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Advisory Board
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February 24, 2014

Attending: Ron Mikol, Harold Simmons, Christine Muir, Kevin Welch, Joe Dean
Absent: Dana Metzler

Also attending: Superintendent Anthony Bent, School Committee Chair Alison Manugian, School Committee Representative Lou DeLoureiro, Business & Finance Manager Jared Stanton, Incoming Superintendent Kristin Rodriguez

Meeting opened at 7:05 p.m.

Tonight's meeting focused on the Groton Dunstable Regional School District budget request for FY2015. Jared distributed papers showing Special Education Spending, Circuit Breaker revenue, and the assessment breakdown for Dunstable and Groton.

Chapter 70 currently includes a \$63,000 increase over last year but Jared hasn't included this in the budget as it may still change. His revenue forecasts do not include early learning tuition (Boutwell) or school choice tuitions; the latter is taken off health insurance costs directly.

Ron asked if there was any way to project future budgets, something that Groton FinCom member Jay Prager first requested in 2010. Dr. Bent replied that funding shortfalls are occurring throughout the state of Massachusetts and he doesn't see how schools can continue to operate within only 2.5% annual budget increases.

Ron is concerned about the school district having the right management plan, resources and skill sets to project future costs. Jared replied that one of the two audits currently underway is to evaluate the controls in place, which should give all of us greater confidence in the process.

Joe asked where the additional funds would come from to meet greater financial demands, and incoming Supt. Rodriguez suggested that she had heard Dunstable could hold off on conducting the Public Safety building feasibility study or not replace the police officer who is leaving. Fire Chief Brian Rich later mentioned that Dunstable residents pay just \$0.35 per day for fire protection services, so there isn't any room to cut.

Kevin suggested that the district administration look to the vocational schools as models for budgeting and projecting future costs. Dr. Bent replied that the vocational schools' per pupil expenditures are higher than public schools, and that managing one school is less complex than managing multiple buildings. Jared added that vocational schools might not have as many expenses as one would think, and their budgets usually draw from multiple towns.

Christine asked if there was a detailed revenue sheet available, since Jared had mentioned that some revenue was reflected in the decrease of certain line items. Jared said yes. Christine also asked how fees from organizations like Rec/Travel basketball were accounted for. Jared said any fees collected by Community Education programs went through their revolving fund, but CE does pay rent to use the Peter Twomey Youth Center (PTYC).

Dr. Bent emphasized some highlights of the district's spending, including the fact that Athletics accounts for less than 1% of the total budget; Food Services runs in the black, with only a portion of the employee health insurance costs paid out of the general fund; 15 FTEs would be reduced in FY14 and FY15; curriculum leadership spending is far less than the state average.

A lengthy and somewhat heated conversation took place on the topic of Special Education and its costs. Incoming Supt. Rodriguez said that part of the solution is more in-district support, which GDRSD has been working on for several years. In response to Kevin's question about the high number (351) of kids in Special Education programs, Rodriguez said that it's because those kids aren't treated separately in state hospitals and isolated anymore. Kevin argued that a \$36 million budget isn't stingy but that SPED costs needed to be brought under control.

The School Committee and Administration concluded with the revelation that the E&D (excess & deficiency) fund balance is currently about \$600,000, and they are hoping to keep \$350,000 at the end of the current year. Christine noted that the Educational Contingency line item, which was increased by \$450,000 over FY14, was a tough pill to swallow. She felt that more than half of that was in there to replenish the E&D fund and didn't think it was wise to put that much in so quickly. She & Ron agreed that the account might have to be rebuilt more slowly.

After the GDRSD representatives left, the Advisory Board agreed that we should consider waiting to hire a new police officer until the school budget is settled. Selectman Danny Devlin was present, then, and the board also advised him to consider not funding the two feasibility studies (River Rd and Public Safety building).

Meeting adjourned at 9:10 p.m.

Bob J. Mitchell
Christine Min
Harold G. Smith
Ken Wells
Paul D. Ryan