March 27, 2018

Finance and Warrant committee

David Roberts, Cecilia Emery Butler, Kevin Hughes, Kevin Preston, Jon Heffernan, Susan Fay, Marty Lindemann, and Sue Carney present.

Meeting began at 6:45, with a presentation by the representatives of Blue Hills Regional technical school.

Tom Poledo, Vice Chairman of Blue Hills Regional School committee, and Steven Moore, assistant superintendent for Business & Personnel.

Mr. Moore explained that this budget presentation would be streamlined in the interest of time. He declared the 3 goals of the budget as being responsible, realistic, and responsive.

Mr. Moore stated the first major increase: that the salary line has increased by $418,000. The majority of this increase comes from instructor salaries. In the normalized budget, there was a 3% increase overall. He characterized it as a slightly-above level service budget driven by refocusing on the school’s needs.

There is a renovation project scheduled to break ground in June. Borrowing has begun for this and other upcoming projects. He reminded the committee that the first year of this project is being paid for by normally budgeted funds.

Mr. Moore called attention to a synopsized handout breaking down $19.6 million of the budget. Blue Hills plans to move previous END funds, which are functionally free cash, into their project budget to reduce the cost of the borrowing to member towns.

Mr. Moore explained the history of how the Blue Hills has used END funds, and how the usage of such funds has become more efficient over the last five years. State funding generates 4.8 million dollars for Blue Hills. Additional money from the state is used to reduce the assessment to member towns, but if the state aid comes up short the school will not ask towns for more money.

Mr. Moore said that $9.8 million is the regional member assessment/required contribution for member towns. Dedham’s required contribution per pupil was $19,309 dollars, calculated between a flat value and a varying value based on the percentage of students attending. In the last year, 5 additional Dedham students attended Blue Hills despite overall enrollment dropping, leading to a total assessment increase of $164,000.

Projections estimate that 50% of students that apply from Dedham enroll at Blue Hills. Dedham’s 4-year student average is 9%. This year’s assessment has seen the largest increase due to the increase in Dedham student enrollment.

Mr. Preston asked about an increase in the Fixed Charges item line of $31,000. Mr. Moore answered that this increase came from the cost to insure their building during the renovation project. Mr. Preston pointed to a total increase of $663,000. Mr. Moore explained that $500,000 of funds were moved from one budget line to another as part of the upcoming renovation projects.

Mr. Preston asked if a reserve was in the budget for anticipated collective bargaining costs. Mr. Moore answered that they settled a 3-year contract this year, leading to a 2.5%, 2.5%, and 1% increase for teachers. These costs are included in the data presented.

Mr. Preston asked about the acceptance process. Mr. Moore answered that they review a copy of each applicant’s grades, discipline, and attendance, then interview them in person.

Ms. Carney asked what percentage of Dedham applicants were accepted. Mr. Moore answered 69%.

Mr. Heffernan asked why the total enrollment at Blue Hills was down by 19. Mr. Moore explained that the application process results in students being ranked and given a numerical score. The district draws a cutoff line of what score is acceptable. Last year, there were not enough students above that bar. The superintendent is investigating the matter. Mr. Moore stated that they revised their enrollment process a few years ago, targeting getting the right students for the right reason.

Mr. Heffernan asked what they expected the school’s capacity to be post-renovation. The presenters estimated 880 students. Mr. Poledo explained that after October 1, they no longer backfill student slots who move or leave. After sending out the first round of acceptance letters, they go off the waitlist to fill the unfilled slots. The goal is to have 240 freshmen this September.

Mr. Preston asked if they have paid any capital costs for the renovations yet. Mr. Moore answered that they have not repaid any borrowing yet. Mr. Preston asked if they could estimate what amount the school will be putting towards defraying the costs to towns. Mr. Moore explained that they will be putting money from their capital budget towards decreasing the costs, but did not have an estimate available.

Mr. Lindemann asked how many students graduate each year. Mr. Moore estimated 10-12 fewer than start freshman year. Mr. Lindemann asked where students tend to go after they graduate. Mr. Moore answered that many go into their trade, and many more go to a 2 or 4 year schooling, sometimes also working in their trade.

The Blue Hills representative concluded their presentation and thanked the committee for their time.

The Public Schools representatives began their presentation; Superintendent Michael Welch and Assistant Superintendent of Business and Finance Sam Rippin.

