



TOWN OF ADAMS SELECT BOARD AND FINANCE COMMITTEE JOINT MEETING MINUTES

THURSDAY, March 26, 2015 – 6:00 PM

HOOSAC VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL, 125 SAVOY ROAD, CHESHIRE, MA 01225

On the above date the Board of Selectmen and the Finance Committee held a joint meeting with the Adams Cheshire Regional School District School Committee (ACRSD) at the Hoosac Valley High School in Cheshire, MA at 6:00 p.m.

Chairman Arthur Harrington presided the Select Board Meeting. Present were **Members John Duval, Joseph Nowak, Jeffrey Snoonian,** and **Vice Chairman Richard Blanchard.** Also in attendance was **Town Administrator Tony Mazzucco.** Town Counsel Ed St. John III was absent.

Chairman Tim Burdick presided the Finance Committee Meeting. Present were members **Craig Corrigan, Paul Demastrie, Joan Smigel, Charlie Foster, Amy Giroux, Sandy Kleiner, David Allen, Leon Parrott, Brian Johnson, Matt Pitoniak, Rachel Tomkowicz,** and **Fred Hobart.** Absent were John Lawson and Greg Tremblay.

The Adams Cheshire Regional School District School Committee called their meeting to order at 6:05 pm

The Town of Adams Select Board Meeting was called to order at 6:05 p.m.

The Town of Adams Finance Committee Meeting was called to order at 6:05 p.m.

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Adams Cheshire Regional School District Budget Review and Discussion

Address by Superintendent Gordon

Adams Cheshire Regional School District Superintendent Kristen Gordon gave an overview of the budget request for FY2016. She advised the administrative team added 3 positons, and are in a deficit of \$1.1 Million after a level service budget. She advised she approached the audit and budget committee to make cuts, so the budget was presented without personnel cuts. She noted that she has been working with Town Administrators from Adams and Cheshire, as well as the School Committee on the budget. Superintendent Gordon said the budget being presented was more than the Town of Adams could put forward for funding. She emphasized that her role is to let the community know where the budget stands, and that everyone is working together to problem solve, so there are no sides of this issue. She recognized that many people feel very passionate about the possible loss of 25 to 28 positions in the district. The District is looking at options like restructuring, having a 4 day school week, or combining and closing the elementary school. Over 50% of the students served by ACRSD are low income. Superintendent Gordon said she felt the level of student worth is determined by the MCAS test. She thanked the ACRSD staff for compromising to make this work.

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Budget Statistics and Challenges

School Committee Vice-Chair Diane Rodowicz advised the expenditure per pupil is \$12,990, which is lower than the state average and over \$3,000 lower than the county average. This is 11% below the state average for what is spent per pupil. She advised the schools have a higher overhead cost here than in the eastern part of the state.

School employees are contributing to help by changing their Health Care PPO and POS funding to 40%. She noted there are transportation shortfalls as a district, being \$.56 per dollar and the state did not live up to its promise of 100% transportation reimbursement funding. She noted the state trends are not working for this community.

Proposition 2 ½ Override

Town Administrator Mazzucco explained the process of Proposition 2 ½ Override to give full understanding to the community. In Massachusetts, Proposition 2 ½ is a state option and permanently adds to the tax base. If it is done it stays permanently on the tax rolls. Revenues will never match the expenses the rate the community is going, and over the next 6 years the Town of Adams will have to cut almost 30% of its staff to make the budget balance. The 4% that was allocated by the Town of Adams is barely sustainable, and somehow a way has to be found to afford the schools in the District. It is one community, with both a School Budget and a Town Budget. In this budget year, the Town had to close a half million dollar gap in the budget but never considered changing the 4% for the school district. There are not enough resources to sustain what the community needs.

Budget Increases

Audience members said the School Budget represents a decrease of \$370,000 from the preliminary budget despite total operating expenses increasing by \$800,616. This included an addition of a Science Teacher at Hoosac Valley to fill the position from last year's budget cut. Special Needs students also increased costs. The School added a Curriculum and Technology Director Position at a salary of \$130,000, because few schools operate without one and this position was strongly recommended by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). A Curriculum Director would be a short term position. School Adjustment Counselors are needed for Cheshire Elementary School and C.T. Plunkett School. The Maintenance budget showed an increase of \$80,000 due to increased energy costs. The Solar Array helps with energy bills but building heating costs will increase \$23,000. Health insurance constitutes a 16% increase, and pupil transportation costs also increased, causing an Operating Budget increase of \$811,735.

