

Minutes: Selectmen's Meeting: Monday, March 24, 2014

Present: Kenneth J. Leva, Clerk and Walter F. Alterisio, Procurement Officer and Member; Chairman Daniel F. Devlin absent

The meeting was called to order at 7:00pm with quorum present. Minutes of 3/18 held for a full board. Selectman Alterisio noted some changes he'd like made to the minutes - debt assessment is \$416K and proposed increase in certified budget - reflecting about 11% increase. Was quoted at a meeting that if the town wished to move the 2 ½% we'd be allowed to increase \$157K with school budget asking for \$116K of the \$157K. Selectman Alterisio will provide amendments for 3/18 minutes to the secretary for acceptance at next meeting.

Now that we know the number we're looking at for the district and know the number we're trying to achieve can look to scrub down some of the numbers in the town budget. Selectman Alterisio indicated at the top end individual departments submitted budgets before we knew the size of the issue with the school district budget. Now that we know what the number is, can begin to scrub down the town's department budget for places to come up with some funding. As it happens to fund basically all the salaries & wages on the town side, along with the Town Administrator have come up with an increase of over \$25K - looking at level funding and maintain services as they are now. His suggestion is to highlight the numbers and look for confirmation from the department heads that we're not crippling their departments. Selectman Alterisio continued to review the numbers he's come up with and explain how he'd come up with these projections advising there's still some room but have to hedge on maintaining services in effect. Are some line items that based on the performance, issue is not sure that there are some things the departments have planned that they're not aware of. Same thing with fire & safety, inspectors, town administrative services, dog officer, basically are some ups and downs, amount allocated for town administrator at special town meeting, since haven't appointed a town administrator are asking all to defer whatever they can. Selectman Alterisio suggested getting together with both Chief Downes and Chief Rich - with those two departments are talking about \$1M - where we can get some real savings. He noted he would also suspect that the Road Commission will be looking at their budget at well for any place there may be room. He asked Ken to work with the Chief. Not sure what to do with the numbers related to the radio dispatch - Selectman Alterisio initially thought it was picking up the fire, but if double accounting, one of them comes out. He further advised there were some line items that Selectman Alterisio didn't quite understand. The

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whole inspector area had some discussion on taking a look at a pay as you go as opposed to stipend based on previous year's permits...may be some transition but don't know what the numbers are. Selectman Alterisio referred to previous discussions with Electrical Inspector relative to callouts for emergency service repairs inspection. For everyone, including what is put out in terms of minutes etc., understand we are looking for a town administrator, not a town manager as charter prohibits us from bringing on a town manager. Element of Town Manager is much more influential and autonomous than a Town Administrator.

He presented the budget analysis and advised secretary that her input will be required in a lot of items as deals more with day to day for a number of the items.

The board reviewed and signed the common victualler's license for Dunkin Donuts @238 Pleasant Street.

Selectman Alterisio referenced article needed for acceptance of MGL relative to wage coverage during military service, as included in the police contract.

Selectman Alterisio inquired whether notice of the vote had been sent to GDRSD School Committee and secretary advised that town counsel had indicated it wasn't applicable in this situation, advising town's acceptance is at Town Meeting. The board discussed the receipt of the vote on the school budget adopted, noting with some quick numbers basically say the operating and debt assessment, etc. reflects a 10.9% increase over last year – Selectman Alterisio reflected on the numbers he's come up with relative to budget increases, etc. over the past few years. He indicated it was quoted for the whole town the town could increase its budget by 157K and if were to increase to meet the school's budget it would be \$119K. As minutes reflect his understanding was that the town has a certain amount of days to respond, will follow up on the technicality of no response but can expect from Dunstable's side that can't meet the assessment – so we must disapprove the budget. Can't do the line items to meet the GDRSD budget amount – would expect that the district could recertify their budget with the only option being either maintaining the amount previously certified or lowering the number. Dunstable is working diligently to see how they might reduce the numbers of the municipal side and Selectman Alterisio's proposal is with the departments they have available police, fire, different municipal departments, believe can level fund...are very hopeful that the department heads will be

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agreeable. Question is, can then come to the school district with a number that's achievable on both sides. Selectman Alterisio advised that may be a moot point since the vote wasn't reported as requested based on legal counsel. Selectman Alterisio further reported he was at meeting of APEC and noted Groton has the resources to be able to work to accommodate and meet the assessment.

An individual in the audience questioned if the budget is lean, why don't we meet 2½ - last year the schools increase was 1.9% - we went up 1.5% - if we have to we'll go to the limit, but try to keep the costs down. Levy limit from last year to this year would be \$157K increase - max 2 ½ %. GDRSD School Committee Member Jim Frey asked whether there was extra taxing capacity, staying under 2.5%. The board noted the Advisory Board is working with those numbers as they're more familiar with the variables but all are working together to come up with whatever options are available. Negotiations are between Selectmen in the Town of Dunstable, the Town of Groton and the School district but rely heavily on the support of the Advisory Board. GDRSD realizes the work that's required and the Town of Groton has a means to meet the assessment - the School Committee will work to meet the needs of not only the school but the town's. Selectman Alterisio referenced the situation as a three legged stool - the Town of Dunstable as one leg, Town of Groton another and GDRSD the last. Can understand from some of the discussions on the proposed budget and he's asking the School District to appreciate the position we're in - because Dunstable is so tight in terms of the amount that it has from the real estate taxes and excise tax that's pretty lean whereas Groton has a resource stream that's outside with businesses, etc. One of the things that was put out in a notice, as recent as March 5th, stating if the budget fails, consequence is the closing of Swallow Union School - doesn't bode well. Discussion continued on the process and options that must be investigated when the district looks at how to stay within the budget. Jim Frey advised in reality, GDRSD is pushing against the numbers and have to look at every option for saving money in the budget.

