

LNSU-LNMUUSD Special Board Meeting
January 16, 2024
Minutes of Meeting

Board Members Present: Belvidere: Stephanie Sweet; Cambridge: Mark Stebbins, Sue Prescott, Amy Listenik, Jan Sander (phone), Christy Liddy (phone), Denise Webster (phone); Eden: Jeff Hunsberger, David Whitcomb (phone); Hyde Park: Lisa Barry, Tina Lowe, Philip Kiely; Johnson: Mark Nielsen, Allen Audette, Katie Orost, Angela Lamell, Monica Stearns; Waterville: Bart Bezio

Board Members Absent: Hyde Park: Patti Hayford

Administrators Present: Catherine Gallagher, Deb Clark, Michele Aumand, Rene Thibault, Dylan Laflam, Erik Remmers, Blake Nemeth

Members of the Public: There were approximately 20 individuals. Those who addressed the Board have been mentioned below.

Minute Taker: Sue Trainor

Call to Order, Approval of the Agenda, Announcements and Public Comment: Nielsen called the meeting to order at 6:02 p.m. Bezio made a motion, seconded by Barry, to approve the agenda as written. The motion passed unanimously.

Announcement: Gallagher began the meeting by stating that the RAB minutes from their last meeting were amended to reflect that Remmers made a recommendation and Ciccolo made a motion to take action. There were very mixed feelings in that meeting about what should happen and she was not certain if that was reflected as thoroughly as it should have been in the minutes.

Gallagher also reminded people what the protocol was on weather days. When an early dismissal or cancellation of after school programs took place, it was in the hands of the secondary team who worked with the elementary team. The reason that Central Office did not make the decision was because dismissals were staggered and scheduled games needed to be cancelled by the athletic director.

Public Comment: Sam Rowley, Sustainable Agriculture Instructor, stated he was advocating for both programs. He thanked the Board for taking more time to consider the decision. It was clear that the program was valued in the community and was worth the expense. Abandoning the farm would be a huge loss of a resource that had taken seven years to build. Rowley wanted to be sure to highlight the fact that the Vermont Land Trust partnership provided a free lease to the farm. There were letters of support being sent to the Board from several organizations, such as Farm to Plate.

Meaghan Luther, Forestry Instructor, thanked the Board for taking the time to make the decision and thanked Nielsen for answering her email. She noted that there was a slide show of a tour of the farm if anyone was interested in viewing what was happening there. Luther stated she believed there were some potential grant opportunities. One of the grants available was through the Northern Border Regional Commission. They had a catalyst grant of \$50 million. Luther was also working hard to attract more Hazen students and she noted that current applications included students from other sending schools.

Dan Kilborn from the Vermont Land Trust, the organization that owned the land where the Robtoy Farm was located. Kilborn stated they had sent a letter of support today. He was at the meeting to show his support and to speak to the relationship that had been built over time. He noted that hosting the program there aligned well with the mission of the property to demonstrate and advocate for sustainable agriculture and forestry operation. In order to sustain the Vermont landscape and the connection that people had to the land it was important to have quality educational programs that connected students to the land. The work being done there was a

shining example and he hoped the program could continue. They would like to continue to be a partner of the program.

Calvin Smith stated he was an alumnus of the Tech Center. He had no idea that the program was in danger and he had thought the program would be there forever. Smith had experienced two years of Rowley's class and what it provided to a young developing mind. It changed the way he thought about the working class and work ethic. His view had been that he'd have to work hard and never have anything to show for it. Seeing what Rowley was able to accomplish over a short amount of time gave Smith aspirations to strive for what he thought he could do. He had started his own business and using the physics, biology, and other science skills that Rowley had taught him.

A former forestry instructor from 2014-2019 stated he came to advocate for both programs. He stated that these programs had been a success. Linemen at local electric companies, farms with young people pushing the working landscape forward, and local excavation companies were all products of these programs. He thought it would be a giant disservice not to do everything possible to keep the two programs open.

