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BERLIN-BOYLSTON REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Tuesday, March 19, 2024, 5:00pm
Tahanto Regional Middle/High School
Multipurpose Room

Stream link <https://www.youtube.com/@bbrsdlive2893/streams>

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School Committee: Mrs. Meagan Grill, Chair; Mrs. Julie Lee, Vice Chair; Mrs. Lori-Anne Hart, District Clerk; Mr. Michael Totman; Mrs. Jessica DegliAlberti; Mrs. Julie Lee; Mrs. Lisa Mair

Administration: Ms. Carol Costello, Superintendent; Mr. Dan Ayala, Director of Facilities Ms. Nicole Bilotta, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent; Mr. John Campbell, Berlin Memorial Principal; Mrs. Jannel Fitzpatrick, Director of Pupil Personnel Services; Ms. Nancy Konisky, Director of Finance & Operations; Ms. Renee Legendre, Tahanto Middle/High School Assistant Principal; Mr. Paul Mara, Technology Coordinator; Ms. Lisa Sequeira, Tahanto Middle/High School Principal; Ms. Sally Stukuls, Director of Curriculum and Grants, Grades 6-12; Ms. Cinthia Sykes, Boylston Elementary Principal

Also present: Mr. Howard Drobner, Ms. Erin Kane, Ms. Mary Porter, Ms. April Steward, Ms. Peg Stone and other members of the public

- I. **Call to Order** – Mrs. Grill called the meeting order at 5:01pm
- II. **Pledge of Allegiance**
- III. **Public Comments** – Ms. Erin Kane who has children in school in Boylston spoke. She noted how phenomenal Ms. Sykes is as principal for BES. She was concerned about what items will the children have less of next year and how will that affect them if cuts are made. She asked the committee to approve the budget in full.
- IV. **Communications - None**
- V. **Consent Agenda - Vote - Motion made by Mrs. Lori Hart and Mrs. Julie Lee, 6-0, motion passes.**
 1. Payable Warrants

VI. Reports

1. FY25 Budget Presentation – *Ms. Carol Costello and Ms. Nancy Konisky*

Ms. Nancy Konisky presented the BBRSD budget. The draft presented on February 27, was with a 10% increase. Now it is being presented with a 5% increase. She summarized the changes that were made to include increased school choice allocation, new out of district tuition and an increase in special education transportation. 7.7 FTE were moved to next year. BBRSD kept 1.0 FTE OT district wide, BES 1.0 FTE teacher, TAH kept 3 unified sport coaches, and 4.0 FTE math tech and .60 athletic director. BMS had an initial 3 % increase, but is now -2%, which is a savings. BES had an initial 12% increase, but now is a 7% increase. TAH had an initial 12% increase and is now at 6% increase.

Ms. Konisky reviewed BBRSD Capital. The BMS roof was moved to next year and there was a decrease in IT support dollars. The BES bathroom and playground updates were moved to next year, IT support dollars decreased, and the cafeteria floor replacement cost was increased. At TAH refurbishing track was moved to next year, IT support dollars were taken out, swipe card system was moved to next year, the auditorium equipment was moved to next year, HVAC controls and repair dollars decrease, athletic field renovation dollars increased, non-student device replacement dollars decreased, walkway paving dollars decreased, added in boiler repair dollars.

Ms. Konisky reviewed the assessment comparisons for each school. The backup is listed on page 23 in the presentation. The town of Berlin has a 5% increase for \$455,427. The town of Boylston has a 1% increase for \$175,357.

Ms. Carol Costello commented on how hard BBRSD administration has worked on the budget and reviewed items for this year and what could be postponed to next year. She wants to be supportive of the schools and respective of the towns. Mrs. Grill and Mrs. Lee also worked with Ms. Costello, Ms. Konisky and the towns to refine the budget.

Mrs. Grill explained that Boylston is in a place where they can give \$500k more than last year for both operating assessments and TAH capital assessment. They can use free cash to fund the elementary capital assessment. If BBRSD goes over limit town has to go to override. Mr. Howard Drobner, Chair of Boylston Financial Committee, agreed \$500K is school portion of their budget and \$500k is for the town side. They will be at top of the levy if either go over. If the increases in operating assessment are added and then subtract capital assessment for Boylston/Tahanto BBRSD is around \$13k. In the budget Ms. Konisky has BBRSD moving money from school choice to cover gap.

