

**LNSU/LNMUUSD Finance and Capital Committee Meeting**  
**December 5, 2023**  
**Minutes of Meeting**

**In Attendance:** Deb Clark, Jennifer Hulse, Jan Epstein, Angela Lamell, Mark Stebbins, Mark Nielsen, Patty Hayford, Bart Bezio, Dylan Laflam

**Minute Taker:** Sue Trainor

**Call to Order, Approval of Agenda and Public Comment:** Stebbins called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. Stebbins noted that the posted agenda was incorrect and should reflect that budget presentations would be taking place at this meeting. Nielsen made a motion, seconded by Bezio, to approve the amended agenda. The motion passed unanimously. There was no one from the public in attendance.

**Preliminary AOE Numbers:** Clark referenced the December 1<sup>st</sup> Tax Letter that she had just provided to the Committee members. The key considerations noted in the tax letter were: the end of one-time Federal ESSER funds, a 16% increase in health care benefits, overall inflation, and debt service to new capital projects or renovations.

Today, Clark received the first preliminary AOE-generated long term average daily membership (LT ADM) numbers. The District's numbers were good and would give them some breathing room when working with the budget. The Committee reviewed the LT ADM numbers, fixed at 9%, and the numbers were lower than the AOE numbers. Clark discussed the current published town tax rates and said that if the AOE calculations held, the maximum that the District rate would go up would be 5%. The homestead rate would go from 1.3338 to 1.4005. This was as long as the increase to per LT ADM spending was below 10%. Using the student numbers that her office had, \$656,000 no longer needed to be cut from the budget because they were now under the 9% threshold.

**Budget Presentations: Waterville Elementary School Budget and Special Education Budget**

**Waterville Elementary School Presentation:** Clark reported the salaries and benefits line items that the Committee was reviewing did not include salaries and benefits for IT, facilities, transportation, school nutrition, and after school programs. Johnson and Eden's budgets were reformatted to reflect the same.

Epstein explained to the Committee the reason for some of the increases in her budget. Epstein informed the Committee she would like to be able to keep the same personnel. There were several ESSER positions, one of them being a second interventionist, that she hoped to keep. The challenge, even before COVID, with only one interventionist was that it required one teacher to try to do intervention for seven grades, including kindergarten.

With the introduction of the Bridges math curriculum, they couldn't have a true multi-age set-up so they needed another person to teach third and fourth grade math. The PE teacher acquired a teaching license to add math and he took on two sections of math in addition to teaching PE.

All academics took place in the morning, so that made it difficult for one interventionist to meet with students from all grade levels in the afternoon. With the ESSER funds the school had been able to hire a second interventionist. This person came in with a lot of experience and was doing a great job. Now both interventionists have full schedules. Data determined which students needed these interventions and it showed that a large number of the students were approaching Tier 2 and needed the assistance. Having the second interventionist there was really helping the students in grades 4-6.

Epstein explained that prior to COVID, the school counselor had been a .6 FTE. With ESSER funds, she had been able to increase that position to full time. The counselor's schedule was now completely booked with a waiting list. Epstein was currently looking for an outside clinician because there were so many students in need with social, emotional and mental health issues. Families and students were really struggling and it was very concerning. For this reason, she would like the school counselor position to remain full time. Considering the new EQS and the higher demands for SEL, the counselor was already going into classrooms to teach guidance. This, on top of seeing students, meant a full-time counselor was necessary.

Epstein discussed the need to increase the Math/PE teacher to a full-time teaching position.

Epstein then discussed her request for a planning room position. Over the last few years Epstein had been doing that job. This meant Epstein spent a lot of time in her office with students, primarily because there wasn't a planning room, a place to process, or someone available to do the processing the student needed to do. With the ESSER funds she asked to bump up a para position to a Group 9 planning room coordinator position. She had hired paras previously but they quickly moved to higher paying positions.

Epstein said a teacher had suggested making this planning room coordinator position a full-time teaching position. The position would ask for someone with some background in psychology background. This was a critical position but they hadn't been able to keep anyone in place. Epstein stated that PBIS was a huge amount of work and required a lot of documentation. Restorative practice also required a lot of time. Teachers were devoting a lot of their own time to do these programs and going above and beyond. It would be helpful to have a central person to take care of some of this work.

