



All-Boards Meeting

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

September 19, 2023

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	September 19, 2023
Location:	MERMHS Cafeteria
Attendees:	<p>Essex Board of Selectman, Chair Ruth Pereen Peter Phippen, Alva Ingaharro</p> <p>Essex Finance Committee, Chair Ben Buttrick Michael Flynn, Nina McKinnon, Mark Renzi, Christopher Wolf, Joshua Franklin, Jodi Harris</p> <p>Manchester Select Board, Chair Ann Harrison, John Round, Becky Jaques, Catherine Bilotta, Brian Sollosy</p> <p>Manchester Finance Committee, Chair Sarah Mellish Andy Oldeman, Albert Creighton, Dean Nahatis, Tom Parkins, Michael Pratt, Peter Twining</p> <p>MERSD School Committee, Chair Theresa Whitman, Anna Mitchell, John Binieris, Kate Koch-Sundquist, Chris Reed, Erica Spencer</p> <p>Pam Beaudoin, MERSD Superintendent Avi Urbas, MERSD Business Manager Brendhan Zubricki, Essex Town Administrator Gregory Federspiel, Manchester Town Administrator</p>
Absent:	Jake Foster, School Committee
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	1623 Studios will record and air meeting at later date. No virtual access.

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A. Call to Order by Ms. Harrison and Ms. Pereen, 7:04 pm

B. Meeting

- a. Introduction & Procedural Overview – Ms. Harrison, Chair of the Manchester Select Board, and Ruth Pereen, Chair of the Essex Board of Selectmen.** Ms. Harrison stated that the usual rules of meeting would apply, including no side conversations. The All-Board Meeting is intended to provide all members an opportunity to speak and to hear each other. Board Chairs are asked to limit their statements to ten minutes and other speakers are asked to limit themselves to two minutes. No public comment will be accepted.
- b. Call to Order, Town Boards**
 - i. Sarah Mellish called the Manchester Board of Finance to order at 7:06 pm.
 - ii. Ben Buttrick called the Essex Finance Committee to order at 7:07 pm.
 - iii. Theresa Whitman called the School Committee to order at 7:08 pm.
 - iv. Ann Harrison called the Manchester Select Board to order 7:08 pm.
 - v. Ruth Pereen called the Essex Board of Selectmen to order at 7:09 pm.
- c. Financial Outlook**
 - i. Regional School District – Preliminary enrollment and financial assumptions:** Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the district is proceeding from the assumption that ten-year trends will hold. District spending in that time period has been at 3.4% growth, inclusive of one override year at 6%. MERSD's goal has been to be reliable and not exceed 3.5%. The override year was a result of the group decision by the collaboration group at that time. Unless there are changes to the major impactors of health, personnel, or out of district placement (OOD), the district anticipates growth of 3-3.5%. However, input from town boards indicates that this will exceed goals of one or both communities. Superintendent Beaudoin expressed the hope to focus on the structural problems at the current meeting. It is becoming evident that the assumption of 3.5% growth is not holding. The superintendent said that enrollment is remaining fairly stable for FY25, with Manchester up .7% and Essex down .7%.
 - ii. Essex & Manchester –Preliminary financial forecast**
 - 1. Brenden Zubricki, Essex Town Administrator. Mr. Zubricki detailed the efforts and fortunes of the Town of Essex that have previously allowed them to absorb growth in the district's budget without passing an override, including service regionalization, excess tax levy capacity accrual, and rental proceeds from Conomo Point. The town is reaching the end of that capacity and anticipates being at 100% tax levy for FY25. Mr. Zubricki stated that the town anticipates being \$60K behind even if MERSD comes in at 2.5% growth.
 - 2. Greg Federspiel, Manchester Town Administrator. Mr. Federspiel stated that the Town of Manchester is in a strong financial position but anticipated major financial headwinds in the near future, primarily driven by the need to reinvest in facilities and infrastructure and combat the impact of climate issues. Without the anticipated construction work for Essex Elementary, the town will be strained by approximately \$100M in facility expenditures over

the next 10-15 years. A positive note is the anticipated tax revenue generated by the Cell Signaling campus, the largest commercial development in town history. Mr. Federspiel stated that an increase in the school district budget of 3.5% is manageable for Manchester, but anything higher would be difficult.

- d. Roundtable Discussion – Ms. Harrison introduced the roundtable as an opportunity for each board to express its view on how to deal with the difficulty of developing the school district budget, including what percentage to target for growth and what kind of school the district should strive to be. Questions from board members will be held for the end.

- i. Board Chair Reports (limited to ten minutes per participant)