Mr. Michael Totman asked if there was a commitment made by Boylston about covering the elementary capital expenses. Mrs. Grill noted the Financial Committee Chair, Mr. Drobner has committed. He confirmed they have agreed and cannot see an issue with it (\$285,450 elementary capital). The town is going to fix BES roof. It will be resurfaced and re-shingled. The library roof will be fixed immediately. For this year they are going to do a patch job that will get them until they receive the funds to fix the roof in its entirety. Mr. Drobner has had roof assessments done and received recommendations. The metal roof of the library and flashing

around window will be fixed and is where lots of water is coming on. Additionally, the rubber membrane areas will be patched. The timeline has not been determined. After the town meeting in May and free cash has been approved Ms. April Steward can work with contractors to get the project going. The full rubber membrane will be addressed of FY26. Typically, patches only last about two years. Ms. Costello has also applied for a MSBA grant to get some funding back to hopefully tie into second part of the replacement. The Boylston Finance Committee is committed to fixing the roof in a two-year process.

The capital \$513,079 minus \$500,000 is a \$13,079 difference between budget and the \$500K Boylston can give. The FY25 operating assessment assumes we move around \$200k from school choice. If BBRSD continues to allocate school choice funds in FY27 there will only be \$200k left. FY26 will have 13 kids coming off of school choice, but will add more spots. When you take money from school choice it goes into the assessment for BBRSD for following year. Towns don't have that on their side but will go into BBRSD. They will have less to provide. Essentially deferring the burden and pushing it off.

Berlin Assessment

Last year Berlin funded part with BBRSD budget with free cash. They used their free cash for operating assessments. Their number is different from BBRSD. They felt the free cash shouldn't be included, but it was technically the number used on the town floor. The operating assessment Berlin started with was less (\$383K), Berlin Financial Committee has \$178k assuming starting at the lower number. BBRSD will have to cut jobs to meet their requests. \$200K would need to be cut from what there is now and maybe more. Berlin not provided a levy limit to BBRSD. Berlin would not like to dip into that pool. Ms. Peg Stone explained there was a letter sent that the money was an additional one-time funding and is not added to the base. They do not have the free cash.

A Berlin override is select board decision only. Mrs. Grill doesn't know the amount to hit the override. The calculations that BBRSD has in shouldn't hit it, but BBRSD doesn't have the information. The excess levy capacity is up to \$1.6million. Ms. Stone noted it would be a tremendous tax increase to the town. It would be a potential increase of \$1400 to \$1600 per household. She said the budget should have been to them by November. Last year, the \$383K that was free cash had to be used for a last-minute emergency and BBRSD had no choice. It was noted that Berlin has due date calendar. Mr. Totman explained he did not recall any November due dates only February. The reason BBRSD pushed out their date is not having accurate revenue figures until later in the year. Mrs. Grill agreed that next year she will work with the timeline communication better. Friday, March 23rd is the 45-day timeline for Berlin. Mrs. Hart wanted to clarify that BBRSD is not in charge of the amount needed to fund special ed students. Nothing is being asking for above level for BMS. There is not a lot of wiggle room for BMS.

Mrs. Degliaberti asked about the TAH math teacher and if what is in support the math curriculum required for financial literacy. Ms. Sequeira said it's a start. It would allow them to add two math classes to what there are now. One of the classes taught would help to fulfill graduation requirement.

Mr. Totman asked Ms. Costello about the district improvement plan. He noted BBRSD is supposed to hire more teachers and that BBRSD is not following the plan. He also questioned what is the point of having a plan. Ms. Costello noted it serves as a guide and they are finding out that BBRSD just can't get all those things when it comes down to numbers. BBRSD is still maintaining a part time nurse. They just haven't increased the position to full time. She feels there are areas we are improving, but the district is behind on what they were hoping to accomplish. Next year, there will probably be the same discussions on what BBRSD needs and if it could be provided by the town. Difficult decisions were made by the team for this year's budget. BBRSD does have a five-year plan for their needs.