Epstein noted the staff loved the students and had been doing so much. She said that other schools in the district had some opportunities that her students didn't have. Epstein was fiscally minded but these were the bare minimum of needs required to operate so students can get their basic needs met.

Epstein informed the Committee that more students were accessing pre-school at partner programs because Waterville didn't have transportation. Parents were dropping off their children at pre-schools closer to their work.

In response to a question from Clark, the increase in salary from the Group 9 position to a planning room coordinator had not been included in the preliminary budget. Clark stated the additional cost could mean a difference of anywhere from \$20,000 to \$40,000. Clark also stated she would be looking at the Waterville special education assessment payback amount. That amount might be reduced.

Stebbins asked if there were any resources from another school in the district that could help Waterville. Epstein thought it would be valuable for principals to get together to discuss what was available in each of their schools. She wasn't sure that principals knew what other schools had as resources. Stebbins noted that the merger was done in order to share resources. Clark stated that with ESSER funds removed, the demand in every school was high for the resources that Epstein had been talking about. Epstein noted that she and Manning had tried to work on sharing positions. Stebbins noted a facilities study had been done and he wondered if they should do a staffing study.

Bezio agreed with Epstein's requests and knew the planning room was necessary. Stebbins thought it was unreasonable to have Epstein take on that role. It was understood that Epstein wanted to be able to assist students, but as principal she had other duties that needed to be accomplished.

Bezio asked about the 38% increase in the assessment line item. Clark stated it was the LNSU assessment. Currently they were looking at an increase of 13.3% increase in special education expenses and a decrease of 5.72% special education income. This generated a 35% increase in the assessment. There was a discussion of the financial impact of receiving State-placed students.

**Special Education Budget:** Hulse informed the Committee that from one end of the district to the other there was an increase in students who were exhibiting significant behavioral and social/emotional needs. This current year Hulse had added a special educator position in Eden, resulting in a total of three there, and one was increased in Cambridge. There were some children that the district was serving now that they had not historically had to. This was due to the fact that there was such a backlog and waitlists for therapeutic programs. Laraway wasn't taking elementary students this year and East Meadow had a significant waitlist.

Therefore, they have been creating programs in-house which was a challenge. Hulse had been able to hire well-trained BI's from the Mosaic Learning Center which had closed down. However, Hulse continued to struggle with staffing. There were positions that needed to be filled and there were other positions that were being held by contract providers which tended to be more expensive. Additionally, salaries and benefit costs were increasing and that affected her budget as well.

The FTE increases in the budget were behavioral interventionists serving those students who used to be outplaced. While their costs may be a bit higher, the overall expenditure was a little less. Clark asked whether the costs for the alternative classroom in Johnson was in the budget. Hulse stated it wouldn't cost anything, because staffing and space was already available. This was just a different model to help those who hadn't been successful in the general setting. They hoped to get that started in January.

Hulse's hope was to move away from virtual services and have in-person staff. There was a discussion of the costs associated with both of those options.

Bezio asked what the District could do to help fill some of these special education positions. Hulse outlined the many ways in which she posted and networked the open positions. The location of the district, housing, and Chittenden County wages were reasons cited for the difficulty in hiring. Clark stated that HR and Thibault were now participating in job fairs and using new outreach software to help in this effort.

Nielsen stated that considering the fact that it was so hard to fill these positions, increasing the hours of the part time employees at Waterville to full time made sense.

Clark stated that next week the Committee would receive information on the Facilities, IT, SU and MUUSD budgets. Clark reiterated that a 10% spending limit on per pupil spending would result in a 5% protection on the tax rate. Those two elements would roll through 2029. The Board would have four years to bring spending increases to the natural tax rate. The 5% protection would continue each year but the increases would need to drop. What made this FY24-FY25 transition was the advent of the pupil count, changes in weighting, and the definition of poverty. That won't happen again. Next week the Committee would need to decide whether to take this one-time opportunity and work over the next four years to bring budget increases to the natural tax rate in 2030.

Bezio asked if they were building enough of a cushion to support future labor costs. Clark stated that the Committee would need to go into executive session if they were to talk about staffing. It was decided that the executive session could take place next week.

**Adjourn:** Nielsen made a motion, seconded by Bezio, to adjourn the meeting at 7:22 p.m.