

Board of Selectmen reviews Board of Education Budget

## **Special Board of Selectmen's meeting**

**February 14, 2011**

Present: First Selectman Gayle Weinstein; Selectman David Muller; Selectman Dennis Tracey III; Town Administrator Tom Landry; Administrative Assistant Judy DeVito; Superintendent of Schools Dr. Colleen Palmer; Finance Director JoAnne Keating; Members of the Board of Education; residents and members of the press.

**This meeting was recorded and videotaped. The tapes are available in the Selectmen's office.**

Ms. Weinstein called the meeting to order at 7:35pm

### **Pledge of Allegiance-**

**Board of Selectmen review of the Board of Education Budget-** Phil Schaefer, chairman of the Board of Education, said as far as the Operational Budget, they are staying the course to bring in a budget as low as possible, while maintaining and improving the quality of the Weston Schools.

Dr. Palmer said this is the financial road map to achieve the goals of the district and to maintain the high quality educational program, its diverse offerings, and its programs that meet the needs of their students. This blue print does not compromise the educational integrity of their school system. In some cases she will point out where it increases quality with no additional cost to the district.

This was a year of renegotiation of the teacher contract as the major bargaining unit which has a tremendous impact on the budget. They had some favorable outcomes where the increase of the salary line was very low 1.74% overall. That was virtually mitigated by the saving they anticipate through the high deductible Health Savings Account Insurance Plan that will become the plan of choice for all bargaining members in the teachers bargaining contract.

Dr. Palmer said that they were able to negotiate, not as direct financial impact but there is a subtle impact in terms of the working conditions of the teachers in grade K through 5. The core classroom teachers will now be available for approximately 25 minutes more per day to provide direct instruction to the students. They found that academic needs of the program demanded this shift over time. The standards have increased for the students and the byproduct of that is an adjustment in terms of FTE for their special area teachers, between that and enrollment which is also another driving factor. Most of the enrollment changes are coming at the lower levels because they see smaller cohorts of student coming through the school district. This is an issue that will be studied in depth with their strategic planning process. They were able to adjust staffing which resulted in a reduction of five positions at the elementary level still maintaining the class sizes for their students within the acceptable guidelines of the Board of Education.

## Board of Selectmen reviews Board of Education Budget

Dr. Palmer said that she had previously talked about the SWOT analysis that was done and how they are beginning to look at the critical needs of the district and address those in methodical strategic manner. While the strategic plan is not in place, they have the beginning of a blue print and the needs that developed out of that process indicated that there were some gaps in technology which are also addressed in the proposed budget.

Part of the shift in the budget will address the need for additional wireless capability at Hurlbutt and the Intermediate School. Most of the funds earmarked in the proposed budget are for shoring up the file server that support our district and also the Town.

They made a commitment to see through their two year commitment for the partnership with Columbia. There are funds earmarked in the proposed budget to finish that. This should be the final year for a major consultant fee for Columbia.

One area they are very proud of is the Board of Education has adopted an all-day kindergarten program. It is developmentally appropriate, has the appropriate time to achieve the academic needs but also the social and emotional needs of our youngest learners. Because they are not going to be running the middle of the day bus run that will be an offset for any additional little bit of FTE they need in art to maintain that program so they actually save \$6,000 by all-day kindergarten.

Special Education is an area to watch. They monitor it very carefully. As they look at their trends for Special Education they are below the DRG average for identification of Special Education students and the percent of their budget allocated to Special Education is also below the DRG average. They think that they provide high quality Special Education to those students who qualify.

Cost containment has been a constant theme for this district. Dr. Palmer congratulated JoAnn Keating and other members of their operations department who have done an incredible job in terms of saving money and making sure they are bringing forth a very cost effective budget and the energy program that they have in place this year.

Looking at this budget, they have adhered to all the Board of Education adopted budget guidelines that were set forth earlier this fall, they adjust for the enrollment, and they maintained the educational integrity and hopefully brought forth additional features to support the needs of their students. There is one new position and a reduction in other areas as an offset to create a position for Data Management. The State Board of Education just passed new regulations for teacher and principal evaluation that have established 45% of teacher evaluation will come from student outcomes. Attached to the minutes are two presentations.