Appoint an Additional Representative to the GMTCC Regional Advisory Board: Sweet made a motion to appoint Allen Audette to the GMTCC Regional Advisory Board. Lowe seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

LNSU FY25 Budget Review: Clark reported that since the last meeting she had applied \$129,000 to the budget from the surplus. The general education assessment would increase from \$1,506,714 to \$2,311,599. Salary and benefit increases at the LNSU included \$173,803 of ESSER funded investments, moving those costs to the general fund for SU-wide Diversity, Equity and Training and IT supports that were vital.

Special education costs would increase from \$4,278,292 to \$5,773,223. That was primarily due to the 69% decrease of state-placed revenue. There were moderate salary and benefit increases. Clark reminded the Board members that benefits were negotiated state-wide and the Board had no control of those costs. Services for special education students were now needed to be purchased and this was increasing costs as well. Additionally, there was a significant need for emotional and behavioral support. It was taking more people to support student needs.

Clark highlighted where the overall LNSU general budget expenses came from. 73% of the SU expenses were for instruction and student supports. Adding transportation costs would bring that total to 76%. As for special education percentages, salary and instruction were 46% of the budget and benefits were 19%.

Orost made a motion, seconded by Hunsberger, to adopt the LNSU FY25 budget as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

LNMUUSD FY25 Budget Review: Clark explained Act 127 to the Board again. The State made changes to how students were counted, from Equalized Pupils to Long Term Average Daily Membership (LT ADM). They added new weighting factors for poverty, sparsity, ELL and grade levels. Districts were expected to keep their spending below a 10% increase. If a district kept their spending below 10%, there would be a 5% cap on the district tax rate increase. However, if the natural tax rate was 5% or less growth, you would lose the 5% cap protection for the next four years. Therefore, they were saying to push the budget in this first year, put the funds where the funds needed to go and then work to get to a natural tax rate down to 5% or less.

Act 127 was designed to reallocate state education resources to districts that had been historically underserved. This was a state education budget, not a local education budget. The budget was

developed locally by the principals and professionals who knew what is needed in the schools but the taxes were a state tax.

Because the state also changed their need-based designation, the increase of 56 additional students at the elementary level and 188 at the secondary level provided the district with a one-time opportunity to adjust budgets to allow for continued pandemic recovery work, absorb economic pressures driving costs up, and hold the increases in the district tax rate to no more than 5%.

Clark explained that once she was informed by the State of the higher LT ADM numbers, she added back expenses that she had previously removed. Clark stated 67% of the elementary budget was student supports and instruction and some of the administration costs (at 12%) could be included in that as well. Facilities and safety was 10.58% of the budget. At the secondary level, 75% of the budget was for instruction and student supports and some of the administration costs (at 10%) could be included in that total.

Clark reported there had been discussion about adding some small, deferred maintenance, one-time only projects. Building in some small one-time expenditures provided a small cushion when moving from FY25 to FY26.

At the elementary level, there was a \$46,978 reduction in the assessment by applying all of the surplus at the SU. Clark added in \$180,000 that included two ESSER positions that hadn't been carried forward. This brought the spending per LT ADM to 9.85%. Clark understood 9.85% made some Board members uncomfortable but she noted that the LT ADM numbers provided by the State were frozen and would not change.

At the secondary level, Clark stated there was a \$50,000 reduction in the assessment. Clark added \$50,000 to Voc Tuition, \$75,000 to school nutrition program supports and \$265,000 to deferred maintenance. Laflam would be providing a list of deferred maintenance items to Board members. This brought the spending per LT ADM to 9.88%. This came to a combined natural district tax rate of 6.5%. However, because of being able to meet the cap of 10%, the tax rate would be capped at 5%, or \$67 per \$100,000 home.

Budget notes outlined by Clark included: general fund budget increases of 14.92% at the elementary level and 20.04% at the secondary level; education spending increases of 15.94% at the elementary level and 24.81% at the secondary level; and spending per LT ADM increases of 9.85% at the elementary level and 9.88% at the secondary level. To change spending per LT ADM by half a percent would take a \$72,000 cut at the elementary level and \$85,000 at the secondary level. To change the district tax rate by one cent (\$10 per \$100,000 of property) would take a \$210,000 reduction at the elementary level or \$288,000 reduction at the secondary level or some combination of both. It would take \$2.5 million dollars of reductions to bring the tax rate to match this year's published tax rate.

