

Town of Chester Budget Committee Public Hearing

February 6, 2023

Approved Minutes

7:00 PM

Budget Committee members present:

Michael Weider, Chairman

Ephraim Dobbins, Vice Chair (joined at 7:03)

Kathy Guilmette

Jack Cannon

Charlotte Lister

Ron McKinnon

Sabrina Harris, Chester School Board Liaison

Steve D'Angelo, Board of Selectmen Liaison

Guests present:

Royal Richardson, Chester School Board Chairman

Sharon Locke, Superintendent, Chester School District

Benjamin Kilar, SAU Finance Manager

Chester PACT

Members of the public present:

Dana Theokas, 9 Muskrat Circle, Chester School Board member

Jonathan Eckerman, Chester School Board member

I. Meeting to Order

Chairman Weider called the meeting to order at 7:00 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 did not offer a Board of Selectmen update.

VI. School Board Update

There was no School Board update.

VII. New Business

a. Chester School District 2023-24 Public Hearing

Chairman Weider explained the process of holding a Public Hearing for the 2023-24 Chester School District budget.

Chairman Weider moved to open the Public Hearing for the 2023-24 Proposed Operating Budget for the Chester School District with the additional Warrant Articles that contain

appropriations. Ms. Guilmette seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken. All were in favor. The vote passed unanimously.

- i. **Warrant Article 2: Election of School District Officers** will be taken up on Tuesday, March 14, 2023 on Election Day.

ii. **Warrant Article 3: Operating Budget for School District**

Chester School Board Chairman Royal Richardson reviewed the 2023-24 Chester School District proposed operating budget and highlighted specific areas that represented the majority of the 4.6% increase over the prior year. These include increases in tuition at Pinkerton Academy, Chester Academy teachers' salaries, and health insurance benefits. The projected tax impact of this budget is \$1.39 per \$1,000 of assessment. He noted that details on this Warrant Article will be included in the School District Report coming out on February 24, 2023.

Vice Chair Dobbins explained that the Budget Committee asked the School District to limit the increase to 4.6%, as this is the projected amount that wages will increase this year across the country.

Mr. Cannon moved to approve Warrant Article 3 as written and read. Ms. Guilmette seconded the motion. A vote was taken. All were in favor except Selectman D'Angelo, who abstained. The motion passed 7-0-1.

iii. **Warrant Article 4: Chester Educational Support Personnel Association (CESPA)**

Ms. Guilmette moved to move Warrant Article 4 to the floor. Mr. McKinnon seconded the motion.

Mr. Richardson reviewed the details of the CESPA collective bargaining agreement. Their goal was to develop an effective wage scale to hire and maintain personnel. An entry-level health insurance benefit was also initiated, as was a continuing education course reimbursement benefit. The resulting increase in the anticipated tax rate is \$0.32.

Mr. Cannon moved to move Warrant Article 4 forward. Mr. McKinnon seconded the motion. A vote was taken. The motion passed 4-3-1.

iv. **Warrant Article 6: Contribute to Boiler Fund**

Vice Chair Dobbins moved to move Warrant Article 6 to the floor. Ms. Guilmette seconded the motion.

Mr. Richardson explained this Warrant Article transfers funds to the Boiler Capital Reserve Fund, which is designed to cover the cost of replacing the boiler in 2025.

Ms. Guilmette moved to move Warrant Article 6 forward. Vice Chair Dobbins seconded the motion. A vote was taken. The motion passed 7-0-1.

v. **Warrant Article 7: Contribute to Educating Disabled Children Fund**

Vice Chair Dobbins moved to move Warrant Article 7 to the floor. Ms. Guilmette seconded the motion.

Mr. Richardson explained this fund is used to address unexpected costs for Special Education services. More services are being required each year, hence the request to add additional funds to this account.

Ms. Dana Theokas, 9 Muskrat Circle, added that the need for funding for special education comes up on short notice, whereas reimbursement from the federal government is not received until the next budget cycle. She appreciated the Committee considering this motion.

Superintendent Locke added that the federal reimbursement is not equal to the actual cost of providing special education. This year, it is roughly 10% of the actual cost.

Vice Chair Dobbins moved to move Warrant Article 7 forward. Ms. Guilmette seconded the motion. A vote was taken. The motion passed 7-0-1.

vi. **Warrant Article 8: Fund Balance Retention Fund**

Mr. Cannon moved to move Warrant Article 8 to the floor. Vice Chair Dobbins seconded the motion.

Mr. Richardson explained this Warrant Article is to increase the total amount the School District can transfer to this fund to 5% of the current fiscal year's net assessment. This will allow capital reserve funds to be moved into this fund and be managed more effectively.

The Committee discussed the effect of retaining these monies as opposed to returning excess funds to the Town to reduce the tax rate. Mr. Richardson explained taxes can be lowered by taking money from this retention fund. Committee members expressed concern over this fund not being earmarked for specific uses and that the School Board will be the only body deciding how to spend it. Ms. Harris noted that it is designated for emergency purposes, overspending, and that the School Board has worked well with the Budget Committee in the past.

The possibility of proposing an increase of less than 5% or incremental increases was discussed. Mr. Richardson noted that most surrounding school districts are at 5%.

Vice Chair Dobbins moved to amend Warrant Article 8 to change the amount to 3% instead of 5% of the current fiscal year's net assessment. Mr. Cannon seconded the motion. A vote was taken. The motion passed 5-3-0.

Mr. Jonathan Eckerman, School Board Member, noted that procedurally, the Budget Committee does have control of this fund as they have full disclosure regarding the retained funds. He noted that the Legislative Body approves the School District budget, so all expenditures are approved.

150 *Mr. Cannon moved to move Warrant Article 8 forward. Vice Chair Dobbins se-*
152 *conded the motion. A vote was taken. The motion passed 5-3-1.*

154 vii. **Warrant Articles Not Discussed**

Chairman Weider noted that Warrant Articles 1, 2, 5, and 9 will not be discussed
this evening.

156 *Mr. Cannon moved to close the Public Hearing. Vice Chair Dobbins seconded the mo-*
158 *tion. A vote was taken. The motion passed unanimously.*

160 **b. Town Budget Review**

The Committee reviewed the proposed Town Budget. They questioned line items that had
no backup. The Committee created a list of questions on specific items in the proposed
budget, including wages, benefits, IT, equipment leases, fuel, Fire and Police Department
personnel, and Highway Department.

166 These questions will be sent to Board of Selectmen Chairman Chuck Myette.

168 **VIII. Next Meeting Date – February 13, 2023**

170 **IX. Adjourn**

172 *Mr. Cannon moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:30 p.m. Ms. Guilmette seconded the motion.*
174 *A vote was taken, all were in favor. The motion passed unanimously.*

Respectfully submitted,

176 Beth Hanggeli, Recording Secretary