Mr. Tracey asked if they had any graphs with per cost per student. Dr. Palmer said they have some comparable data. The cost per student from the State is always a year behind. It is her prediction that when those numbers are finalized and calculated with this year's budget you're going to see a shift that probably Weston will not be as high ranking as it

## Board of Selectmen reviews Board of Education Budget

has been in the past but they don't have the current numbers. There are some unaudited numbers.

Ms. Weinstein asked if the numbers were a little skewed because of our economies of scale that we have here. Dr. Palmer said yes they are. If you are looking at taking the cost of the Central Office and dividing it over your total student population if you have 2,500 students verses 10,000 then that cost is just amortized over a larger number. If you have more students that will drive up your per pupil cost.

Dr. Palmer said there is one key area when you look at the per pupil cost in terms of the benefits. They tend to be in the middle of the pack on per pupil cost on all the various factors for which they are evaluated. One area that is higher has to do with the cost of benefits and that is because our district pays a considerable amount of money each year towards the GASB obligation and not all districts are funding that. In many instances, Towns are paying for that out of their budget or districts are not funding that obligation. If that factor is taken out, they are not really high in terms of the per pupil expenditure.

Dr. Keating said it looks like they have high number in facilities, a lot of Towns bond for their annual capital projects we do it through tax levy so that is included in your expenditure at 100% where other Towns amortize it over a period of years. There are a lot of factors to go into the per pupil cost so you really have to break it down to understand why we are different. Ms. Weinstein said that we do that because we are very conservative about our budgeting.

Mr. Muller asked how they keep up with the pace of the technological changes. Dr. Palmer said they know is they are moving from a society from an education system of large machines on tables to hand held devices. They are looking at leveraging students bringing in their own devices. A couple weeks ago, they had more students and staff using their own devices on the wireless network at the Middle School and High School than the schools devices. They were contacted by CEN that provides free internet service to schools across the State that they are bumping up against our bandwidth. They are going to be doubling our bandwidth.

Mr. Muller asked if there were any efficiency to have the schools open for evening classes. Dr. Palmer said they would have to work with their bargaining unit because they have their contract defining working conditions. The issue with High School students is putting a course in the evening if they have other activities and have just as many conflicts. They could look at it for a pool of students.

Mr. Tracey asked what the relationship between fewer students and fewer teachers and more technology and the clerical staff what they thought about that. Dr. Palmer said they had a consultant do an analysis looking at what do we need to infuse data driven decisions making into our organization in terms of the Data Management Coordinator and the analysis revealed that they really need that full time person plus reallocating current people in their system to assist with that whole process.

## Board of Selectmen reviews Board of Education Budget

Ms. Weinstein asked about the budget to budget 2012-2013 for the professional technical services which has a huge increase. Dr. Keating said one of the changes in that area is if you look at the pupil personnel budget, professional technical services has gone up a budget of \$36,500 to \$111,500. The reason is they had to contract out for a Physical Therapy Professional based on the IEP requirements. They have tried to hire a person, but have not been able to find the resources. In curriculum instruction, they have added in the \$50,000 for the Columbia consulting cost.

Mr. Muller asked with the abundance of reading devices is there a cost efficiency to be had in having books on line. Tom Scarice said they are halfway through the first year of a two year pilot for a new math resource and there are a lot of online resources.

Ms. Weinstein asked about materials. Dr. Keating said the bulk of the increase is software purchases. Ms. Weinstein asked about the enhancement necessary for RecTrac. Dr. Keating said in the first year contract they had some of the support services included in the contract that they purchased initially and they have to start the subscription in subsequent years.

Mr. Muller asked why the SUV that the Board of Education was requesting was in their budget and not the Capital Budget. Ms. Weinstein said they consider their vehicles equipment and put it through their operating. Mr. Muller asked why it was done that way. Dr. Keating said the risk of not including this in the operating budget is that we are taking savings on contracted services and the budgets are voted on separately. If you were to take the savings and not include the purchase of the vehicle it would be a risky venture.