Orost asked what the two ESSER positions added back into the budget were. Clark stated they were math and literacy interventionists at Waterville and Johnson. Orost asked about the \$265,000 being added in for capital projects. Laflam stated the projects would be determined by the Finance and Capital Committee but there were several million dollars worth of deferred maintenance items to choose from. Clark said there was a list of projects from \$5,000 to \$70,000. These projects would need to be completed in FY25 because the expense would not be carried over. Clark explained that the \$265,000 was determined by keeping the items under the total of 10%.

Clark, in response to a question, explained that school nutrition programs didn't pay for themselves. There was usually a deficit that the general fund had to pick up. It was unclear where the funds were coming from as far as school nutrition was concerned. The State was doing what they could to

get federal funds for the program. The District qualified for the highest possible reimbursement for the nutrition program but it was all new so it was unclear how much revenue the District would receive.

Kiely made a motion, seconded by Sweet, to adopt the LNMUUSD FY25 budget as presented. Prescott stated she would have been more comfortable going with a 9.5% on both budgets. Stearns asked what that would look like. Clark stated it would reduce the budget at the secondary level by \$45,000. Prescott stated she would only bring that forward as an amendment if she heard that other people were considering it. Lamell stated she wanted to maximize the benefit of getting close to 10%. The motion to adopt the motion then passed unanimously.

GMTCC FY25 Budget Review: Remmers began by stating that he, in consultation with the RAB Chair, was able to modify the original budget from 11.5% to 10.49%, while allowing the two programs to remain separate. This would bring the GMTCC budget to \$3,973,185.

Remmers modified the budget by moving the engineering teacher to the TIME grant. There was a two-year window for that so it would come on to the budget in FY27. The salary for the new pre-tech teacher was changed to an M step 5. Vincent's Bistro renovations were removed, although the hope was to use the capital reserve for this project. He believed this was an important item for the culinary program.

Additional revenue of \$48,219 from the tuition reserve fund and \$29,335 in FY23 excess were applied to the FY25 budget. The tuition per pupil cost at 11.5% was \$29,038 as opposed to \$27,999 at 10.49%. The per pupil tuition from sending schools at 11.5% was \$13,101 as opposed to \$12,258 at 10.49%. The tuition increase over FY24 at 11.5% was \$3,018 as opposed to \$2,175 at 10.49%.

The announced tuition recommended by the RAB was \$27,485 as opposed to \$27,999 at 10.49%. The per pupil tuition from sending schools recommended by the RAB was \$11,548 as opposed to \$12,025 and the tuition increase recommended by the RAB was \$1,466 as opposed to \$2,175 at 10.49%.

Remmers then noted the difference between the RAB's initial budget recommendation which combined the agriculture and forestry programs. The recommendation was to have a budget increase of 7.9% or \$11,548 per pupil cost. The 10.49% increase now being presented was a \$12,175 per pupil cost. The 11.5% increase resulted in a \$13,101 cost per pupil cost.

Webster stated that looking at the data it appeared that the forestry program was almost exclusively Hazen students. She wondered if there had ever been any discussion of selling the forestry building to that District and no longer have it run through Lamoille North. Webster also disagreed with the idea of combining the two programs. Remmers stated there had been no discussion about selling the building. Remmers said he didn't think that was the route they wanted to go.

Gallagher was asked for her recommendation. Gallagher stated the RAB Board had talked about the sustainability of programs and enrollment for a year. What was known was that enrollment ebbs and flows. The School Board was tasked with being responsible financially and had some concerns about the cost of running programs that had a downward trajectory in enrollment. However, this Board also had a deep respect for the community and for hearing the community's concerns about programs that they believed to be necessary for Vermont's future.

Gallagher's recommendation was to let the voters decide and to bring the budget forward without those cuts. This wouldn't directly impact taxes because every school paid tuition. Gallagher noted

that this Board was at a disadvantage not having sat in on the RAB meetings and not having heard from the community. Gallagher said this was the second meeting that the School Board had heard from the community and she thanked people for coming. Gallagher also noted that there was enrollment for both programs next year two months into receiving applications. The RAB Board, the School Board, administration, community, local businesses, and instructors were all responsible for helping to recruit students. That was how the programs could be maintained. Sending schools needed to help more as well.