Mr. Welch thanked the committee for meeting with them this evening, and thanked Kevin Coughlin, Steve Bilafer, and Joshuas Donati for working closely with them this year.

Mr. Welch reminded the committee of the major restructuring that happened last year, re-allocating over $2 million dollars in salaries, a program he expects will continue to improve student achievement going forward.

Mr. Welch explained that they took part in an adolescent health survey. The results of that survey have come in. Adolescent alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco use are all trending down. Mental health, however, needs a serious review.

Mr. Welch stated that 80% of school costs are going to classroom instruction, with over 90% going to instructional support or classroom instruction.

He drew the committee’s attention to the proposed total Full Time Employees in FY19 compared to FY17. In FY18, they significantly reduced staffing levels.

In FY19, chapter 70 funding has received a significant boost of roughly 10%. This increase is largely due to the movement towards full-day kindergarten. He clarified that that money goes to the town, not directly to the schools, meaning the town gets to decide how to spend it. He also explained that the schools reverts unspent funds back to the town. The school also receives Medicaid reimbursements for services provided for eligible children. In FY17, over $250,000 came from those reimbursements and went to the town.

Mr. Welch reviewed enrollment levels. Enrollment is reported on October first each year. By January of each year, student levels are typically higher.

Mr. Welch reviewed class sizes and teacher/student ratios. He highlighted any classroom with fewer than 10 students. They have been working to reduce the number of classes with that classification.

Mr. Welch called attention to the Nasdeq data they received. He explained that students born in 2011 start kindergarten in 2016. He noted that the level of births in Dedham has spiked recently. Mr. Welch estimated that they are on the verge of a continued increase in births and an increase in Dedham families choosing to go through the public school system.

Mr. Welch called attention to 10-year trends in special education. There has been a slight uptick lately in the total number of students enrolled in special education. However, they have also been decreasing out-of-district placements.

Ms. Carney asked if Dedham has ever been cited for over-identifying special education students. Mr. Welch answered no.

Mr. Welch explained that the decrease in out-of-district placements has saved our public schools a huge amount of money. They’ve done so by increasing in-district programming , allowing the system to better meet the needs of these students. They hope to be able to keep utilizing their additional capacity.

Ms. Carney asked what grade our autism programs cover. Mr. Welch explained that our k-8 program is fully in place, and the 9-12 program is underway. He deferred to Liza O’Connell.

Elizabeth O’Connell, Director of Special Education, explained that they are looking to expand their services through age 22. Mr. Lindemann asked what the net savings were on this program. Mr. Welch answered that it is difficult to evaluate that, but the cost of creating the program is not insignificant. Mr. Rippin evaluated that there is a significant fiscal benefit to keeping students in-district.

Mr. Roberts asked if the total number of students in special education can reach an efficiency breakpoint. Mr. Welch answered that many students are served by inclusion settings, which place special education students in a classroom with other students, where the special education students receive additional support.

Mr. Welch explained that the state is supposed to reimburse 75% of the costs to special education programs. However, the schools budget as if they were going to receive 65% reimbursement. The reimbursements come back on a delayed schedule.

Mr. Welch explained the new costs this year. They anticipate a $1.3 million dollar increase to salaries and benefits. They are currently about to have a collective bargaining agreement expire and are currently in negotiations for the next.

39 students displaced by hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico are currently placed in the Dedham education system. Mr. Welch explained that they want to approach this in the most educationally effective and cost-efficient manner. They have proposed using research and development funds to do an audit of their English language learner services. There are several requirements for an ELL program, especially with displaced students.

Mr. Lindemann asked for more details on the displaced students. Mr. Welch explained that FEMA allows hotels to put out proposals for hosting students. Two hotels in Dedham put out bids for this program. This influx of 39 students came as something of a surprise to Mr. Welch and the district. FEMA does not provide information about how long these additional students will be here. FEMA may reimburse some of the costs, and the state also provides some reimbursement. Mr. Rippin explained that money will come in two blocks, and each time it is provided they will need to make new calculations.

Mr. Lindemann asked if the school has been working with support groups and communication with the relocated families. Mr. Welch answered that the schools are working closely with families to meet their educational needs. The families also have needs for permanent employment

Ms. Fay asked if those children were accounted for in the class size estimates that were handed out. Mr. Welch answered that those numbers are based on January 2, but additional kids have come in since then.