Mrs. Grill explained she wants to do better job of letting people know where things are on website. Mr. Totman noted Ms. Costello brought the strategic plan everywhere last year. She noted the district may need to do a better job of explaining to the community the reason why BBRSD needs those things, so they understand why they are being requested.

Mrs. Lee wanted to know how many paras are working with the kindergarten classes in Berlin. Mr. Campbell noted one shared para for two classes. For BES there are three classes with three paras. A similar size expected, but they unsure with the apartment construction. Mrs. Lee asked about the unified coaches. Mrs. Sequeira explained there are three programs and the money is a wash because there are several stipend programs that are no longer running. Mr. Totman noted there is nothing listed to improve BMS. He noted with TAH there is a big drop from sixth grade to graduation and is trying to find reasons to keep kids in town.

For the improvement plan Mrs. Grill expressed that they need to work with towns to identify funding. The last plan was only done with the administration team at a summer retreat. Going forward town representation would be good. Mr. Totman asked if Ms. Costello heard from parents. She has only heard from public comment otherwise nothing. Mrs. Hart noted there are increasing populations with huge inflation increases. Things they could pay for in the past they simply cannot pay for now. In this situation, there are things out of BBRSD's control. When you look at the asks its only four things. For above level, it is three heads and the state reimbursement was lower than expected, as well. These are just the cost of things with all of the unavoidable increases.

Mr. Totman asked about ELL teachers and need for them. He wanted to know if there will be a burden if they are not added. It is felt that each year it will be harder if more students come in needing those services. A full-time teacher is needed. He noted it affects the students and puts extra strain on the teachers. Ms. Costello said in the plan BBRSD has they have hit on a number of the positions, but not all of them. They are around three quarters the way through.

Mr. Totman thinks the budget doesn't have what the school needs. Mrs. Lee noted if we continue funding the school at level every few years the trends of losing students will continue. (20 students approx. a grade). Mrs. Hart noted from eighth to ninth grade is where most kids are lost. If students have good middle school experience they will want to stay for high school. Ms. Costello shared that more after school activities are coming back to help. BBRSD's hands are tied due to the budget on what they can add to improve the district.

Ms. Sykes said she puts in her students needs. Having to make cuts was challenging and stressful and felt like a disservice to her students. Mr. Campbell expressed knowing the Berlin community and the need to more affective communicate on constant basis. The problem is there is not a ton that can be cut. Good things have happened because of the commitment of the teachers and community. Now to pull that back would hurt the school. In the past, Berlin has always come through to help the schools. Now BBRSD is in a tough place and has to find better way to identity and fund the district's needs. Some items for special education are just mandated. BMS created plan for special needs students and they are working hard to meet them. He noted this is not a good time. Ms. Stone asked if discussions could be done in the early fall with a list of what school is looking for, which could help avoid issues at this time of the year. In December above level was presented. For special education costs, when unforeseen things come up other items have to get cut. Ms. Stone said having discussions will help make better decisions. Being at the end of their timeline they don't have time to make decisions on items.

If anything is added to Boylston it will go to override. School choice funds could help cover them. Mrs. Sequeira noted how hard they worked to put budget in place as it is right now. She said adding things could make it more fragile and not sustainable. Mrs. Legendre inquired with school choice what would that do to the sizes of classes or space. Ninety students per grade total is what TAH is comfortable at now. The average cost is 5K per school choice student. If there is space to fill it makes sense to put more spots. Mr. Totman noted the goal is to retain students from the two towns. BBRSD needs to operate with the idea of once those school choice funds are gone they are gone. Mrs. Grill did not love idea of school choice funds to help the budget, but is unsure of a solution. She did not feel an override would pass. Mrs. Hart shared there is lots of tax payer burden already. Boylston needs to be cut or move school choice.

