



Town of Arlington, Massachusetts
730 Massachusetts Ave., Arlington, MA 02476
Phone: 781-316-3000

webmaster@town.arlington.ma.us

Budget Minutes 09/16/2009

Budget Subcommittee of the Arlington School Committee

Minutes for Meeting of

September 16, 2009, 5:00 p.m., School Committee Room
(Approved October 7, 2009)

Attendees

Committee Members

Present: Joseph A. Curro, Jr., Chair
Cindy Starks

Absent: Ronald Spangler

Administration Interim Superintendent Kathleen Bodie
Chief Financial Officer Diane Fisk Johnson

Others Richard Fanning, Finance Committee
Vicki Ford
Juli Brazile

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 5:00 p.m.

Public Participation

The chair invited public participation. No members of the public wished to share any matters of concern during this portion of the meeting.

Review of Minutes

On a motion of Ms. Starks, seconded by Mr. Curro, the minutes were unanimously adopted by a vote of 2-0.

Welcome to CFO Diane Fisk Johnson

The subcommittee chair welcomed Ms. Fisk Johnson to the Arlington Public Schools and to the work of the Budget Subcommittee.

Ms. Fisk Johnson acknowledged the introductions of meeting participants and spoke briefly about the Cambridge Public Schools budget process. She explained that Cambridge's budget committee is a "committee of the whole" with two co-chairs.

The CFO underscored her philosophy that it is extremely important to tell the story of the budget in terms that are understandable and accessible to the public.

Fiscal Year 2011 Budget Discussion

Ms. Brazile asked about the possibility of seeing budgeted vs. actual amounts. Dr. Bodie stated that this is available, but that it is at a very fine level of detail. She noted that former Superintendent Levenson tended to present budget information in terms of buckets (i.e., the nine budget categories defined by School Committee policy DBJ).

Mr. Curro opined that roll-ups into these broad categories might be helpful, but he also said that consideration should be given to reporting on the success of some of our newer initiatives, including the encouragement of more F-1 visa students and restrictions on custodial overtime. Ms. Starks echoed this sentiment, citing special education as an example of an area where we should understand what we actually did versus what we thought we were doing.

In further discussions about the best way to present budget information, Ms. Fisk Johnson noted that Cambridge was a community with a great thirst for detail. Meeting attendees assured her that Arlington is much the same in this regard. Mr. Curro again stressed that some of the greatest sensitivity is around new initiatives.

Dr. Bodie reported on recent conversations with the Assistant Town Manager, who suggested that we might be looking at a town-wide deficit of as much as \$4 to \$6 million. (At the upper end of this range, we could be looking at a \$3.5 million gap for the schools.)

Areas of potential savings include up to \$2.5 million from Arlington's adoption of the Group Insurance Commission health plans; approximately \$1 million from Pay As You Throw; and around \$250 thousand from the local option hotel/motel and meals taxes.

On the issue of special education, Dr. Bodie reported that we budgeted in the current fiscal year for 111 out-of-district placements, but that we have been successful in dropping this to the high 80s, in large part because of our new programs. She is working to compute the per student savings.

Dr. Bodie stressed that the Town Manager would like an early sense of where we are in budgeting for FY 2011. Mr. Curro asked about the assumptions behind the \$4 to \$6 million range for a town-wide deficit. Dr. Bodie said that the low end assumes the same level of federal stimulus funds as last year, while the high end assumes none.

Ms. Starks wondered what our deficit would be if we did nothing different. Dr. Bodie said that we could consider creating some initial scenarios based on different percentages of salary increases.

Ms. Brazile mentioned the need to demonstrate scenarios with some easily communicated examples, such as the textbook budget. Mr. Curro suggested that we might demonstrate measures like this by illustrating a normal replacement rate vs. an actual replacement rate.

Ms. Starks recommended that we start any budget discussion with an overview of the last five years, presenting the best case and the worst case.

There was further discussion around how Dr. Bodie should present budget issues at the next School Committee meeting. Part of this discussion revolved around a list of questions forwarded to the subcommittee by Ms. Brazile and Ms. Ford.

Ms. Brazile underscored the importance of explaining just what a structural deficit is. During this discussion Ms. Fisk Johnson stated that one certainty is that prices will pretty much always go up, regardless of the rate of growth of revenue.

There was further discussion of enrollment projections and space constraints, with reference to Crosby and Parmenter. Official enrollment figures should be available from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education on October 1.

Budget Timeline

There was extensive discussion of the draft budget timeline, particularly around the proper time to start presenting specific scenarios and options for closing the deficit. The attendees also talked about external factors, such as employees' potential acceptance of the GIC and the reemergence of Pay As You Throw as an option.

Mr. Fanning stated that there will be a need for a firm figure to work off of by November 1, and he said that the Finance Committee will have its first meeting on September 30.

Ms. Fisk Johnson said that in Cambridge there is not much budget discussion in the fall until numbers are clearer, and she worried about everyone spinning their wheels until there is a number to work toward. She felt that rather than thrashing budget numbers at this point, we might be better served by thrashing enrollment projections.

After further discussion, ***Ms. Starks moved to accept the proposed timeline for recommendation to the full School Committee. This was seconded by Mr. Curro and adopted unanimously, 2-0.***

Adjournment

On motion of Ms. Starks, seconded by Mr. Curro, the meeting was adjourned at 6:34 p.m. by unanimous vote, 2-0.