

NORTH READING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

North Reading, Massachusetts

Regular Meeting of the School Committee

Open Session/Budget Workshop

Date: April 24, 2017

Time: 3:30 PM

Place: Superintendent's Conference Room

School Committee Members Present

Clifford Bowers

Julie Koepke

Janene Imbriano

Gerald Venezia

Staff Members Present

Jon Bernard, Superintendent

Patrick Daly, Assistant Superintendent

Michael Connelly, Director of Finance and
Operations

Others Present

Robert Mauceri, Chairman, North Reading Board of Selectmen

Donald Kelliher, North Reading Finance Committee

Abigail Hurlbut, North Reading Finance Committee

Scott Buckley, Community Member

Dan Tomasello, North Reading Transcript

Geoffrey Simons, Community Member

The workshop was called to order at 3:32 p.m. by Chairman Bowers.

Superintendent Bernard provided a brief introduction to the FY18 budget draft, noting the most up-to-date revenue projections provided by the Town's Finance Director earlier in the day. Mr. Connelly followed with a review of the FY18 budget draft (copies distributed).

Ms. Koepke asked a question to clarify that we would be implementing the hybrid kindergarten model which Mr. Connelly answered in the affirmative.

Mr. Bowers asked whether the elimination of the food service general subsidy was realistic. Mr. Connelly responded that he believes it is realistic, but it is also a calculated risk. Mr. Bernard added that the district has asked Chartwells to continue to provide catering services in the future, and they have accommodated this request. Mr. Bowers expressed concern that we have come so far, and need to be careful not to ask too much.

Mr. Connelly stated that the largest challenge will be the further reduction of the operating budgets for the school and district. Ms. Koepke mentioned that this puts an increased strain on parents and the need to contribute to classroom items, such as tissues. Mr. Bernard stated that while we appreciate parent contributions, we will not explicitly request such donations. Dr. Daly stated that these operational cuts may impact professional development, technology, and other areas, and will be a challenge.

Mr. Venezia asked for clarification on the busing subsidy reduction. Mr. Connelly explained that the bus fees cover 90% of the additional service of providing transportation for those students for whom busing is not mandated.

Mr. Kelliher asked whether these budget reductions deplete the revolving account, and Mr. Connelly explained that while it does not deplete it completely, it does greatly reduce the account. He then explained the process of carry-over to increase the offset in the next year.

Mr. Buckley asked a question about the user fees for the bus and the challenges of predicting the offset given several variables. Mr. Connelly explained that our projection of the \$50,000 user fee increase was close to accurate.

Mr. Connelly stated that the items below the line were decided upon today at a meeting with the Administrative Council. Ms. Hurlbut suggested investigating whether the Van Driver position could be combined with the driver for the senior center.

Mr. Mauceri asked if there had been consideration of the fully funded circuit breaker possibility as well as the \$28,000 increase in the House budget.

Mr. Connelly and Mr. Bernard also added that there is a significant need for a residential placement of a student for 2017-2018 at \$400,000 per year. Mr. Bernard noted that the district has been carrying about \$220,000 in reserves and can mitigate much of this cost with carry-over funds but that will have an impact on any reserve funds for FY19.

After Mr. Connelly added that there would be a reduction in the legal expense budget, Ms. Hurlbut asked Ms. Conant for her perception of those cuts. Ms. Conant indicated that this would be a challenge and we would need to consider our approach to obtaining legal advice in the future.

Mr. Connelly concluded the presentation and Mr. Bernard reminded the group that the expenses associated with operating the new middle/high school building have exceeded expectations and that it was important to remind everyone of those costs.

Mr. Venezia expressed that this budget is “level services reduced” and that we are using smoke and mirrors to back into this budget. Ms. Hurlbut expressed that there is not anyone around the table who likes this situation but that we need to acknowledge that the Town has also needed to do a tremendous amount of belt tightening. Mr. Venezia stated that we have had a hard time advancing as a district, with large class sizes and the inability to add new programs as desired.

Mr. Mauceri mentioned that the only way things would change would be to add new revenue to expand the economic base. Mr. Bowers and others described the issues at the state level with respect to school funding.

Mr. Venezia reiterated that the budget before him did not include the 1.0 FTE Elementary Team Chairperson and that he was going to suggest that we carry it forward as an undesignated cut but that in light of the aforementioned special education obligation of \$400,000 he cannot

recommend it at this time. Mr. Bowers noted that the Administrative team worked hard on this and cannot figure out any other way to balance the budget. Mr. Bowers stated that he is uncomfortable with this number. Mr. Bernard assured everyone that we will still offer a quality program and that the administrators will work hard to deal with these cuts.

Mr. Buckley asked how we can mitigate the Special Education costs without adding the Team Chair position. Ms. Conant answered that we will continue to look at students and programs and bring as many students back and keep as many students in as possible. The Team Chair position would provide us with the opportunity to do this very well, and we will do this to the best of our ability without this position. Mr. Buckley asked if we had programs here to offer for students to tuition-in, and Ms. Conant described the current programs and the work we are doing to continuously improve these programs.

Ms. Hurlbut asked if the Chapter 70 increase were to come to fruition, what would be the first item to add back into the budget. The operational budgets would be the first to be added and the Team Chair position would likely be next.

Mr. Mauceri described a recent conversation with Representative Brad Jones that highlighted the budget dialogue with the state. Mr. Mauceri added that if there is any more money to squeeze out of the process, he will be there to do it.

Mr. Bernard stated that he senses from the Committee that we use this document to come to a bottom line vote on Monday. Mr. Bowers expressed his concern that we keep finding little pockets of money, while the schools keep cutting portions of the budget.

Ms. Imbriano made a motion to adjourn the workshop at 4:46 p.m. The motion was seconded by Ms. Koepke. The motion passed 4-0.