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December 1, 2023 Update

Budget season is upon us and this coming Monday evening, December 4, I will be presenting the FY25 WPS Budget recommendations to the School Committee. Before doing that, I wanted to reach out to all of you to provide additional background information as to how this year's presentation will be different. Following the work of the Town of Westford Budget Task Force, which presented their report earlier in the fall, the School Committee asked that we prepare two different budget scenarios just as the Select Board is asking the Town Manager to do. The first scenario will be articulating our identified needs in order to maintain the high quality programming and services that WPS is known for and contributes to the reputation of the community. The second scenario will articulate the difficult decisions and reductions that will be necessary if additional funding is not available and our budget must be balanced within Proposition 2 ½ constraints.

The budget challenges for FY25 have been well documented and communicated through the work of the Budget Task Force. There are significant challenges for both the Town and Schools. In developing our budget for FY24, we identified three major increases that would have to be funded in our WPS FY25 budget. The first being the statewide 14% increase in Special Education Tuitions. The second being ensuring competitive pay for our staff in a market where many of our contracts had not kept pace with our comparable districts. The third being the anticipated increase of transportation costs as we are obligated to go out to bid for our next bus contract and our surrounding districts have seen an average increase of 11% in costs. Those three buckets combine to an additional (\$4,975,242) needed to support our district needs for FY25.

These needs resulted in an anticipated FY25 increase of 8.18% (\$5,389,766) where our budget increases for the past two years have been at 2.89% (\$2,531,083).

So, the first scenario that will be presented will include efficiencies based on adjustments made for enrollment as well as reconsidering how some services and supports are provided. It is a level-service budget although some services will look different or be provided in a different manner. It will reflect a change in our needs request from the anticipated 8.18% increase identified during the Budget Task Force process to a 7% increase.

The second scenario identifies the impact of balancing the budget within Proposition 2 ½ constraints. Working with our town partners, a 2% target increase was identified for the schools to try and meet. In order to do that, we have identified 3.2 million dollars of reductions and changes which is the difference between the 7% increase recommendation and the 2% increase target. There are no recommendations within that scenario with which we are comfortable.

We will be discussing the budgets over the next few months. Please remain engaged in the process and aware of the conversations taking place. The first round takes place at the School Committee meetings and then conversations move into the Budget Hearings with the Town of Westford Finance Committee and Select Board. As always, the final approval of the town budgets takes place at Town Meeting which is scheduled for March 23, 2024 this year. If an override is approved at Town Meeting it must also be passed via ballot question on the townwide election day, May 7, 2024. So, many questions about FY25 will not be completely resolved until much later in the spring.

If you have not been able to access and read the full Budget Task Force report, I would encourage you to do so as it presents a significant amount of data and analysis that has been much needed. The more informed everyone is about the budget the better.

Sincerely,

Chris

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