- 1. Essex Board of Selectman – Ruth Pereen. Ms. Pereen stated that an analysis of the town’s potential to finance the MERSD FY25 budget at 2.5% growth, which translates to 4.0% to Essex, indicates that Essex will not have the capacity to fund the school budget.
 - 2. Essex Finance Committee – Brendhan Zubricki. Mr. Zubricki said that Essex places a high value on education and maintaining a strong school. He also emphasized the importance of transparency. Ms. Zubricki stated that Essex has had a higher increase to its assessment between FY15-FY24 than Manchester. He said that there was a spike in student exit from the district during COVID in both communities, but Essex students largely returned while those from Manchester did not. Mr. Zubricki said that the override campaign last year was divisive, and there does not seem to be appetite for another override attempt this year. He stated that there is strong consensus to open the regional agreement to examine the heavier weighting of enrollment versus relative wealth. Mr. Zubricki stated that resorting to a super meeting would result in one community losing its sovereignty. Regarding transparency, Mr. Zubricki said that they would like more budget-to-actual reporting. The regional agreement stipulates an October report. Mr. Zubricki said there is frustration with requests for full disclosure regarding enrollment. Lack of responsiveness and completeness in class size data gave ammunition to the “no” vote on the override. Mr. Zubricki also said that they do not think school choice should be viewed as a lasting solution.
 - 3. Manchester Board of Selectman – Anne Harrison. Ms. Harrison stated that the district’s educational system is an asset to the community. If necessary, the Manchester Select Board will support an override. They have no appetite for reconsideration of the apportionment formula. The Manchester Select Board would like a clearer definition of what is meant by “level services.” If it means stagnation, they would prefer to invest more to support continued excellence in the school system. Ms. Harrison suggested hiring a consultant to provide outside perspective and look for savings in the non-instructional side of the budget. Ms. Harrison recommended looking for budget savings on the non-instructional side, which she

estimated at half of the district budget. Ms. Harrison stated that the Manchester BOS would support a super town meeting if needed and said the town of Essex should consider their willingness to support capital costs and not operational.

4. Manchester Finance Committee – Sarah Mellish. Ms. Mellish stated that the Manchester Fin Com is hoping the district will look to increase user fees and search for additional efficiencies. They support maintaining the current quality of instruction, including diverse course offerings. Ms. Mellish expressed the board’s opinion that failure to offer quality instruction and diverse offerings could erode the MBTS tax base should families choose to send their students to private schools. Ms. Mellish said the Fin Com will support an override and does not support a change to the regional agreement. Ms. Mellish stated that Manchester pays \$23,595 per student while Essex pays \$19,060. The Fin Com will support a super town meeting if needed to support quality education.
 5. MERSD School Committee – Theresa Whitman. Ms. Whitman pointed to the School Committee’s Operating Goals for direction, stating that the SC is responsible to the people for whose benefit the schools were established. Ms. Whitman clarified that the SC does not necessarily set the budget, but votes to approve the budget created by MERSD administration. Ms. Whitman said the School Committee will commit to exploring all ideas and will answer to their communities. For the SC to achieve its target of approving a budget, Ms. Whitman said that it would be helpful to have agreement between the towns on the MERSD growth target percentage. At 3.5% there is a funding gap. Ms. Whitman said that feedback from the community to the SC is asking why town partners have not planned for the current situation since it is cyclical. Community members have asked what the towns are doing to increase revenue, what Essex would be contributing to the discussion of an agreement change, and why it is on the school district to keep cutting.
- ii. Member Input (limited to two minutes per participant). Mr. Buttrick clarified that Essex would support a third party review of the current situation. Mr. Oldeman asked for a qualitative sense of enrollment trends. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the biggest impactor is the exit of the bubble classes. The district website contains a report reviewing enrollment for the previous ten years. It is stable in Manchester and increasing in Essex. Mr. Oldeman asked if the district should do more to market the high quality education offered. The superintendent agreed that the district can do more to market to families deciding between public and private education. However, the driving force in enrollment is a demographic shift in students available to attend. Previously, there was a spike in students of school age moving into Manchester. As that bubble moved through the system, the district responded by decreasing teaching staff, now totaling sixteen teaching positions. Ms. Creighton asked for insight into SPED expenses.

The superintendent said that the district typically has between 15-18% of students in special education. Most are moderate needs who receive additional supports but no specialized instruction. The subsection with more severe needs or a specific identified disability that requires specialized or separate programs are served where able through investment in teachers and paraprofessionals within district. Where this is not possible, out of district placement is required. The 22-25 OOD placements are the greatest expense.

- e. Ideas for Solutions – Members explored ideas for increasing shared services between the communities, collaborating with other towns to provide access to AP classes. Members discussed the towns’ efforts to increase revenue and decrease expenses, including multiple roles for employees. The district discussed options for regionalizing services. For example, the prekindergarten program for both towns is housed in Manchester. Class ratio at the high school was questioned. Superintendent Beaudoin said that looking only at a snapshot of enrollment in one class does not provide a full picture of the complexity of scheduling, particularly as each year fits within the greater story of growth, access, and opportunity for students. The superintendent said it is also difficult to reduce a teacher by .2 to react to what may be a temporary fluctuation in enrollment. Employee retention becomes a concern. Ms. Bilotta stated that, prior to discussing apportionment, the district should look at facilities to determine if the assumptions made in the regional agreement continue to hold. Mr. Reed said that there are other communities with options to assist struggling residents by allowing them to apply to opt out of an override or apply for abatements. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked what the common understanding is among those present about the division of labor and responsibility in creating the budget. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked if the district should be allowed to make requests of the towns in regard to their budgets. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked when the towns’ boards could commit, annually, to providing their input regarding acceptable growth. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked what the shared understanding is for the priorities of the school district. Ms. Koch-Sundquist stated that the School Committee is in an impossible position because they cannot bridge the expected deficit without program cuts and the boards have all stated that they do not want that. Ms. Jaques stated that it is important to maintain the spirit of collaboration and urged asking questions in a manner that does not imply mistrust.

Ms. Jaques moved to adjourn the All-Board meeting. Ms. Bilotta seconded the message.

The motion passed unanimously.

C. The meeting was adjourned at 9:25 pm.