Ms. Emery Butler asked about a budget item EDUTVCR. Mr. Welch explained that these are Educational Inverventionists, who work alongside instructional coaches to provide additional support to students who are not necessarily receiving special education serices but a

Ms. Emery Butler asked about the Childcare budget line. Mr. Welch answered that the Childcare paraprofessionals are paid through a revolving fund generated by tuition paid by families who enroll in our beforecare and aftercare programs.

Mr. Welch clarified that he hopes this audit to our ELL programs will lead to more economic and educational efficiency going forward.

Mr. Welch stated that he is hoping to create a FTE position for a library media specialist in a school that currently only has a part-time, non-library media certified instructor.

The bus fee is proposed to be reduced from 266 to 180 dollars for a year. Mr. Welch explained that this is part of an ongoing goal to reduce fees by as much as possible to all families in Dedham.

Mr. Welch also explained a newly expanded position for an inclusion coach to support teachers, and explained several ongoing school programs.

Ms. Emery Butler asked what the rules are for riding the public school bus. Mr. Ripping explained that state mandates that if you are in grades k-6 and live more than 2 miles away bus transportation must be provided. Additionally, if you qualify for free and reduced lunch you cannot be charged for transportation. Furthermore, all Kindergarten students receive free transportation.

Mr. Preston asked about the Medicaid reimbursements, which spiked from FY14 to 15. Mr. Rippin estimated that he feels this is a victory for refocusing on receiving as much reimbursement as possible from the state.

Mr. Heffernan asked if the goal was to eliminate all fees associated with the public school. Mr. Welch stated that he believes a public education should be paid for by tax money. AP fees seem reasonable to him due to an additional service. However, he wishes to reduce barriers to entry as much as possible, even if it is not feasible to completely get rid of all fees.

Mr. Heffernan asked how Mr. Welch estimates reducing the fees will affect the budget. Mr. Welch explained that reducing exam fees to the new sliding scale cost around $20,000. Completely eliminating AP fees would likely cost another $20,000.

Mr. Preston asked how much it would cost to eliminate all fees. Mr. Rippin explained that for some systems like bussing, fees help them regulate and track usage and are more helpful than detrimental. Mr. Heffernan asked what Mr. Welch wanted to do in terms of reducing fees. Mr. Welch explained that he would like to talk to the school committee about it.

Mr. Heffernan praised the school system for absorbing 39 relocated students from Puerto Rico. He asked Mr. Welch what lessons they’ve learned from this event. Mr. Welch explained that they learned that they do not have the infrastructure set up to support this type of students and support their specific needs. He clarified that even without a major event, they see an increase of highly mobile families who will need comparable support.

One thing that has been accomplished is the creation of a framework with access to a wide variety of language speakers to support the enrollment process. This is something that will hold value going forward.

Mr. Roberts asked if the reduction of the athletic fee resulted in increased participation. Mr. Rippin estimated that due to the high participation levels of our athletic programs, he does not see much room for participation to increase. However, Mr. Welch has seen an increase in the rate of non-athletic afterschool activities, whose fees have also been reduced.

Ms. Fay asked the capacity at the Avery, Greenlodge, Riverdale and Oakdale School. Mr. Rippin estimated roughly 310 for each except Riverdale, which he estimated at 210.

Ms. Fay asked how many ELL teachers we employ. Mr. Welch answered 7.5.

Ms. Fay asked if they are anticipating any retirements this year. Mr. Rippin stated there would be one. Mr. Welch explained that they are seeing more maternity leaves and fewer retirements. Ms. Fay asked what the average cost of a maternity leave is. Mr. Rippin estimated $11,000. Mr. Welch stated that his largest concern is the continuity and quality of the educational experience. This means a need for quality substitute teachers.

Ms. Fay asked about the new athletic league we are participating in. Mr. Welch stated that this is their first year participating in a new league and commended the school committee for taking charge on this initiative.

Ms. Fay commended the schools on taking initiative to address mental health.

Mr. Lindemann asked how we compare to other communities in terms of influx of ELL students, particularly from hurricane Maria. Mr. Welch answered that we have had a large influx, but they will recalibrate benchmarking appropriately.

Mr. Lindemann asked what our end-state is for ELL education. Mr. Welch answered that ELL students are routinely tested, with the expectation to reach academic English understanding over 6 years. The rate of achievement among ELL students is a criteria the state evaluates.

Mr. Lindemann asked about graduation rates and post-graduation surveys. Mr. Welch answered that he will be sending this data out in an email. Furthermore, post-graduation tracking is not done very heavily. Most data comes from a pre-graduation survey.