Ms. Weinstein asked about them budgeting for current year long term absences that are unanticipated for next year. Dr. Keating said we have teachers out on maternity leave this year and they have a sub in for them that cost less than what their salary is but they do plan to come back next year so they have to budget for them to return from maternity leave.

Mr. Tracey asked if any recent thought had been given to making student activities more self-sufficient through fees. Mr. Schaefer said the Board has had discussions about this, but have currently rejected it. Dr. Palmer said she has been in two districts in which the district attempted to put in place a student activity fee for clubs and after one year it was so unsuccessful that overwhelmingly the Town leaders and the Board decided to repeal it. The sports program has a \$25.00 fee per session. Ms. Weinstein asked for the participation numbers for the High School.

Athletes- Ms. Weinstein asked why they were anticipating a decrease in the gate receipts. Mr. Berkowitz said they hosted Thanksgiving football this year and they won't host it next year. Mr. Tracey asked about the zero increase in equipment even though the price of equipment and the shipping cost are going up. Mr. Berkowitz said they have been able to get quality equipment at a better price working with vendors.

## Board of Selectmen reviews Board of Education Budget

SPED- Mr. Muller asked if they had done anything about bringing students from out of district to take advantage of facilities here and perhaps earn revenues. Dr. Palmer said she did not think a formal plan has been generated and she thinks that will be part of the strategic planning process.

Mr. Tracey asked about the additional life skills teacher for the sixth grade. Ms. Pernice said that they are trying to build their in-district programs and so they have community class which is for students who are more significantly disabled and currently they have a class that will be moving to the Middle School but they will still have kids at WIS so as they are building that program they need a specialized teacher.

Curriculum and Instructional Improvement- Ms. Weinstein asked why there was a need for an increase in Curriculum and Instructional leader in PE and Health. Dr. Palmer said that was part of their negotiated WTA contract for all the changes the district agreed it would increase the FTE by .2. It brings that position in line with the K-12 art music and the K-12 world language.

Technology Services- Ms. Weinstein asked if the 24 laptop replacements were included in the Capital Budget for the Library as well. Dr Keating said no. The 24 laptops are for project lead the way.

Ms. Weinstein said if you look at the budget to budget on the coordinator and drivers expense, that went from \$146,000 to \$179,000. Dr Keating said that there were two things that contributed to that. One they are going to be adding the vehicle next year and the second is they are going to be taking over all of the summer transportation that they use to contract out and they will be running their own type 2 vehicles. They couldn't do it the past year because the vehicles were actually being purchased and retrofitted this past summer but they will do it next summer.

Internal Services Fund- Dr. Palmer said the proposed budget does not anticipate any use of the funds except for OPEB.

Capital Budget- Ms. Weinstein said there was issue with the paving of the lot across the street. Mr. Muller said when he was on Planning and Zoning, the decision was made to put the lot in and it was done with the proviso that it not be paved because of the amount of non-permeable surfaces. He said if we are now making that step he wants to be clear that they have gotten the necessary approvals from Planning and Zoning because they would have to amend that approval. Dr. Keating said they would defer to Ms. Kulikowski.

Ms. Weinstein asked about the renovations that are going to take place in the Middle School Library. Dr. Craw said the Library has not been updated in a number of years and they are looking to respond to the need for online resources and create a space that will meet a variety of needs. Relocating handicap ramps will give them more useable space, replacing carpet, replacing stacks within the library and adding technology resources.

## Board of Selectmen reviews Board of Education Budget

Mr. Tracey asked what the thinking was that the High School has two assistant principals and the Middle School with almost as many students manages with one. Dr. Palmer said if you look at of the student management issues, and if you look at the number of teachers in each of the buildings, proportionately each administrator has a very full load. They anticipated with the teacher evaluation plan that was put in place this year that 20% of their time would be used for that and they are probably approaching 40% to 50% of the time the administrators are spending in the classroom.

The Selectmen thanked the Board of Education for their hard work in putting the budget together.

At 9:16pm Mr. Tracey made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Muller seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted

Judy M. DeVito  
Administrative Assistant  
Approved 3/15/12