Discussion continued on the process and the advantages of working together to meet the needs of the educational system and funding requirements. Selectman Alterisio noted that he was somewhat concerned with reports that our school system was lacking - and statements that don't know what the impact is. Jim Frey advised have seen reports on instructional level have seen test scores go down and have seen impact, any further changes will have an impact. Kids in the High School now are doing great, but they went thru elementary

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school come time ago...will still have a good product but have a concern with reducing their product Discussion continued on protecting the quality of the instructional process, etc. Apex meeting – she noted there are a number of opinions – where do the residents get to make their concerns known – they don't want more cuts to be made to the school – wants to bring it to the public for their decisions. Walter noted the dialogue comes from discussions with town boards and school committee and final decision at the ballot box. What the BOS are responsible is not for the integrity of the school district alone, but all the other departments of the town – would hate to have the legacy of the town to be great school system but I wouldn't want to live there. Ken noted have to look at realistically, protecting the integrity of the town in all areas – including police, roads, etc. Have steps that have to take, not obvious to all residents, will be looking at a 2 ½ override in order to meet the budget increase as dunstable doesn't have the resource to come up with 390K. Residents need to understand, once you pass 2 ½ it's there forever and moving forward must continue to address. Jim Frey advised there are some changes that have come forward that are favorable – an additional 60K in Chapter 70 had been identified; also a favorable on their health care costs – those kinds of things can be brought back.

Selectman Alterisio advised on the town's side asked for the deferring of any spending back in January so now will look at those deferrals as possible funding to meet some of the budget deficit. Jim advised the district will continue to look at options for delaying expenses and deferring action as well. Selectman Alterisio advises he's looking at working with the School District to reduce somewhat – no doubt will pass at Town Meeting but whether it will survive the ballot is another – thinks it has a much better chance of winning. Lou and Jim will go back and talk with the committee – addressing the list – any possible cuts and options continue to be researched – glad to maintain an ongoing dialogue with the towns – seems like a huge rise but what we're really doing is going back to where the budget should have been had the district not cut back in previous years – shortage now is largely caused by overrun costs for Special Education – a lot is getting the district back in position to enable proper management of the school district. Ken indicated up this point, our taxes are pretty good – we have probably the safest town in the state – full time Fire Chief, when you drive through Dunstable have safe roadways. In fairness – Dunstable has absolutely no corporate taxes to fall back on – it's all residential taxes. Mr. Frey advised in the past the district has been able to fund overruns but have now pulled in everything they can – focus now has to be on not only how to fix what happens.

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Selectman Alterisio we have to arrive at a number long before town meeting – have to get the info out and share with all the residents in this town including those that don't have any children in the system – strong community reflects on housing, costs, and value of the property. He advised he believes we're going to have to have an override – interest is in maintaining a good community relationship between the two towns.

??Sue Prescott?? asked if it will be the position of the Selectmen to voice their support at Town Meeting and note the advantages of supporting the school district for the general value of the town. She inquired why the E & D can't be increased as part of the budget so district won't have to worry in the future. Mr. Frey continued to explain how the School Committee prepares the budget, what's included, and how E & D funding etc. are accomplished – including restoration of the reserve fund, etc.

The Board noted that the funding requirements for the school etc., certainly affects the municipal side noting our highway department is made up of two people, the number of police is the minimum required to maintain 24/7 coverage. Previous we only had two officers and were dependent on state police to come in and provide coverage in an emergency, a service that is no longer available. Services are Police Department, Highway Department, both small with everything else being miniscule, including the Fire Department which is volunteer with the exception of a full time chief.

In answer to questions from the audience, Selectman Alterisio repeated the increase for Dunstable, on the school side, if take the FY2015 budget number is 11%. Mr. Frey continued to explain for those present how the budget approval process works. Selectman Alterisio advised the message BOS is asking the School District representatives to convey is that we're looking for discussion as early as possible and meeting with Fincom next week to see what they've been able to come up with from within all the town budgets; asking the School District to take a closer look as well.

Mrs. Prescott explained what APEX is and noted it's made up of individuals from both Groton and Dunstable residents as well as the school district to work toward ... APEX is largely for educating property owners of the need and better understanding of the situation and advantages and/or disadvantages of the decisions made.

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Treasurer's warrants were reviewed and signed, and meeting adjourned at 8:25PM after appropriate motion by Selectman Leva, 2nd and vote. Selectman Alterisio referenced meeting scheduled for tomorrow at 2:00PM with Madonna McKenzie re: Town Administrator position.

Respectfully submitted,



Danice N. Palumbo,
Board Secretary

