

**Town of Chester Budget Committee Public Hearing
December 11, 2023
Approved Minutes
7:00 PM**

Budget Committee members present:

Ephraim Dobbins
Kathy Guilmette
Charlotte Lister
Jack Cannon
Beth Swanson
Sabrina Harris, Chester School Board Ex-Officio
Steve Couture, Selectboard Liaison

Budget Committee members absent:

Rob Varsalone
Ron McKinnon

Guests present:

Chester PACT

I. Meeting to Order

Mr. Dobbins 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. Board of Selectmen Update

a. Cost of Living Allowance

Mr. Couture reported there was a workshop discussion on setting the cost of living (COLA) increase. No decisions were made; this will be discussed at a future business meeting. They will be comparing the increases in other towns to determine if Chester salaries are staying current, as part of determining what the COLA increase should be.

b. Emergency Authorization – UFB

Mr. Couture shared that the request to the DRA for the emergency authorization for the Un-assigned Fund Balance (UFB) to pay the remaining amount for the repairs to Lane Road was approved. He noted this will serve as an insurance policy, in case the funds are needed.

c. Engineering Services RFP

An RFP was issued for Town engineering services and three firms responded. The Town currently does not have a contract with an engineering firm, although two firms are frequently utilized. Both of these responded to the RFP. The BOS will now begin the selection process and hope to make a decision by the end of January 2024.

d. Solar Working Group

Mr. Couture reported the group received three responses to the RFP. They will interview two of the firms in non-public sessions. He invited the members of the Committee to attend the interviews. He reviewed the locations under consideration for placement of the solar array.

e. Requested Information

Ms. Guilmette said she did not feel the information Mr. Couture provided in response to the Committee's questions was sufficient. He invited the Committee to provide additional questions in writing and he would respond to them in kind. He suggested in the future, the Committee ask him for any information they would like and he will bring it to the next Committee meeting.

f. DOT Ten-Year Plan

Mr. Couture reported the Department of Transportation published their updated ten-year plan that includes two Chester items. The safety improvements to the 102/121 intersection are scheduled for 2026, which will be 100% state funded. The Shepard Home Bridge over the Exeter River project is scheduled for 2029, of which the Town will need to fund 20% of the cost.

VI. School Board Update

Ms. Harris reported the School Board approved a budget with a 8.18% increase and explained that the details will be reviewed in their budget presentation. She said the increase in the Pinkerton Academy tuition is 5.84% and the special education tuition increase is 17.8%.

She also reported that Superintendent Locke is retiring at the end of the school year, so they will begin a hiring process in January 2024. Based on the needs of the school, a full-time superintendent is needed. The Committee discussed sharing a superintendent across districts. They requested more details on the needs that were not being met that require a full-time superintendent and Ms. Harris said she will obtain those from the School Board. They also asked what is being done to determine whether it is appropriate for Chester to have its own SAU.

The Committee asked if moving the superintendent from part-time to full-time will be proposed as a Warrant Article, to allow the Legislative Body to weigh in on this decision. Ms. Harris said the School Board has proposed a significant number of Warrant Articles and described them; however, the superintendent position will not be one.

Ms. Harris reported the School has received an updated boiler estimate, which is considerably higher than the last estimate. They are waiting for further details to clarify the difference between the two estimates, and are writing a Warrant Article proposing to increase the amount being put into the boiler fund, to continue to prepare for this. The Committee asked for information on annual maintenance and repair costs. Ms. Harris noted they would obtain multiple bids, once replacement is needed.

VII. Other Committee Updates

VIII. Minutes

a. September 11, 2023

Ms. Guilmette moved to approve the minutes from September 11, 2023, as written. Ms. Lister seconded the motion. A vote was taken. The motion passed 4-0-3, with Mr. Cannon, Ms. Swanson, and Ms. Harris abstaining.

b. November 13, 2023

Ms. Guilmette moved to approve the minutes from November 13, 2023, as written. Chair Dobbins seconded the motion. A vote was taken. The motion passed unanimously.

IX. Old Business

X. New Business

a. Financial Reports (School & Town)

Ms. Harris noted that on the School financial report, the Business Administrator added a line for adjustments and known expenditures to help articulate known spending for numbers that cannot be encumbered at this point. She reported on various areas of savings, as requested by the Committee at the last meeting. She also reviewed open positions at the School and how they are being covered. In response to questions at the last meeting, she offered to share information on the cost per pupil. She explained that while School funds are not comingled with Town funds, there is a portion of School funds that is used to offset the School tax rate.

b. Budget Calendar

The Committee reviewed the proposed budget calendar and discussed the School Board meeting dates. Ms. Harris will discuss providing the Committee with the School budget before the January 5, 2024, deadline. Mr. Couture said there have been no changes since the schedule was originally submitted to the Committee. The Committee asked Mr. Couture to resend the schedule that includes the department meetings in February 2024.

c. Other Items

XI. Next Meeting Date

The next meeting will be the School Board budget presentation in January 2024.

XII. Adjourn

Ms. Guilmette moved to adjourn the meeting at 7:49 p.m. Mr. Couture seconded the motion. A vote was taken, all were in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Hanggeli, Recording Secretary