

**Town of Chester Budget Committee Public Hearing
February 5, 2024
Approved Minutes
7:00 PM**

Budget Committee members present:

Kathy Guilmette, Vice Chair
Charlotte Lister
Jack Cannon
Beth Swanson
Rob Varsalone
Ron McKinnon
Sabrina Harris, Chester School Board Ex-Officio

Budget Committee members attending via Zoom:

Ephraim Dobbins, Chair

Budget Committee members absent:

Steve Couture, Selectboard Liaison

Guests and members of the public present:

Royal Richardson, Chester School Board Chair
Sharon Locke, SAU Superintendent
Benjamin Kilar, SAU Finance Manager
Chester PACT

I. Meeting to Order

Vice Chair Guilmette called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

II. Attendance

III. Public Comment

There were no members of the public wishing to comment.

IV. New Business

a. Chester School District 2004-25 Budget Public Hearing

Mr. McKinnon moved to open the public hearing at 7:08 p.m. Ms. Harris seconded the motion. A vote was taken, all were in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

Articles 1 & 2

Will be determined at the School District meeting on March 6, 2024.

Article 3 – School District Operating Budget

The original proposed increase in the School operating budget was approximately 9.05%. After making recommended changes, the current proposed increase is 7.59%.

Mr. Richardson noted budget materials are available on the SAU 82 website. He reviewed the

52 proposed 2024-25 Chester School District budget. He defined choice and obligatory items in
the budget. He identified the three main obligatory drivers in the budget: Pinkerton Academy
54 tuition (29% of budget), District special education out-of-district placements (7.9% of budget),
and salaries and benefits (50% of budget). The increase of \$1,080,186 across these three areas
56 equals 98.3% of the proposed expenditure increase of \$1,099,347. Mr. Richardson reviewed
increases in the choice and obligatory items in the budget.

58 The 2023-24 approved expenditure was \$14,486,745. The proposed expenditure is \$15,586,092.
The proposed increase is \$1,099,347, which is a 7.59% increase. Mr. Richardson reviewed the
60 estimated revenues. The local tax rate estimate is \$15.38. The estimated tax per house valued at
\$450,000 will amount to an increase of \$706.50.

62 Vice Chair Guilmette asked for public comment.

64 Robert Day, 52 Sheepwash Drive, asked about the change from a part-time to a full-time
66 superintendent and what those salaries are. He asked what benefit he will get from a full-time
superintendent and why the District is not sharing a superintendent. Vice Chair Guilmette
68 explained the Budget Committee did discuss hiring a shared superintendent. Mr. Richardson
provided the salary information and the history of the superintendent position in the District. He
70 noted the position requires more than three days a week to accomplish the required tasks. There
was a heated discussion regarding the value provided by the superintendent.

72 Mr. Richardson explained if the School decided to pursue a shared superintendent, the SAU
74 withdrawal process takes approximately two years, per state statute. He said they have
researched joining other Districts in the past, but did not find an opportunity where it was more
76 cost effective to do this. He also noted the autonomy that would be lost by joining another
District.

78 Mr. Cannon asked about the status of the superintendent search and the scope of the search
80 committee's efforts. Mr. Richardson clarified the goal is to hire a full-time superintendent and
explained the difficulties involved in finding someone willing to fill the role part time. Ms.
82 Harris noted a 0.8 position is not fiscally responsible, due to the structure of the benefits and
retirement system.

84 Mr. Day criticized the quality of education provided by Chester Academy. Mr. Cannon noted
86 that this meeting was not the appropriate forum to voice these concerns. He recommended Mr.
Day attend the School District meeting in March and make motions on the floor to address his
88 concerns and to make changes.

90 Dana Theokas, 9 Muskrat Circle, said the District has been very fortunate to have Dr. Locke as
the superintendent and noted the positive changes regarding professionalism and passion for
92 education at Chester Academy. She asked for clarification regarding hiring a full-time
psychologist and Mr. Richardson provided it. He noted this is in response to requests from
94 parents and that other schools in the area are doing the same thing. Ms. Theokas recommended
reducing one-to-one computers to students in the third grade and below.

96 Kenneth Beale (sp), 3 Croft Lane, asked for Chester Academy and Pinkerton Academy
98 enrollment figures for 2022, 2023, and projected 2024. Those were provided and Mr.
Richardson noted a 35% increased is projected by 2033. Mr. Beale asked for enrollment

information on students attending private or charter schools and Dr. Locke provided it. Mr. Beale said taxes are increasing but enrollment is not, and he has not seen an increase in the quality of education at Chester Academy.

Article 4 – Flat Roof Replacement

Ms. Harris moved to move Article 4 to the floor for discussion. Mr. Cannon seconded the motion.

Mr. Richardson explained why the roof needs to be replaced. The Trustees of the Trust Fund have authorized withdrawal of \$234,286 from the Capital Reserve Fund to cover the bulk of the cost and impact fees will be used to cover the remainder, so there will be no tax impact. The estimated cost is \$259,000; the job will go out to bid this summer. He noted work on the air handlers and air conditioning units on the roof was originally included in this project; however, this has been removed. Ms. Harris noted this was recommended by the Budget Committee as a way to reduce the tax increase.

Vice Chair Guilmette asked for public comment; there was none.

