



TOWN OF EAST LONGMEADOW
60 CENTER SQUARE
EAST LONGMEADOW, MA 01028

TOWN COUNCIL

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Ralph E. Page, President,
Marilyn M. Richards, Vice President
Matthew Boucher, Kathleen G. Hill, Anna T. Jones
Michael J. Kane and Connor J. O’Shea

MINUTES- Draft
Special Town Council Meeting
Superintendent’s Conference Room, 180 Maple Street
East Longmeadow MA 01028
February 7, 2023 at 6:00 p.m.

Present: President Page, Vice President Richards, Councilor Hill, Councilor Jones, Councilor Kane, Councilor Boucher and Councilor O’Shea.

Also in attendance from School Committee: Gregory Thompson, Chair; Antonella Raschilla Manzi, Vice Chair; Elizabeth Marsian-Boucher; Aimee Dalenta; Sarah Truoiolo (attending remotely).

Also attending: Gordon Smtih, Superintendent; Pam Blair, Assistant Superintendent of Business; Kim Collins, Director of Municipal Finance; Tom Christensen; Deputy Town Manager; Mary McNally, Town Manager.

Council President Page opened the meeting at 6:00 p.m. with the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by School Committee Chair Greg Thompson calling to order the meeting of the School Committee.

Financial Matters:

1. Joint Meeting of Town Council and School Committee per the Charter, Article 6, Section 1, Annual Budget Process

Council President Page announced that this joint meeting with the School Committee is required (per the Charter) and begins the budget process. He then introduced Town Manager Mary McNally to give an update of the Town’s financial status.

Ms. McNally commented that the Town is in very good financial condition, and there’s a substantial amount of free cash. The stabilization account is also in good stead, and the bond rating is AA. However, expenses are out of balance mainly due to skyrocketing utility costs. Capital requests have been submitted for FY24, but the Capital Planning Committee has not convened yet.

Ms. McNally also offered bonding updates, and said that all ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) money has been used. The ARPA funding was limited to four major categories, and three major projects were completed in Town. The total amount of \$2.4M in ARPA funds was used for capital projects.

Ms. McNally then referred to Director of Municipal Finance Kim Collins for more information, and commented that Ms. Collins and Collector/Treasurer Dawn Fonte worked together to prepare the following information for the Council. She also added that she's been impressed with this work since Ms. Collins has only been in her role for a few days. Ms. Collins commented that certified free cash is at \$6.8M, with \$1.4M available. The OPEB (Other Postemployment Benefits) trust is close to \$10M, and the stabilization fund is close to \$3.5M. The CPA (Community Preservation Act) balance is \$1.5M and broken down into specific accounts.

Ms., McNally said she has directed the department heads to submit level services budgets, incorporating the COLA (Cost-of-Living Adjustments) increases which were negotiated through unions. She added that the budget will increase due to utility expenses and thirteen new positions,

School Committee Chair Greg Thompson asked if there were any full time employee requests for FY24. Ms. McNally replied that she knew of none, other than replacing vacant positions.

Mr. Thompson said he predicts a 4% level services budget, which he realizes is high, compared to past years, but asked if they are still going through the Financial Oversight Committee, especially since there are no additional positions being requested. President Page said they are still going through the Financial Oversight since it is more like a review of the proposed budget. He added that meetings such as this one help, but is also helps to have another set of eyes review the budget.

Mr. Thompson questioned the purpose of a Financial Oversight Committee if a level services budget is being directed. Ms. McNally commented that Financial Oversight cannot increase the budget, but they can make recommendations. She added that, given that we have a new governor, we're only going to know the operational side of the budget. Last year Governor Baker's budget was somewhat delayed and she anticipates there will be a further delay because of the new administration. However, she firmly believes that new growth will again be substantial, and that Mayor Healy will continue to support many educational initiatives. In any event, they won't know the final numbers until the state budget is known.

The usage of funding for capital projects was then discussed. Mr. Thompson then said that the School Committee has possible positions that could be justified, and asked if they should bring those forward above level services? President Page suggested those positions be added, and Ms. McNally said she would be obliged to pass those forward. She then added that the Financial Oversight isn't focused on cuts, they are focused on explanations of any increases.

Mr. Thompson asked if there is not directive to the Financial Oversight Committee, what is their motivation? President Page replied they are simply an oversight board; they dig in the budget and the explanations and relay their findings to the Council. It's easier for a group of people with expertise to do this on a weekly basis than it is for the Council.

