

**Town of Chester Budget Committee Public Hearing
January 25, 2023
Approved Minutes
7:00 PM**

Budget Committee members present:

Michael Weider, Chairman
Ephraim Dobbins, Vice Chair
Kathy Guilmette
Jack Cannon
Sabrina Harris, Chester School Board Liaison

Budget Committee members absent:

Charlotte Lister
Ron McKinnon
Steve D'Angelo, Board of Selectmen Liaison

Guests present:

Royal Richardson, Chester School Board Chairman
Dr. Sharon Locke, Superintendent, Chester School District (via telephone)
Benjamin Kilar, SAU Finance Manager
Chester PACT

I. Meeting to Order

Chairman Weider called the meeting to order at 7:15 p.m.

II. Attendance

III. Announcements by the Chair – Welcome

IV. Public Comment

There were no members of the public wishing to comment.

V. BOS Update – Steve D'Angelo

Selectman D'Angelo was not present at the meeting.

VI. Minutes

a. January 9, 2023

Mr. Cannon moved to accept the minutes of January 9, 2023 as written. Ms. Harris seconded the motion. A vote was taken. All were in favor. The vote passed unanimously.

VII. New Business

a. Chester School District 2023-24 Budget Review and Recommendations

Chairman Weider noted the budget is high and increases each year due to the addition of staff members and benefits. Mr. Richardson pointed out two full-time staff positions have been eliminated, which is reflected in the budget. Mr. Richardson also noted that a large reason for the increase in the budget is the Pinkerton Academy tuition.

Ms. Guilmette asked about the expense for tutors and Mr. Richardson explained these are para-educators assigned to work with students based on their IEPs. She also asked about the expense of the school security update, which is currently out for bid. The school has received a grant to help pay for this project.

Chairman Weider asked if the furniture purchase could be pushed out another year. Dr. Locke explained it is furniture requested by teachers. Chairman Weider explained this type of purchase should be included in the CIP instead of added as a line item in the budget and Mr. Richardson said it will be included in the future.

Chairman Weider asked about the need for a full and a part-time nurse. Mr. Richardson explained the need is calculated based on the workload created by the number of students and their demands for services. Dr. Locke explained the nurses are working extra hours on their own time to complete their tasks, which includes a large amount of reporting. Mr. Richardson clarified they are not adding positions; this has been in the budget for some time.

Mr. Richardson explained this year, the School Board entered negotiations on wages and insurance benefits for para-professionals. The lack of a benefits package had become an issue in hiring, so they added an introductory health insurance benefit. The School was penalized by the federal government, as their former offering was not considered useable health care. The union president believes a fairly small number of para-professionals will sign up for the insurance benefit.

Dr. Locke noted the School budget presented to the Budget Committee has been drastically reduced by the Board of Education. Ms. Harris said that considering inflation, this is a very fiscally responsible budget. There were no "fluff" items included, so it is difficult to reduce it any further.

She noted in the Town of Chester, the cost per pupil is dramatically less than in many surrounding towns. Chairman Weider pointed out the Town has been fiscally responsible by paying down debt, not carrying debt, and not issuing bonds, and this is reflected in the cost per student.

Mr. Richardson pointed out that the Legislature establishes program mandates and service requirements each year that are unfunded and with no estimate of cost. While they are important, someone needs to pay for them. Chairman Weider noted that Chester has no business district, so no revenue is coming in from the business side.

Mr. Dobbins said 2023 wages are predicted to increase by approximately 4.6% across the board. He suggested the School Board attempt to keep the budget increase at that amount. Mr. Richardson asked if the Budget Committee would feel comfortable defending that number and they agreed. He said the School Board will reexamine their budget and try to limit the increase to 4.6%. Dr. Locke said any further reductions would necessitate taking a risk.

Dr. Locke noted that the School Board worked hard to adjust the budget to accommodate the increase in the Pinkerton Academy tuition. Mr. Richardson pointed out three projects were removed from this year's CIP, two of which are looming in the future. He said that the School Board is creating a Warrant Article that will ask to increase the amount retained to

100 the maximum of 5% for the Retained Fund Balance, which would come out of the unen-
102 cumbered funds at the end of the year. These funds could be used for emergencies or to re-
duce the tax impact.

104 Mr. Richardson said they will return to the Budget Committee with a final budget next
106 week. He also reviewed the School's Warrant Articles that will be presented to the Legisla-
tive Body in March.

108 **VIII. Next Meeting Date – January 30, 2023**

110 **IX. Adjourn**

112 *Ms. Guilmette moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:26 p.m. Mr. Dobbins seconded the motion.*
114 *A vote was taken, all were in favor. The motion passed unanimously.*

Respectfully submitted,
116 Beth Hanggeli, Recording Secretary