

**Town of Chester Budget Committee Public Hearing
January 15, 2024
Approved Minutes
7:00 PM**

Budget Committee members present:

Ephraim Dobbins
Kathy Guilmette
Charlotte Lister
Beth Swanson
Rob Varsalone
Ron McKinnon
Sabrina Harris, Chester School Board Ex-Officio

Budget Committee members absent:

Jack Cannon
Steve Couture, Selectboard Liaison

Guests and members of the public present:

Rhonda Lamphere, School Treasurer
Royal Richardson, Chester School Board Chairman
Chester PACT

I. Meeting to Order

Mr. Dobbins called the meeting to order.

II. Attendance

III. Public Comment

There were no members of the public wishing to comment.

IV. School Board Q&A

Ms. Harris noted she will take questions on the proposed 2024-25 School budget to the Chester School Board for response, along with questions from last week's meeting.

Mr. Dobbins asked for a total for incremental salaries and benefits for the SAU Administration staff and psychology position. He said these positions are not driven by statutory or contractual rules, so are discretionary. Mr. Richardson noted the state requires the School to provide psychological services, which is .4 of the position. This amount was previously under contractual services.

Ms. Guilmette asked about the increase in health benefits, which is 7.8 percent increase. She verified that the increase in dental coverage is 4 percent. She asked about the tuition reimbursement increase for CESP, which is an additional \$15,000. Mr. Richardson clarified the collective bargaining agreement was approved at last year's Town Meeting. So, the \$15,000 being spent this year was included in the Warrant Article last year for the cost of the collective bargaining agreement. It is now being carried forward as an ongoing expense.

Mr. Varsalone asked if 40 percent of the psychologist position is covered by a grant and the School is responsible for 60 percent of line items associated with the position. Mr. Richardson agreed and said it was a contract position before, so there are no benefits associated with it. He explained the grant is part of the Special Education package.

Mr. McKinnon asked if part-time employees are offered benefits. Mr. Richardson said every person who works in the School District has access to a health benefits package. Mr. McKinnon asked if the School had considered eliminating the stipend for not taking insurance. Chair Dobbins pointed out it is favorable financially for the School District when employees elect the stipend instead of the benefits package.

Chair Dobbins noted the Manchester paper printed the Derry School budget, which showed a 3.76% increase. He said this might come up as a topic of discussion.

The Committee discussed out-of-district placement and the qualifications, as well as the associated costs.

Mr. Varsalone asked about options, other than sending students to Pinkerton Academy, such as Windham High School. Mr. Richardson explained the Pinkerton agreement is a 20-year agreement renewed every five years. So, a change can't be made for 15 years. Ms. Guilmette said Windham is a very small high school; the amount of services and programs they offer does not compare to Pinkerton. Mr. Richardson explained the benefits of sending students to Pinkerton.

Mr. Dobbins asked, regarding the Warrant Article for the roof, if the \$29,000 could be obtained from somewhere other than appropriations. Mr. Richardson said the School Board can address this. He asked if the Committee would rather use impact fees and they agreed.

Rhonda Lamphere, School District Treasurer, said \$20,000 appropriated for the boiler and the disabled children funds at the 2023 Town Meeting has never been transferred into the Trust funds. They were required by statute to be transferred by December 1, 2023. The Committee discussed options, if the cost of replacing the roof exceeds the Warrant Article request.

Ms. Lamphere said there is \$83,022 in the School impact fee account, correcting what a member of the audience said at the last Budget Committee meeting. She asked why roof repair is not in the budget and expressed concern that the legislative body might not approve the Warrant Article, even though there is no impact to taxes. The Committee discussed the reasoning behind presenting it as a Warrant Article.

V. Next Meeting Date

The next meeting will be held on January 22, 2024.

VI. Adjourn

Ms. Guilmette moved to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Varsalone seconded the motion. A vote was taken, all were in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Hanggeli, Recording Secretary