Mr. Lindemann asked if they had future plans for finding out what happens to our graduates. Mr. Welch answered that he would defer to the requests of the school committee.

Mr. Lindemann asked Mr. Welch what he thought of the Blue Hills school only accepting 69% of Dedham applicants, despite that it is below maximum enrollment. Mr. Welch did not have a comment.

Mr. Lindemann asked Mr. Welch what he thinks they can do to improve student’s performance in college or help them make the correct decisions for them on whether to go to college. Mr. Welch answered that their goal is to prepare students for their future while providing their education.

Mr. Lindemann asked about the general response to the restructuring of the staffing structure. Mr. Welch answered that the MA association of school committees has accepted Dedham to present this summer about the success of our restructuring program. Mr. Welch explained that are making an investment in early education and teacher training, and expect to see this investment pay off in the future.

Ms. Carney asked if each elementary school had its own PTA. Mr. Welch answered yes. Ms. Carney emphasized the issues of the Avery school having the highest class sizes and the highest incidence of High Needs children.

Ms. Carney asked about the increase in students since the October 1 student report. Mr. Welch estimated that the increase was proportional across the district.

Ms. Carney asked if they require students to take AP exams if their fees would be subsidized. Mr. Welch stated yes.

Ms. Carney asked how they decide how many buses to send out each day. Mr. Rippin answered that students, both those who have to pay and do not have to pay, register and receive a bus pass. Enough busses are in circulation for a day where every student who registers attends.

Ms. Carney warned against expecting too much FEMA reimbursement.

Ms. Carney requested additional benchmarking data about staffing levels, such as student teacher ratios. She expressed concerns that our high schools are overstaffed.

Mr. Welch handed out the information regarding Dedham High school staffing levels that was requested by Mr. Roberts and Ms. Carney. He explained that he feels this information requires specific perspective to interpret. The data he has provided is all employees who have been paid by the school district, regardless of funding source. There are several categories of employees. Unit A employees are educators, a classification that extends to such positions as nurse and teacher. Unit B is an administrative union, such as principals. There are also non-unit personnel, who are not part of any union. Some paraprofessionals are members of other unions.

Mr. Welch acknowledged that concerns about the Avery school seem well-founded, and he believes a serious look at the allocation of professional staff is necessary.

As a closing statement, Mr. Welch re-iterated a dedication to making the best use of tax money to give children the best education.

Ms. Carney asked what educational levels were provided instructional coaches. Mr. Welch answered grades K-8. Ms. Carney expressed desire to see additional attention paid to the high school.

Mr. Preston opened the floor to public comment.

Ms. Stevens spoke as a member of the public as a mother of students at the Avery school. She requested a look be taken at class sizes and staffing levels at the Avery school.

Mr. Gallagher spoke as a father of students at the Avery school. He stated that he hopes to see more funding be allocated to the Avery school.

There was no further public comment.

The committee moved to discussion of Article 18: relating to updating the long term facilities master plan for the Dedham public schools. This is sponsored by the school committee and the school rehabilitation and maintenance committee. The assessment is planned by an outside group to evaluate potential use for unused school buildings. Included in this funding are a minimum of 3 community meetings to gather feedback from the public.

Mr. Preston asked if there was a dollar request. Mr. Roberts answered $125,000.

Mr. Bilafer clarified that we are currently working with a master plan originally created in 2001, last updated in 2013 around the ECEC project. He explained that the Capen building’s fate is unknown, and they want to get a better idea of what they want to do about it. They are at the most difficult phase of their 25-year plan, and want to make sure they look at it closely and get community input.

Mr. Welch added that the town subsidized a facilities assessment survey around a year ago that generated comprehensive professional reports, meaning they do not have to start from zero on this project. This work is estimated to take 6 months after it is funded, so he agreed it should be done soon.

Mr. Lindemann asked what the baseline assumptions and questions of this study are. Mr. Bilafer explained that he thinks they need to gather broad data because we have stuck closely to the 25-year schools master plan so far, but he is not certain they can keep doing things the same way.

Mr. Preston asked how broad they expected the study to be. Mr. Bilafer answered that they are focusing on the question of what needs replacing and when.

Mr. Heffernan asked what the facilities assessment survey said about Capen, and if there was an indication that it could be renovated. Ms. Briggs stated that they want to get this review done as soon as possible to see if it makes sense to attempt to utilize the Capen building. Mr. Heffernan asked if the evaluations performed by the MSBA were enough to decide which school needed renovations next. Ms. Briggs answered that such major decisions need to be done with the input of the entire town and adedicated study.