Article 5 – Playground Preparation

Ms. Harris moved to move Article 5 to the floor for discussion. Mr. Cannon seconded the motion.

Mr. Cannon asked about the total cost of the playground project. Mr. Richardson reviewed the history of this project and the reason a redesign of the playground is required. He noted a group has been formed to raise money through private donations to replace the existing playground equipment. The District has committed to preparing the site for the equipment. The cost of the site work is estimated at \$149,000, although this will go out to bid, if it is approved.

Karolyn O'Cull, 76 Meadow Fox Lane, president of the Playground Project Corporation, said they are hoping to raise \$75,000, which is approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of the cost of the playground equipment. Mr. Cannon confirmed a Warrant Article would be needed next year to cover the remaining cost of the equipment. Mr. Richardson explained Article 5 will cover the site work this year. The new equipment would be installed during the summer of 2025, if the next Warrant Article passed.

Mr. Cannon said this is one of the few Articles that benefits the students. He said Article 3 primarily benefits Pinkerton Academy and the employees.

Vice Chair Guilmette asked for public comment.

Mike Oleson, Chester Street, said he supports this project and hopes the Budget Committee supports it as well. He believes the estimates might not be accurate and recommended changes to the proposed sitework. He asked about the tax impact of this article and was told it would be \$0.20.

Article 6 – Boiler Capital Reserve Fund

Ms. Harris moved to move Article 6 to the floor for discussion. Mr. Cannon seconded the motion.

Vice Chair Guilmette reported there was much discussion on this Article and the Budget Committee recommended adding \$60,000 to the fund. Mr. Richardson reviewed the background of this Article. The estimate for the boiler replacement project in FY29 is \$380,000. He noted this is a planning process and FY29 is a placeholder. This project is in the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), approved by the Planning Board. The boilers were installed when the building was erected.

Vice Chair Guilmette asked for public comment; there was none.

Article 7 – Special Education Fund

Ms. Swanson moved to move Article 7 to the floor for discussion. Mr. Cannon seconded the motion.

Mr. Richardson explained the background of this fund and the request to add \$20,000. Per the DRA, funding of Warrant Articles for Capital Reserve Funds goes in the order they are placed on the Warrant. He said the Board is not confident about having a significant Unreserved Fund Balance at the end of the year, so they are not confident this fund will be funded. The Committee discussed the reasoning behind maintaining this fund.

Vice Chair Guilmette asked for public comment.

Dana Theokas, 9 Muskrat Circle, asked about changing the name of the fund to reflect that it is for children with disabilities, not disabled children. Ms. Harris said to change the name, a new Capital Reserve Fund might need to be established. After consulting with Director of Special Services Jana Ruiz, the School Board decided the name was appropriate, though not ideal. Ms. Theokas thanked the Board for the consideration and for acknowledging the students first.

Mr. Cannon moved to close the public hearing at 8:23 p.m. Ms. Lister seconded the motion.

Mr. Cannon urged that Mr. Day and Mr. Beale attend the School District meeting in March to express their opinions. Vice Chair Guilmette noted public comment is closed.

Mr. Cannon moved to approve Article 3. Ms. Swanson seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken. Dobbins – aye, Cannon – nay, McKinnon – nay, Varsalone – nay, Lister – aye, Swanson – aye, Guilmette – aye, Harris – aye. The motion carried 5-3-0.

Mr. Cannon moved to recommend Article 4. Ms. Harris seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken. Dobbins – aye, Cannon – aye, McKinnon – aye, Varsalone – aye, Lister – aye, Swanson – aye, Guilmette – aye, Harris – aye. The motion carried 8-0-0.

Mr. Cannon moved to recommend Article 5. Mr. Varsalone seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken. Dobbins – nay, Cannon – aye, McKinnon – nay, Varsalone – nay, Lister – nay, Swanson – nay, Guilmette – nay, Harris – aye. The motion failed 2-6-0.

Mr. Cannon moved to recommend Article 6. Mr. McKinnon seconded the motion. A roll call

198 *vote was taken. Dobbins – aye, Cannon – aye, McKinnon – aye, Varsalone – aye, Lister – aye,*
200 *Swanson – aye, Guilmette – aye, Harris – aye. The motion carried 8-0-0.*

202 *Mr. Cannon moved to recommend Article 7. Mr. McKinnon seconded the motion. A roll call*
vote was taken. Dobbins – aye, Cannon – aye, McKinnon – aye, Varsalone – aye, Lister – aye,
204 *Swanson – aye, Guilmette – aye, Harris – aye. The motion carried 8-0-0.*

206 The Committee signed Form MS-27. They thanked Mr. Kilar for providing answers to their
questions throughout the budget process.

208 **V. Members Comments**

210 Mr. Varsalone said the discussion during the public comment section was embarrassing and it
212 was unfortunate that the School Board had to sit through it. He asked Ms. Harris to convey this
to the School Board members. He said personally, he is happy with the education his children
214 are receiving.

216 **VI. Next Meeting Date**

The next meeting to discuss the Town budget will be held on February 19, 2024.

218 **VII. Adjourn**

220 *Mr. Cannon moved to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Swanson seconded the motion. A vote was*
222 *taken, all were in favor. The motion passed unanimously.*

224 Respectfully submitted,
Beth Hanggeli, Recording Secretary