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Advisory Board
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Present:

Walter Alterisio, Ken Leva, Danny Devlin, from the Board of Selectmen;
Dana Metzler, Amie Stevens, Christine Muir, Harold Simmons, from the Advisory Board;
Alison Manugian, Stephanie Cronin, Leslie Lathrop, Jeff Kubick, Jennifer McKenzie, from the
GDRSD School Committee;
GDRSD Superintendent Kristan Rodriguez
GDRSD Business Manager Jared Stanton
Several members of the public, including Fire Chief Brian Rich, Joan Simmons, Marlana
Gilbert and others

Absent: Pam Crocker and Ron Mikol, from Advisory Board; Town Administrator Tracey Hutton

Meeting opened at 7:02 p.m.

Dr. Rodriguez began with a presentation of the Overview and Crosswalk documents related to the Needs Assessment recently completed by the district. The full report is over 130 pages; tonight's documents provide a summary in two different formats. Dr. Rodriguez identified and discussed the five key findings produced by the needs assessment. She noted that the "achievement gap" we are experiencing is not a statewide trend but is specific to our district. Although the gap exists in other districts, it is not growing like it is in G-D. She also noted that the district has been cited by the state for not having enough nurses for the number of students.

D. Metzler asked if the five key findings were listed in a particular order of priority. They are not, according to Dr. Rodriguez, but within each of the areas, the specific needs and steps are prioritized.

J. Kubick then asked A. Manugian, chair of the School Committee's Budget & Finance Committee, to provide some fiscal data. She made three points: Prop 2 ½ is constraining everyone throughout the state; there has been a dramatic change in the state funding for communities identified as "wealthier" (funding for schools has decreased from 49% in 2000 to 36% in 2015); many costs within budgets are growing at more than 2.5% annually (insurance costs grow almost 8%; salaries grow about 3%).

J. Kubick provided a hand-out with four options for the district and two towns to move forward with budgeting based on needs assessment. The options are as follows: do nothing to change the way the budget and assessment process works; include a one-time increase in town assessments to cover all costs of needs assessment analysis as well as anticipated technology and capital costs; increase towns' assessments once to cover just the items in the needs assessment and provide a separate increase for capital and technology costs when those are more defined; phase in assessment increases more gradually and more frequently.

D. Metzler asked if there were any specific numbers associated with these options. The School Committee was reluctant to offer specifics but they did provide some broad estimates: \$1 million increases annually to maintain same level of services and add nothing to address needs assessment; five to seven million dollars to address all needs assessment, capital and technology in a single year; three to four million dollars to address just the needs assessment steps. No estimates were offered for the fourth option of gradual increases over multiple years. (Note that these ranges are for the entire district, not one town.)

D. Metzler then presented a document with additional information on Dunstable's budget situation since 2001. Our municipal insurance costs have increased roughly 224% since 2001; other department budgets have grown in smaller amounts, with the exception of the Fire Department, which has seen more growth and expansion of services in that time frame, including the addition of our first full-time fire chief. Since 2001, Dunstable's contribution to GDRSD has grown 116.84%, which is 50% more than it would have been if we had only increased the budget by 2.5% every year.

In the discussion that followed, W. Alterisio noted that education has changed significantly since many residents attended school. He recommended that the biggest challenge to winning town support of an increased school budget is educating the general public on how the school environment and needs have changed since residents were students. K. Leva suggested that a five-year plan might be helpful. L. Lathrop said that the needs assessment details only "catch up" to where district wants to be today, but doesn't address future vision for district.

Discussion continued around the issue of being labeled a "Level 2" district. Dr. Rodriguez stated that a district is rated at the level of its lowest-performing school. In our case, the middle school is rated Level 2 but she noted that we are currently "held harmless" for performance in other schools because we made the transition to the PARCC testing. If we had not done that, both elementary schools would also be labelled Level 2.

W. Alterisio advocated for pushing back on the state to meet its commitments and obligations to regional school districts. Dr. Rodriguez said that she and others in administration, teachers and parents submitted letters requesting that the state review and reconsider the foundation budget formula. The Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools (MARS) is also challenging recent 9C cuts made by Governor Baker, on the premise that the cuts disproportionately affect regional districts. A. Manugian noted that increasing revenue through an override keeps the funds closer to home and under our own control, reducing our need to push back on the state and our dependence on state aid.

The meeting ended with general agreement to look at a single-year increase in town assessments, not including funding for technology and capital projects, as those numbers won't be finalized until May.

All boards adjourned at 8:30 p.m.

