

**TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON
SELECTBOARD
JOINT MEETING
with
THE GREAT BARRINGTON FINANCE COMMITTEE
MINUTES
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2011
6:00 P.M. – FIRE STATION**

PRESENT: STEPHEN BANNON
ANDREW BLECHMAN
ALANA CHERNILA – not present
DEB PHILLIPS
SEAN STANTON
KEVIN O'DONNELL, TOWN MANAGER

FINANCE COMMITTEE: Tom Blauvelt – Chairman
Bud Atwood
Mark Lefenfeld – not present
Alice Reilly
Jim Stark

SCHOOL COMMITTEE: Stephen Bannon – Chairman
Richard Coons – Vice Chair
Deborah Kain
Carol Kuller
Chris Shelton
Dan Weston

Peter Dillon – Superintendent of Schools
Sharon Harrison

1. CALL TO ORDER

Sean Stanton called the meeting to order at 6:00 P.M.

2. INTRODUCTIONS –

All of the members of the Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee, and School Committee introduced themselves.

3. DISCUSSION WITH REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE Berkshire Hills REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT COMMITTEE RE: STRATEGY FY'13 PROPERTY TAX LEVY FOR SCHOOL AND TOWN

Peter Dillon, Superintendent of Schools, presented and spoke to his memo.

Peter said in regards to the economy, things are getting worse, not better and they are sensitive to that.

He stated that 35 positions have been cut in his time here.

Sharon Harrison said that the all programs are included in the first budget given to the School Committee before cuts are made.

Peter Dillon said that there have been significant cuts made in terms of dollars and that they are at, or close to, being able to cut nothing further.

Peter said that 75% of the budget is in staff and benefits, He added that \$50,000 is the average salary.

Peter Dillon said that it is not accurate to say that the majority of taxes are due to the school budget.

Steven Bannon said that borrowing has an effect and the school does not borrow in this manner.

Deb Phillips responded that the important piece is making or setting goals. She said that the population is going down and the budget is going up and added that there are fewer teachers and the budget is still going up. She asked what the costs are and why.

Peter Dillon replied that teachers need to be valued and said that salaries are going up and there are contracts to be honored.

He stated that things are 'very lean' in the middle and elementary school. He said that the High School has a wide variety of classes being offered. He feels that there may be room to reconsider there.

Steve Bannon added that there is the normal increase in health insurance, utilities, bus contracts, and any increase in benefits are a huge cost.

Sharon Harrison said that there used to be more grant money and now those mandatory expenses have to be included in operating budgets.

Peter Dillon said that they are working hard to get grant money and that they are being entrepreneurial.

Deb Phillips asked if there were no choice students, would expenses go down. She asked that the committee speak to the pros and cons of school choice.

Sharon Harrison responded that \$600,000 is the net effect if they did not have them in the school.

Peter Dillon said from a fiscal perspective, it makes sense to have choice students. He added that they also have tuition agreements with Richmond and Farmington River that brings \$5000 per student. He said that this number needs to be increased.

Peter Dillon said that the choice amount for non-special education students is \$5,000 while the tuition amounts range from \$5,000 to roughly \$7,200.

Deb Phillips asked what the cost is per student.

Sharon Harrison responded that it is about \$14,000.

Andrew Blechman said that he attended a Conference in the spring where Congressmen D'Aleo said that he has never heard about the issue of low pay for choice-in students and said that he is willing to talk about it via Representative Pignatelli.

Tom Blauvelt said that the challenge for all is to strike a balance. He said that the Boards have gone through all the Town revenues and next week they will go through the expenses. He said that he is confident that the school committee will do the same to increase revenue.

Peter Dillon stated that grant money is possible but not likely.

Alice Reilly said that the increase in reduced lunch participants is eye opening.

Deb Phillips said that cuts were made and the budget has gone up in spite of this. She said that this speaks to the decrease in federal grants, transportation funds, etc.

Sean Stanton asked what amount of the budget is funded by chapter 7 (not the percentage).

Sharon replied that she will get the answer for Sean. She said that they are getting less state money now.

Andrew Blechman said that the Board of Selectman is trying to think outside the box and asked if the school committee is also, and how.

Peter Dillon said that they do it all the time and that they are in collaboration among the 4 South County Districts in terms of offering joint professional development specifically for math teachers. On a county basis, they continue to use one whole day in October across 13 districts. He said by doing it together, they realized tremendous savings (approximately \$20,000).

Andrew Blechman asked if technology is one of the larger budget items.

Peter Dillon responded that transportation is really big. (Approximately \$1 million a year)

Deborah Kain added that they have to allocate a seat for every child, even if the child doesn't use it.

Jim Stark asked where the areas are that the committee says they can 'flex.'

Peter Dillon responded that it is hard to determine since they haven't gone through the budget process yet. He said that each principal will come up with their budget items and their desires in priority order. The school committee will decide on what items to go forward with.

Tom Blauvelt asked where they are with unintended consequence- item 5.

Peter Dillon replied that the building is 40 plus years old and it is starting to show its age. They are interviewing the project manager to evaluate where they are and to get recommendations on the next steps. Dick Coons added that \$100,000 - \$120,000 is being spent in repairs yearly. They make decisions about repairs and work based on the knowledge that updates are to come.

Steve Bannon said that a stabilization fund is needed and was turned down in the past, but if money was put aside, they would have the maintenance money.

Dick Coons said that this is a good idea. He suggested using a rolling enrollment (5 year) to spread across the Towns.

Deb Phillips said that she would love to hear how they would go about doing the rolling student enrollment. She also stated that the Board of Selectmen is trying not to raise the tax levy next year and she wants the school committee to keep in mind that this is their goal.

Bud Atwood asked for clarity on the document stating the number of employees.

Peter Dillon said he will look into it.

Peter Dillon said that people interpret numbers differently. He said that the 60/40 split is a formula or construct that does not reflect the totality of the situation. He said that the number that they have presented is closer to even.

Andrew Blechman said that the demographic is decreasing and asked if they are taking this into consideration.

Peter Dillon replied that a 15 year projection of enrollment shows all areas decreasing with our district as flat.

Sean Stanton replied that if they keep taxes low, the number may increase.

Peter Dillon said that he will send follow up information, a budget timeline and meeting dates.

Steve Bannon suggested that they meet again at the start of the budget process in January.

Peter Dillon said that the schools now have 'Welcome Wednesdays' in which you can go into the schools to observe. He welcomes all to come.


Deborah Kain thanked the Board members from the other Towns for coming to the meeting.

4. ADJOURNMENT

On a motion by Steve Bannon, seconded by Deb Phillips, the Board adjourned its meeting at 7:25 p.m.

On a motion by Tom Blauvelt, seconded by Alice Reilly, the Finance Committee adjourned its meeting at 7:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Cara Becker
Recording Secretary