

Joint Selectboard Meeting
April 18, 2013
Deerfield Town Hall
8 Conway Street, S. Deerfield

The meeting was called to order at 6:30 pm with Selectboard members representing Deerfield, Conway, Whately, and Sunderland present. Also present were members of Frontier Regional School Committee and Finance Committees from some towns. (A list of attendees is attached.)

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the situation the towns find themselves facing with school costs rising in spite of declining enrollments, and the impact on the balance of town budgets. In most towns the schools take up as much as 70% of the entire budget. Being limited to 2.5% increases, little or no new growth, and no other sources of revenue, towns are struggling to maintain other required services. The point was made that even with no increase in services, expenses go up because of the cost of people (medical costs, etc.). No one wants to pit the towns against the schools.

The Frontier budget request for the coming year was a surprise to member towns, coming as it did at the eleventh hour. Some increase is anticipated, but the size of the proposed increase got everyone's attention. The representatives of Frontier were prepared to defend their request, and felt there had been plenty of opportunity for towns to participate in the process, but it was acknowledged that the earlier the school and towns can sit down to consider anticipated costs, the better. Some thought a good time to begin discussing school budgets would be during the summer.

It was pointed out that the charter for Frontier requires that the town representatives to the school committee hold budget hearings in their communities each year; this has not been happening. The suggestion was made that the formula itself may be broken; there shouldn't be the large swings from year to year.

Representatives of Frontier discussed the school's position. In recognition of the economic conditions five positions were cut last year. To reduce the FY'14 budget by \$250,000 five more positions would have to be cut. An option could be to eliminate all sports programs. A warning that reductions in programs would endanger the \$600,000 that comes from school-of-choice students – the bright spot in the financial picture.

One of the difficulties facing the schools is the cost of out-of-district students. These special needs students are in ungraded programs and may remain in the program until age 22. It is difficult for the schools to predict how many of these students it will have. Medical science is remarkable in that babies that once would not have survived now do, usually with special accommodations being required for their education.

An explanation of the process for creating an IEP (Individual Educational Plan) was presented with the notation that once in place it is a legally binding contract. Every effort is made to meet the needs in-house. For those who must be enrolled in programs located outside of the district, if at all possible the placement is in day programs which can range from \$30,000 to \$40,000 per student. Residential placements can cost as much as \$300,000. The school has little choice about providing the services and readily admits the squeeze it creates for the balance of the student body .

Recognition was made that the budget will normally increase by 2.5 to 3% per year. This year's increase is too much for the towns to manage. The suggestion was made that if substantial reductions in the budget cannot be identified and made prior to Annual Town Meetings, the Frontier budget could be voted down and brought back at a special town meeting at a later time.

In conclusion a couple of thoughts : The perception that school budgets can't be changed needs to be changed. At some point the cost of education needs to be recognized. Hopefully, better communication between the schools and the towns will go a long way toward easing the "pain."

Respectfully submitted,
Priscilla Phelps