Ms. Carney asked if the MSBA has guidelines for how high capacity a building it will support. Mr. Roberts answered that the MSBA evaluates relative to the community size.

Ms. Briggs pointed out that we are quickly reaching a point in Dedham where there is not much land left for the building of new schools, particularly of the size that the MSBA requires.

Ms. Fay asked why this wasn’t a capital expenditure. Ms. Terkelsen answered that the timing and preparation required for this project are more in line with it being a separate article.

Mr. Bilafer stated that SBRC studies are always put through as a separate article.

The committee moved to discussion of Article 16, relating to ECEC traffic mitigation.

Mr. Roberts explained that this article is part of a condition that was included in the planning board’s approval for the ECEC project listed under a certificate of action. They have iterated through several proposals and designs to this point, and the planning board has voted unanimously to approve the presented design.

Mr. Bradford of Knight, Bagge, and Anderson, took the floor to explain the design. The committee was handed a map of the proposed design. One of the goals of the design is to calm speed coming from the area of the 128 overpass. There are 5 measures being put in place to this effect

* A sign indicating a school ahead
* A speedometer/posted speed sign in both directions
* A lane narrowing
* A center-road vertical barrier of planted islands
* Stamped Pavement at the end of the planted islands

To accommodate traffic, there will be a left-turn lane such that those waiting to turn into the school do not block traffic.

Mr. Bradford presented technical drawings of the proposed traffic calming area.

Mr. Bradford explained that traffic studies undertaken at the area found that this is not a well-travelled roadway for pedestrians. The average speed was close to 50 miles per hour, and the goal is to reduce this speed to 35 miles an hour.

Mr. Preston asked if this proposal would change the dimensions of the shoulder. Mr. Bradford answered yes, the shoulder will increase out to about 5 feet.

Mr. Roberts explained that the landscaping has been approved by the department of public works, and that outreach to the abutters has been a major focus of this project. The final design has proven to be popular with the neighborhood. He further clarified that the design team has worked closely with the department of transportation because DOT roadways are very close to this area. They are in support of this project.

Mr. Heffernan asked why there was a second, 100 foot island. Mr. Bradford explains that this longer pathway achieves a tunneling effect that can more effectively meet their traffic calming goals.

Mr. Lindemann raised concerns about making a left turn out of this area. He also suggested that there could be issues with school buses entering the area.

Ms. Briggs explained that school buses will only be coming in from one direction, which will eliminate some of the concerns that were raised. She further clarified that this site has been a high-traffic school area in the past, and that was prior to the new plans they have put into place.

Mr. Preston asked what the estimated cost was. Mr. Roberts answered $563,000. Mr. Preston asked if there was a breakdown between safety driven and aesthetic driven costs. Mr. Bilafer answered that he would not qualify any of it as purely aesthetic. For example, the trees serve a very important purpose as part of the tunneling effect.

Mr. Bilafer further explained that putting this off could result in it not being ready in time for the opening of the school, and incur additional costs by forcing them to switch to a new contractor. He explained that the development is contingent on having traffic calming measures, as per the planning board.

The committee moved to discussion of Article 26, relating to the effect of military service on salary, seniority, and leave allowances of public employees.

This article proposed giving full paid military leave for up to 34 days a state fiscal year for military reserve members who are public employees, or 17 days for a federal fiscal year. This section allows them to not lost seniority or accrued leave while using this leave. Mr. Macdonald offered to a provide data on what the financial cost of this would be.

Mr. Lindemann asked if this would make us equivalent to the state in our treatment of public employees who are military members. Mr. Macdonald answered yes. Mr. Lindemann asked what surrounding towns do. Mr. Macdonald did not have that information available.

Ms. Carney asked what our public contracts offer employees who are on jury duty. Mr. Macdonald did not have that information available. Mr. Preston explained that the most standard allowance grants employees their regular pay less the allotment for Jury Duty.

Ms. Fae reiterated point from Mr. MacDonald’s statement that she found troubling; reserve members were leaving the reserve because being called up by the military would result in financial trouble for them. Mr. MacDonald confirmed.

The committee thanked Mr. Macdonald for their time.

Ms. Emery Butler motioned to adjourn, Mr. Lindemann seconded, it was voted 8-0.

Meeting adjourned at 10:01.