Berlin/TAH number includes the bond – total capital will always come from free cash. The \$533k does not count debt repayment. Ms. Stone shared that Berlin capital is meeting Thursday and asked if she can be provided with a description and priority for everything to help determine what happens in the capital budgets. Being around \$900K for Berlin would be needed. It would depend how select board would place it on the warrant. They could call for override if there is excess levy. An override would get the greatest number of people to vote. There is a possibility it may not go to override. Ms. Kristen Steward expressed appreciation on the work that has been done, but it is still far off. She thinks there are two different budgets and townspeople will need to vote.

Ms. Mary Porter explained she looked at DESE numbers for circuit breaker for FY24. She said school districts can find things from the state. She asked for more transparency. Ms. Porter noted there was an agreement between Mr. Totman and Mr. Shultz about the free cash. She wanted to asked where the were the funds used. The town of Berlin is under mandate of proposition 2. She noted taxpayers are under the same strain we are talking about in the meeting. She felt it could be worked out and doesn't want to see either town go to override. If plans are done, they need to stay integrated going forward. Mrs. Jannel Fitzpatrick said the funds were used appropriately for special ed services.

Ms. Konisky said on March 4th DESE updated \$646,83k1 for circuit breaker. It is \$158k more for the whole district. She shared you could switch out school choice and use circuit breaker

funds. Ms. Porter wanted to know about Assabet Collaborative numbers. There are less Berlin students attending than in the past.

Mr. Totman felt the school committee should stick to the February 27th budget numbers for Berlin and if the town votes not to pay, then they would need to come back and look at it.

There was a typo in the presentation. It is BES recess aide.

Mrs. Grill asked the rest of the committee for their opinions. Mrs. Mair doesn't want to change anything and vote as is. Mrs. Hart asked Mrs. Fitzpatrick about the special ed teacher. She explained everything on the list is a need and balanced and responsible. Mrs. Hart expressed she wanted to vote on the budget as is. Mrs. Lee felt the reductions were not ideal but were thought out and would vote the budget as is. There is nothing else that could be added as a reduction. The mandates made it difficult. Mrs. Degliaberti wanted to note that the nurse was remaining as is. She did not want to cut jobs and doesn't think reductions are ideal, but hopes next year working with the towns that BBRSD will be in better place. Mrs. Grill wanted to vote as is. She was concerned about the Berlin number, but cannot see where anything could be cut. Nothing is being added. Any further cuts could be detrimental to the district. She does not want to be put in situation where an override does not pass. Next year, she will plan with the towns on how to make it happen. BBRSD is working with the town for the BES roof.

Mrs. Hart thanked the admin team and their collaboration to come up with the budget. Ms. Costello noted the administrative team worked together during the discussions about what to keep or potentially cut from the budget.

Ms. Rubin noted the money normally gets reimbursed in a rears for special education. She made a request for BBRSD to look at the special ed reimbursement numbers for FY25 because that could be a place where BBRSD could pick up money. Mrs. Grill noted a huge issue is that at some point in time the towns will have to go to override because houses and apartments keep going up, but not commercial development

Mr. Totman felt that if BBRSD does the numbers in November and the DESE numbers just changed in march the budget would have to be redone. He asked for a timeline to be done on how often to look at websites/funding. The MASC consultants advised BBRSD to do this timeline because of those changes. Ms. Porter shared that Chapter 70 is driven by enrolled students, real estate values, and wages. State monies should go up. BBRSD looked with their consultants on incomes and they are too high and it lowers the calculations. Mr. Totman noted there are people with higher incomes because the towns and school district attract people with higher incomes.

VII. Business Items

- 1. Approval of FY25 Budget – Vote – 23,762, 458 motion to approve for FY 25 Motion made by Mrs. Julie Lee and seconded by Mrs. Jessica Degliaberti, 5-1, motion passes. Mr. Mike Totman asked to amend to add all the fte positions under reductions, no second.**

Mrs. Grill thanked the group.

Meeting adjourned 7:01pm

VIII. Upcoming Meeting

- April 9, 2024 Open Meeting

The listing of items is those reasonably anticipated by the Chair which may be discussed at the meeting. Not all items listed may, in fact, be discussed and other items not listed may also be brought up for discussion to the extent permitted by law.

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