. LaCasse then moved to the February 8th presentation and stated that since the last meeting the Town has eliminated some positions, delayed OPEB funding, removed a BAN paydown, adjusted revenues which leaves a current shortfall of \$2.9 million. He stated that department heads are looking line by line and have been challenged to find additional savings in their budgets. The health insurance renewal rate came in and that is below what was expected at a 3.78% increase over last year. Mr. LaCasse stated that he will continue to do monthly tracking of receipts to see if any adjustments can be made, he will continue to follow up with department heads and hopefully the Governor's budget will be given by March 1st.

Mr. Donoghue began the school presentation and stated that the budget in January was a level services budget that was 5.8% increase over the FY23 budget. He stated that they have made some reductions by using revolving funds, attrition with staff retiring and not replacing and using school choice funds to pay for one employee. The total budget is now \$58,290,994 and represents a 4.37% increase over last year. He stated that the biggest drivers for the FY24 budget are special education cost increases and utility cost increases. He was hopeful that energy costs will be reduced due to the new boilers at the high school and there are no text book purchases this year. He showed a pie chart that represents all of the school's expenses and eighty percent of the budget is salary and wages.

5. Discussion of Next Steps to Balanced Budget

Ms. Sara Walsh stated that there are still many unknowns, but we are at \$2.9 million shortfall so there is still some hard work to do. She stated that the committees need to have a good conservation and deliver the services of the Town and School that residents are looking for. Mr. Wilk stated that the committee needs to see what a balanced budget looks like and asked if there were any one-time items that could take out of budget. Mr. Donoghue stated that they could look at fees and potentially get another \$50,000. Mr. LaCasse commented that it is still the beginning and it was too soon to set the alarm bell. Mr. Wilk stated that its full-time employees because in reality the fuel costs will not change, insurance isn't going to change and increasing receipts a half million still leaves a \$2 million deficit and the committee needs to see the final scenario. Mr. LaCasse responded that he didn't agree with the statement that there is nowhere to go.

Mr. DelVecchio stated that he didn't believe it was the point in time where the committee needed to allocate dollars of the deficit that the schools and town need to reduce. He added that the committee needs to compare apples to apples and need to look at a realistic picture.

Mr. Cooney commented that if this is in the beginning of process what does a timeline look like or where the budget will be in six weeks. Mr. LaCasse stated that given the challenges the town meeting will be June to make sure the budget is the best budget possible. He stated that there needs to be good numbers and he does not want to over budget for revenue. He noted there needs to be consistent free cash so that the Town keeps a good bond rating. He then stated that typically by now the State would have provided their numbers but the new Governor is not expected to release that until March.

Mr. Feely stated that there is an extra three to four weeks compared to last year. He added that when Mr. LaCasse gets the governors numbers there will be a better idea of where things need to go, March will be a critical month and additional revenue numbers will be known so that the FY24 budget can be adjusted.

Ms. Sara Walsh noted that the State number is not going to close the gap and everyone needs to look at expenses and revenues and proposed that Mr. Dumas, Mr. LaCasse, Ms. Murphy and Mr. Donoghue meet and discuss where some additional cuts can be made. She stated that there will either be drastic cuts, use of the stabilization fund or look for additional revenue sources, however she did not want it to be drastic cuts.

Mr. Trowbridge stated that when the town and school meet together there is a better product. He stated that he agrees with Mr. Wilk that the committee needs to do a what if scenario, but he thought it was too early to go there now. Mr. Trowbridge stated that in the past the Finance Committee has talked about the trash budget and commented that trash is putting the Town in the hole every year.

Ms. O'Neil commented that the committee has seen a \$3 million gap previously and asked what was done to close the gap in previous years. Mr. Wilk noted that one-time expenses like text books were taken out and paid for with Free Cash. Mr. Wilk asked if any items could be isolated and Mr. Donoghue stated that there are some large lease costs for smart boards that may be able to come out. Mr. Wilk stated that it needs to be a one-time thing and not full-time employees. Mr. DelVecchio stated that in the past capital improvements was cut and he wouldn't suggest that because it is important to continue having a capital improvement plan and it leads to higher costs in future years.

Ms. Sara Walsh summarized that we are waiting for governors' budget, looking at one time expenses, conversations about using revolving funds, and the Finance Committee meets next week and can revisit the

trash conversation. Mr. LaCasse stated that he liked that approach and the citizens would want to know what was done prior to an override. Mr. Dumas commented that maybe it's a combination of all of those items and it was great progression to go from \$5.4 down to \$2.9 in one month.

Mr. Cooney asked if there were any other items like the health insurance renewal rate that may go in the Town's favor. Mr. LaCasse responded that he is conservative and there may be opportunities with a Host Community Agreement and marijuana tax and stated that there is also the health care stabilization fund that could be used.

Ms. Sara Walsh stated the next Budget Subcommittee meeting is February 16th followed by a Finance Committee meeting and then March 8th and March 22nd are scheduled Budget Subcommittee meetings and asked if another all board meeting was needed. The group decided to schedule one for March 29th.

Resident Questions and Comments

Ms. Tobey Lovett of 25 Samoset Avenue commented that she enjoys the Fall Festival and stated that residents could possibly pay a small fee to attend so it could save the Town money.