Capital Budget Expenses

The Capital Budget was listed as \$1,018,709, and the Debt Exclusion was \$858,809. Capital repairs were listed as \$25,000 for Cheshire Elementary School roof work and driveway blacktop, and \$85,000 for C.T. Plunkett School roof repairs, staircases, boiler room repairs, work on the stage, removal of old carpet and replacing tile.



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Chapter 70 State Funds

Chapter 70 state funds amount to \$10,149,428, and only increased this year by \$27,960. Most other Budget areas are flat funded, so the remainder of the funding must come from the 2 towns of Cheshire and Adams. Health insurance and contracted wage increases were explained as well as outside tuition.

Total Budget Increases

The total increase in expenditures was presented as \$811,735, and the total increase requested of the towns of Cheshire and Adams was \$727,512.

C. T. Plunkett School

C.T. Plunkett Principal, Michelle Colvin emphasized the importance of the students and advocating together for what the children need in the schools and community. She noted that if the School requested budget doesn't pass, many skilled and needed hands will go away and students will not receive instruction, causing larger classes of 23 to 25 students. The Bullying Program would no longer be funded. She gave examples of how the Schools have over the years adopted a practice of doing more with less, and how most teachers wear many hats. She explained that Senator Downing visited the school and was disheartened at the lack of technology available. She said there are only 24 iPads that teachers have to sign up for and share, and only 30 minutes of computer instruction per week for students. There are no foreign language or music teachers, and the schools are considering a possible closing of a library.

Cheshire Elementary School

Cheshire Elementary School Principal, Peter Bachli addressed the group. He explained that although there are declining enrollments, the cost is rapidly increasing due to unfunded mandates by Federal and State Governments, as well as the Department of Education. He noted the dedication and passion with which staff does their job. He likened the financial need to "potholes", and not funding the budget is a loss of the money with which to purchase materials to fill the holes.

Hoosac Valley Middle School

Principal of Hoosac Valley Middle and High School, Jeremiah Ames spoke to the Boards and the audience and noted the School has already lost a Librarian, Math Teacher and Science Teacher. This year they may lose Social Studies, English, and Special Education Teachers. There is a need to find a way to do without 2 Middle School Teachers, 8 Para-Professionals, and 2 Support Staff. In the absence of increased funding the district will have to fill budget gap with further cuts and have larger classes by combining higher and lower levels. Electives are already stripped to what is absolutely necessary to meet graduation requirements, and the school committee was asked to reduce requirements because unfunded classes cannot be requirements. Music programs will be reduced and there will be no money for professional development or extracurricular student trips except through fundraising and donations. Being forced to make cuts challenges the ability to both attract and retain students and quality faculty members.



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School Committee Presentations

School Committee Member Joshua DeMarsico-Birkland gave a presentation as a resident of the Town of Adams, being a taxpayer, parent, and educator. He noted the structural deficit of the budget showing up year after year, and said the Towns cannot tax or cut their way out. He emphasized making the School System part of the long-term plan by funding the schools, since high-functioning school systems attract new families. Adams Cheshire Regional School District is a Level 3 School District, statistically performing among lowest 20th percent in the state, with C.T. Plunkett at only the 5th percentile, which he said is a symptom of a larger problem. These performance results are despite having purchased new materials, implementing a new teacher evaluation system, BSRI and MMSI initiatives at both the Elementary and Secondary levels. At the High School level, there have been both Math and Science initiatives. He noted that budget cuts are causing students' needs to not be met, which relates to lower performance. He reiterated many points made by other speakers, for emphasis. Mr. DeMarsico-Birkland said schools looking to merge will not consider merging with the Adams Cheshire Regional School District because of their Level 3 status. He noted that the Proposition 2 ½ Override is not the only option, and suggests supporting the School Budget request with a 45% guaranteed budget overall for Education through both ACRSD and McCann Schools. He noted that the Town of Cheshire is half the size of Adams and the Cheshire Town Hall is open one day a week. He suggests Adams Town Hall operate on 2 or 3 days a week and to act like a small town and not a city. He emphasized outrage at the Town continuing to do business as usual and expecting different results.

School Committee Member Ed St. John IV also gave a PowerPoint presentation on the value of education. He compared percentages among communities and said what is spent shows what the communities care about, because budgets present philosophies. He said to show the community truly values education, the way to do it is to devote a larger share of budget to education. He said in his opinion the more money shared for education the better the MCAS results would be. He said the ACRSD is at the MCAS bottom 10% and the community is spending under 10% on education. He quoted the FY2014 approved budget as spending 37% on education, which is an equal percentage for the FY2016 Budget. He compared local towns and what they spend on education comparatively. He noted those who give a larger percentage of their budget to the schools are testing at a Level 1 or Level 2 comparatively. He suggested that if Adams devoted 37.5% of the budget it would create a difference of over \$4 Million, and will provide district-wide curriculum alignment by hiring a new Curriculum Director and bring the schools back up to proper staffing. He said by creating a 40% budget percentage for the schools they would have a better chance of becoming Level 1 or Level 2 schools. In the Commonwealth, only 26 communities spend less than Adams on their schools, and 326 spend more.