President Page said, back to any School full time position requests, he would suggest a supplemental budget. Superintendent of Business Pam Blair commented that in the past the School did give a supplemental budget; they submitted what the level services were, and had a second page which showed the School's needs.

Mr. Thompson then said the vote for a new high school will be problematic, and agrees with the philosophy that we forego any full time positions for FY24 because we want to pass a vote on a high school next year. He added maybe they don't go from 4% to 5% because we have the vote for the high school.

President Page said that a new high school is different than the general operating budget; the new school is a vote of the citizens. Ms. McNally commented that she didn't state there would be no new full time positions because we want a high school; it is because there were thirteen new positions added last year.

Five or six positions are funded through the ambulance fund. She is also aware of the looming new high school vote, and as President Page said they have to continue to run the Town, and be prudent. She reassured Mr. Thompson they are also concerned about the new high school being passed.

Councilor Hill asked Mr. Thompson that given he didn't want to put a bad taste in the taxpayer's mouth and go to the polls upset, why would he submit new full time positions. School Committee member Elizabeth Marsian-Boucher replied, due to the aftermath of Covid, a request for an SEL (social-emotional learning) teacher for Meadowbrook School is very much needed. The students need a safe place to go to. Superintendent Gordon Smith added that the position Ms. Marsian-Boucher is talking about was actually one that was in place but cut two years ago. He added that this year there has been a sharp increase to forty-five referrals for preschool.

Councilor Hill stated that she would leave that position in and have the Financial Oversight Committee look at it. Mr. Thompson felt there was a disconnect with the Financial Oversight Committee without any direction from the Council.

Councilor Richards stated that throughout the state schools are seeing the effects of Covid and she can't believe the legislation isn't taking notice. Ms. Blair commented that she is hoping the legislature will come forward with some kind of assistance. There was then discussion about the rising costs of special education costs set by the OSD (Operational Service Division).

Ms. McNally stated she appreciates the heartfelt explanations the School has given of the needs for the positions they seek. She also noted that every single department in Town, including the school, takes their responsibilities very seriously, and the consequences of not spending money can be dire. The Town is absorbing legal expenses due to the town hall not being ADA compliant, and water breaks all over town are costing money. While those are not as significant as a child's needs, every department has those issues. Ms. McNally concluded that she has confidence in the townspeople that they know that the cost of living is higher than it has been; and if our budget goes up 4%, there may be some grumbling, but they can live with it.

Mr. Thompson said he agrees with Ms. McNally 100% but thinks it should only be the "people in this room" who answer to the voters to make those decisions.

Councilor Richards commented that the Financial Oversight Committee has been a real rub over time; however, as a councilor she appreciates the second tier of scrutiny. She added that the Financial Oversight is an advisory committee, and the Council makes the decision in the end.

Superintendent Smith noted that the School is still dealing with the impact from Covid, and they need to make sure the preschool is staffed appropriately given the high level of referrals they are seeing, and still withstand the (OSD's) 14% increase. He feels Governor Healy is supportive and he will be interested to see what newly elected Senator Jake Oliveira's stand is on this. Councilor O'Shea suggested that when Senator Oliveira appears at a near future Council meeting that the School Department also be invited.

Mr. Thompson talked about the proposed design of the new school, which includes no fossil fuels, air exchange only and photovoltaic panels on the roof. He would like to make the decision by April relative to if ELCAT, the IT Department and the School's central offices will remain at the high school or not. Mr. Thompson would like some kind of input on this from the Council.

President Page replied that they were still waiting for additional information. Ms. McNally said she didn't feel confident of a move of any of those departments with certainty and suggested the School keep them in the project for now.

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School Committee member Sarah Truoiolo commented that this is her fifth budget season and this was the largest group that's convened for this joint meeting for the longest amount of time. It's also one of the most collaborative she's ever been a part of. Also, Ms. Marsian-Boucher's statements about the needs of the preschool are sincere, and she thinks that Ms. McNally has been a staunch advocate of the high school. We need to balance the needs of the Town as a whole, with respect to the taxpayers.

Councilor O'Shea suggested that instead of once a year, the Council and School Committee meet more often as the budget process continues. President Page is more than willing to extend that invitation as it gets closer.

Motion: Councilor O'Shea made a motion to adjourn the Open Session Meeting at 6:58 p.m. Councilor Jones seconded and all were in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeanne R. Quaglietti
Town Clerk/Clerk of the Council