Nielsen stated that Remmers had done an amazing job. He did not want to see the two programs go away. He wanted to give GMTCC the opportunity to grow them. Thanks to Remmers, the Tech Center was highly advertised, going to national competitions every year.

Barry said it seemed that there were grant opportunities available and the District would be pursuing some of those. Barry agreed that they should let the voters decide but she also wanted to respect the sending schools and use the 10.49% budget rather than the 11.5%.

Sweet agreed with Gallagher. She stated it was too soon after COVID to make any drastic cuts anywhere. She suggested asking for the 11.5% increase so that they could offer the 10.49% if the first vote was defeated.

Hunsberger agreed with Gallagher and said voters should make the decision. The primary piece for him was that the Board received the information one week ago. It was important to have more discussion. He agreed that the agriculture and forestry program should remain separate entities and that the Board should work to grow the programs. Hunsberger was impressed by the level of attention the public had paid to this through their communications to Board members. The last two nights of former students and advocates speaking for the programs as effectively as they had was wonderful. While he understood it would cost more money if the vote passed, he thought it was better to have conversations about this at the Annual Meeting and to help people understand how important maintaining the programs were. Hunsberger had checked in with Sarah Waring of the USDA and other individuals. One person he spoke with suggested bringing adult learners in to boost enrollment.

Bezio agreed with everyone and thanked Erik for pulling data together for the Board to review. The trend lines in the sustainable agriculture program were either at or above trend for five years up until 2 years ago. He didn't want to make a hasty, shortsighted decision. He suggested getting an update mid-year on enrollment.

Bezio then made a motion to adopt the GMTCC budget increase of 10.49%. Barry seconded the motion. Approving the motion would allow the agriculture and forestry programs to continue as separate programs.

Hunsberger thought it best to have the 11.5% option presented to voters first. Stebbins said he was starting to agree that the 11.5% option was best. Nielsen said that if the Board believed in the numbers being presented, the Board could sell the need and the numbers would pass. It had been done multiple times in the past.

Orost stated that the increase of 10.49% was respectful to the community that was advocating for these programs but it was also respectful to the taxpayers. Barry stated again that for the sake of the sending schools, she believed it was best to approve an increase of 10.49%.

The Board voted to approve the GMTCC budget with a 10.49% increase, with Hunsberger voting against.

Remmers stated that he would provide the RAB minutes in the Board packet in the future. Prescott asked about UVM Extension's participation with the program. She had thought they were supposed to be part of the program. Rowley stated he was in contact with many people at UVM Extension. Prescott thought there would be interns from UVM. Barry noted that UVM Extension was not what it used to be. Rowley then informed the Board that through a collaboration with UVM and members on the Land Trust Board they were able to have an intern on the farm. That was the first time he had an intern and it was very beneficial.

Announce 2024-2025 Tuition: Clark asked the Board to make a motion to announce LNMUUSD tuition for the school year 2024-2025 as follows:

Grades K-6: \$17,970
Grades 7-12: \$19,345
GMTCC: \$27,999

Stebbins made a motion, seconded by Hunsberger, to approve the stated LNMUUSD tuition for the school year 2024-2025. The motion passed unanimously.

Clark then reviewed the Warning of the Annual Meeting with the Board. The Annual Meeting would take place on February 19, 2024 at 7:00 p.m. The Board had adopted a budget of \$16,353,135 for PreK-6th grade, a budget of \$19,797,762 for Grades 7-12, and a budget of \$3,973,185 for GMTCC. Voting on these budgets would take place on Town Meeting Day, March 5, 2024.

Hunsberger announced to the Board that Representative Balint would be coming to the high school on January 24th.

Personnel Matter: Prescott made a motion to go into Executive Session to discuss a personnel matter, with School Board members being asked to attend. Lowe seconded the motion and the Board went into Executive Session at 7:33 pm. The motion passed unanimously.

The Board came out of Executive Session at 7:43 p.m. Orost made a motion requesting that the Personnel Committee present a recommendation to the full Board for the Superintendent's contract renewal. Lamell seconded the motion and the motion passed unanimously.

Adjourn: The Board adjourned the meeting at 7:44 p.m.