School Committee Members, Select Board, and Finance Committee were given the opportunity to ask questions or make comments.



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Adams Select Board Member Joseph Nowak addressed the Boards and audience. He noted he spends a significant amount of time substituting at Hoosac Valley, McCann, Cheshire Elementary and CT Plunkett Schools and is proud of the teachers there. He gave his opinion that when families nurture children they do better. He said he has observed that para-professionals are more than tutors, and students speak with them about home situations. He expressed pride in the commitment of teachers, who frequently purchase supplies for students out of their own pockets. He also pointed out that some students do well and others don't want to learn or don't have the capacity to learn and money can only do a certain amount. He said the turnover of students causes disruption in the classroom with repetition of work and loss of attention span. He also noted that Hoosac Valley has a lot of technology that isn't functioning properly in classes and needs correction. He advised that making comparisons of other communities can be misleading because numbers can be misrepresented, and he is not convinced that throwing money at schools is the answer. He clarified that there is not one person on the Select Board that doesn't believe in education and this is a difficult process for both teachers and also the community because education is key for success, but the Board has to make conscientious fiscal decisions.

Audience members addressed the Boards with their concerns and comments about the budget.

Public Questions and Answers

Cutting Services

Though the schools are currently the lowest per pupil expenditure in the county, the year isn't finished. A question was posed about where it was suggested the Town cut services.

Superintendent Gordon responded that the Schools don't tell the town how to run their community and town doesn't tell school how to run theirs. She noted the schools would have \$550,000 in staff cuts, so she met with the Adams Town Administrator, Select Board Chairman and Finance Committee Chairman to discuss it, and they are doing all they felt they could truly do.

School Committee Vice-Chair Diane Rodowicz said it is time to make different choices for the budget, and is asking the Town to fund what the state isn't funding. She said these are decisions that the community has to make and there will be an impact from the cuts that are made. She admitted this puts community members and tax payers in an uncomfortable spot and though these are difficult times she asks the Town to step up as leaders to make the best decisions possible.

Teacher Salaries, MCAS Scores

An Adams resident noted that the Teacher salaries are 5th from the top and that more money was put into a local school district but it did not result in better performance. He suggested accountability and to look at the MCAS scores to see why BART and McCann are doing better. A recommendation was made to have High School Seniors report back whether they felt prepared when they were a freshman in college. If the schools are not preparing students properly, then need to prepare them better.



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Superintendent Gordon said scores from 10th grade MCAS students since kindergarten that were not transitioning in and out of the district are very good. She said the low MCAS scores are not because of the staff and funding would be used to do targeted support. She also noted the Teacher salaries are an average.

Finance Committee comments included explaining that the ACRSD performance should not be compared with McCann and BART schools because those schools choose their students, where ACRSD takes all students.

Work Study Program

An audience member suggested utilizing the children in a work study program to develop character, encourage the value of work and help students meet challenges they are going to face as residents of this community by having students fill the potholes, build sidewalks and handle problems to give them the survivalist mentality. He said his example was given to let everyone know how foolish they look when they don't provide for the students. The choice to do well or not on the MCAS is the student's, and an example of the message they are getting from the community if they don't value education.

Improvement Plan

The State runs District Assistance with a data team, and 8 Teachers from Hoosac Valley High School took over 2 days' to find patterns and create plans for improvement. Information from that meeting produced intervention strategies to be developed for Math. Volunteer faculty have set up a 9 week program to assist 11th and 12th grade students as well.

Consolidation Issues

An Adams resident pointed out consolidation was being discussed as far back as 10 years ago with the decline in population showing a trend. This issue leaves no room for factions, and it is not plausible to close a school to fit all of the students in C.T. Plunkett, as well as there being traffic and parking issues there.

Student Readiness

One citizen said the textbooks have not changed in 50 years, and Massachusetts has the highest education level in the country, but cannot compete globally. ACRSD kids are being taught by Rosetta Stone instead of a teacher.

Superintendent Gordon said there is an issue with a high majority of kids going into college already needing remedial math and reading. This is the reason the Technical Coordinator was put in the budget. New testing from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) may take over MCAS and would create an economic divide because it is a computerized test. The ACRSD kids with the least technology will be on the bottom of the list. ACRSD would only be offered 2 years of paper tests before they must be computerized, and the scores will be economically ordered.