Ms. Sandy Levine of 20 Walnut Street asked if there were going to be open meetings where residents could speak and ask questions about the budget. Ms. Sara Walsh that this is an open meeting and residents can ask questions at any of the Budget Subcommittee, Finance Committee, Select Board or School Committee meetings. They are open meetings and residents can always ask questions via email.

Mr. Robert O'Connell of 1192 East Street stated that it has been interesting to listen to the meeting tonight and asked if the committee had tried a zero-based budget approach. He stated that before there is talk of overrides and a trash fee and residents are asked to pay more money they need to go through each expense. As a retired person on a fixed income he can't pass on his increased expenses to anyone else. Ms. Sara Walsh responded that the Budget Subcommittee is asking the Town and School to go back and review expenses and see what further reductions can be made. Mr. Feeley responded that he is retired and on a fixed income and each year the Town starts with the same services budget every year. Mr. Robert O'Connell noted that everyone uses trash.

Mr. Steve Schoonveld of 21 Newton Street commented that going back to Ms. Levine's question there needs to be additional meetings prior to Town Meeting for public questions and it is not enough to have a review meeting a couple days prior. He stated that two years ago to the day the trash analysis was done so it should be easy to find that information.

Ms. Nicole Burch of 57 Fairfield Park asked why the grant money was going away and Mr. Donoghue stated that it was federal money and they go away after a certain period. She then asked why would the federal government stop giving COVID money if the schools still have needs caused by COVID and Ms. Scher responded that it is a state and federal decision.

Mr. Olivia Kowlowski of 22 Tracy Circle asked how Town Meeting could be June 14th when the Town Charter says that it has to be done by June 1st. Mr. Dumas responded that he would look into that question.

Ms. Eileen Cusack of 6 Conrad Court asked what a para professional was in the school system because when her children were in school there were not any of those positions and asked how many paraprofessionals are

in the whole school system. Mr. Donoghue responded that there were approximately 110 paraprofessionals and the number fluctuates based on the student needs. Ms. O'Neil noted that paraprofessionals are mandated by the special education plans that some students have and the need is ten times greater than it was ten to fifteen years ago.

Ms. Linda Fernando of 6 Cedar Ridge Lane asked about what grant research is done noting that there may be other grants that could be available for the Town. Mr. LaCasse responded that many grants comes across the desk and they are explored, but the Town looks carefully before jumping in. Ms. Scher also noted that on the school there are many grants that the schools do not qualify for because it is a more affluent town. Mr. Donoghue agreed with Ms. Scher that many grants are urban based, but he is applying for a cyber security grant now that Mansfield may qualify for.

Ms. Marcia Szymanski of 29 Pleasant Street stated that grants are not the answer because they go away. She then asked what the Town was doing to bring in revenue for the vacant buildings in the industrial park and then what the economic development person was doing. Mr. Dumas responded that the economic development position is working with realtors and putting together a full listing of vacant parcels. Mr. Dumas also noted that the buildings themselves still pay property taxes. Mr. Dumas also stated that Mr. Dermott provides quarterly updates at Select Board meetings and works closely with realtors, property managers, the Industrial Development Commission and is responsible for the content on choosemansfield.com.

Mr. Steve Schoonveld of 21 Newton Street asked if Walgreens was in the new growth number and Mr. LaCasse responded that it was but did not have the exact number for Walgreens with him.

Ms. Dana Hourigan of 15 Evans Circle asked if there was centralized strategy for grants or if it is left to each department. Mr. Donoghue responded that the school and town are separate and the schools have a grant coordinator. Mr. LaCasse responded that grants for one-time items for water, sewer, DPW and technology he works with individual departments. Ms. Cavicchi added that in the school's full budget presentation it shows how many employees are allocated to each grant. Mr. Donoghue then added that the schools have about \$7 million in grants.

Ms. Sandy Levine of 20 Walnut Street asked how much the economic development person was paid. Ms. Sara Walsh responded that she did not want to discuss at the meeting individual salaries. Mr. Dumas stated that the individual salaries by person were on the website for the Town.

Ms. Tobey Lovett of 25 Samoset Avenue asked if an analysis of police budget was done and how it was comparable to previous budgets and Mr. Dumas responded that you can see the FY24 budget summary and all the departments by year by line item.

Ms. Dana Hourigan of 15 Evans Circle asked about the funds of the police chief and legal counsel and commented that it has to be pushing a million. Mr. Dumas responded that it is just the difference in salary between the chief and deputy chief and with legal expenses it is not a million dollars.

6. Any Items Not Known within 48 Hours

There were no items.

7. Adjourn

Motion: To adjourn the Budget Subcommittee meeting of February 8, 2023 at 7:36PM. (Bren/Wilk)
Passes 6:0

School Committee:

Motion: To adjourn the School Committee meeting of February 8, 2023 at 7:36PM. (J. Walsh/Scher)
Passes 5:0

Select Board:

Motion: To adjourn the Select Board meeting of February 8, 2023 at 7:36PM. (Aptowitz/DelVecchio)
Passes 4:0

Finance Committee:

Motion: To adjourn the Finance Committee meeting of February 8, 2023 at 7:36PM. (Feely/Cooney)
Passes 6:0


Signature

3/22/23
Date

Minutes prepared by Carrie Champagne