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Letters and Emails to Delegation

Senator Downing and Representative Cariddi are receiving letters and emails, and the rule of thumb is if they get 20 or more it becomes a priority.

Special Needs

Behavior Rooms for students with significant behavior and emotional disorders, as well as home trauma and chemical issues, are running with 10 to 12 kids. There is more need, and a Special Needs Teacher may be cut, yet an additional one is needed now. The school needs a Life Skills Program and cannot service what they need currently. It was said that if the SPED Teacher is cut and the Para-Professionals are reduced the crime rate will go up and the budget will need to be adjusted to pay for more police officers.

A parent of a deaf child that requires special services expressed concern that the support that has been received so far would be gone as her child goes into Hoosac Valley High School next year, and she was debating whether to put her child somewhere else. Her child requires an interpreter and teacher of the deaf, which is expensive.

Superintendent Gordon advised that students that have an IEP are mandated, so it would not be cut and if the student needs an interpreter, he will get an interpreter.

Technology Funding

Town Administrator Mazzucco advised the Town had made the decision to purchase one less police cruiser this year, and could purchase chrome books, low cost mini computers, if Cheshire would match it.

Next Steps

The School Committee will meet on March 31st at Hoosac Valley High School to vote on the School Budget. If approved by the School Committee, Town Meetings are not until May and June and the School would have contract obligations for handing out pink slips prior to then, when the final answer would come. 28 to 34 pink slips would be handed out, based on certifications.

The Finance Committee cannot vote on the ACRSD Budget until after the School Committee votes. They will act on the Select Board recommendations, and the Select Board may reopen the budget. The Select Board receives a recommendation from the Town Administrator and votes whether to approve the recommendation to go forward to the Finance Committee, who then votes a recommendation on the budget.

The Adams Select Board had the scheduled date for the vote prior to the delayed ACRSD Budget proposal in part due to delayed State funding reports. Funding the request may not be possible, but it is important for the Select Board to know what the School Committee is looking for.



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There is a small amount of revenue available for the next couple years so to meet the amount requested a Proposition 2 ½ Override would be a necessity. If the whole budget was approved in an Override, the tax rate would go up \$1.10 for Cheshire and \$1.50 for Adams. If the Override did not pass, the recommended Budget presented would then go forward. If the Town could not pass a budget at all the State would take over.

ADJOURNMENTS

The School Committee adjourned their meeting at 9:00 p.m.

Finance Committee Adjournment

Motion made to adjourn by Member Allen

Second by Member Giroux

Unanimous vote

Motion passed

The Finance Committee Meeting adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

Leon Parrott, Member

Craig Corrigan, Member

Paul Demastrie, Member

Fred Hobart, Member

David Allen, Member

Charles Foster, Member

Amy Giroux, Member

Sandra Kleiner, Member

Joan Smigel, Member

Brian Johnson, Member

Greg Tremblay, Member

Matthew Pitoniak, Member

Rachel Tomkowicz, Member

John Lawson, Member

Timothy Burdick, Chairman



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Select Board Meeting Adjournment

Motion made to adjourn by Vice Chairman Blanchard

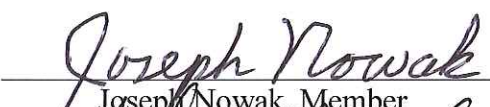
Second by Member Duval

Unanimous vote

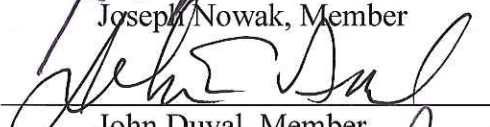
Motion passed

The Select Board Meeting adjourned at 9:00 pm


Respectfully Submitted by Deborah J. Dunlap,
Recording Secretary.



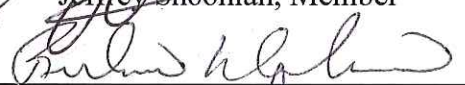
Joseph Nowak, Member



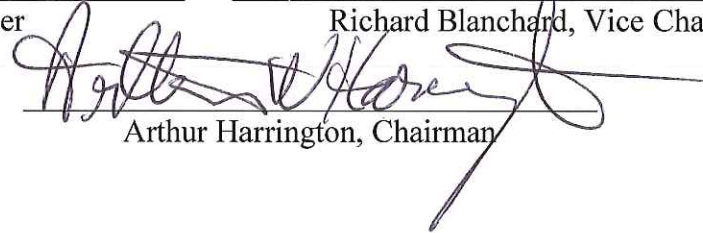
John Duval, Member



Jeffrey Snoonian, Member



Richard Blanchard, Vice Chairman



Arthur Harrington, Chairman