



**Town of Amherst
Special Town Council Meeting
Finance Committee Hearing on the Proposed Regional School District Budget
Thursday, April 4, 2019
Town Room, Town Hall
4 Boltwood Avenue**

Minutes

Complete video is available online: <https://amherstmedia.org/content/amherst-finance-committee-4419>

President Griesemer declared the presence of a quorum and called the Special Town Council meeting to order at 6:33 p.m.

Councilors present: Councilors Bahl-Milne, Brewer, DuMont, Griesemer, Hanneke, Pam, Ross, Ryan, Schoen, Schreiber, Steinberg.

Councilors absent: Councilors De Angelis and Swartz.

Councilors participating remotely: None

Others present: Town Manager Paul Bockelman, Clerk of the Council Margaret Z. Nartowicz, Regional School Superintendent Michael Morris, and Regional Schools Finance Director Sean Mangano

Councilor Steinberg called the Finance Committee Public Hearing on the proposed Regional School budget to order per Charter Section 5.5(a).

Councilor Steinberg announced audio and video recording by Amherst Media.

Councilor Steinberg announced that, pursuant to Charter section 5.5(c), the Town Council has determined that it is prudent to separately consider and act on the regional school budget separately, due to legal requirements, agreements with regional entities or other substantial cause. The Town Council will consider the proposed regional school budget, the proposed assessment method and proposed capital expenditure during the month of April. Councilor Steinberg introduced Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Morris and Regional Schools Finance Director Sean Mangano, who presented the proposed Regional School Budget to the Town Council. A question and answer period open to councilors and the public followed the presentation.

Dr. Morris and Mr. Mangano gave a brief overview of the budget, and the tentative agreement for the assessment method between the four towns. Mr. Mangano explained that the proposed \$32,167,342 budget includes an increase of \$351,991 or 1.1% over the previous fiscal year. Mr. Mangano briefly

explained the proposed assessment method. The largest increase to the budget is wages, with most bargaining units receiving a 1-1.5% increase. The budget also reflects significant health insurance enrollment pattern changes, which result in lower health insurance costs.

Dr. Morris stated that there is a proposed statewide change to the charter reimbursement formula, which will result in less State aid, but there is a pending bill in the House that the MMA has been in support of, that aims to combat the change.

Additions to the budget include a supplemental mathematics program for grades 6-12, restorative practices that have been successful at the high school and will be implemented at the middle school, and the addition of special education programs to support the incoming 6th grade class.

Dr. Morris and Mr. Mangano stated that the full budget is available online.

Councilors asked for clarification about the costs of special education programs. Dr. Morris explained that the incoming 6th grade class contains a higher number of students with IEPs, and that additionally, families often move to the area seeking special education due to Amherst's robust special education programs. Transportation costs for special education continue to increase significantly.

Councilor Bahl-Milne stated that parents and students brought up issues during office hours regarding incidents at the high school, and asked if the addition of funding for restorative services will address those issues. Dr. Morris responded that yes, the adjustment counselor, sometimes called a social worker, will work with students struggling with social/emotion needs.

Councilors asked about the proposed assessment method. Mr. Mangano stated that the proposed method is better for Amherst compared to the State method. To determine what assessment method is best for Amherst, the towns consider the percentage of enrollment, property values, income, and the relationship between those numbers. There have been years that are more or less favorable to Amherst, this year's method is more favorable than the previous year's method. While the District favors a consistent method because it allows for predictability in Towns' budgets, this method will be utilized for the next two years and if no large increases are seen in the Towns, it could last longer.

Councilor Schoen asked about the MMA sponsored bill regarding charter schools, and how to communicate with residents about advocating for the bill. Dr. Morris responded that the School Committee has tried to take a more organized stance around advocacy, and will meet with our local Representatives and Senator to discuss pending legislation. Dr. Morris encouraged councilors to join that advocacy effort.

President Griesemer asked about revisions to the regional school agreement, and if those changes will be brought to the Town Council for approval. Dr. Morris responded that attorneys for the Town and Schools will work on legal clarification, as references to Town Meeting that no longer apply to Amherst; the revisions will be brought to the Town Council for approval.

Councilor DuMont asked about solar options for the middle school roof, and a proposed solar canopy over the high school parking lot, advocated by two high school juniors. Mr. Mangano, Dr. Morris, and Mr. Bockelman spoke about potential solar at the schools. The middle school roof will be studied for solar readiness and potential skylights, it is on the School Committee agenda, and a solar company is coming to present a demonstration. An application was submitted to the Ways and Means Committee for funding to study the feasibility of a parking lot canopy, led by State Representative Domb. If funding was awarded, it would come through the Regional School Budget.

Councilor Hanneke asked about capital in general, and Mr. Mangano stated that there is a separate section of the budget regarding capital, and the School Committee authorizes borrowing.

Councilor Steinberg asked about remaining funds if costs are lower than anticipated. Mr. Mangano responded that there is not typically an excess of revenue, as it is usually offset on the expense side of the budget. The Regional District can set aside up to 5% of their budget as “free cash.”

Councilor Schoen asked about charter school enrollment. Mr. Mangano responded that as local charter schools expanded their grades over the last few years, we did lose students, but now we have seen some students return to Amherst schools from the charter schools, and because local charter schools’ expansion has ended, numbers should stabilize.

Councilor Bahl-Milne asked about regional school debt. Mr. Mangano explained the relationship between regional school debt and the JCPC.

Councilor Steinberg announced that the Finance Committee will vote on the proposed budget Tuesday, and the Town Council will vote on the budget later in April. The Regional School budget must be approved by 3 out of the 4 towns; the proposed assessment method must be approved by all 4 towns; the capital project issue must be addressed; and the Town must raise and appropriate funds to meet the regional school assessment. The Finance Committee will make recommendations to the Town Council regarding all four of those issues.

Councilor Steinberg adjourned the meeting of the finance committee.

MOVED: Councilor Hanneke moved, second by Councilor Schoen to adjourn the Special Town Council meeting.

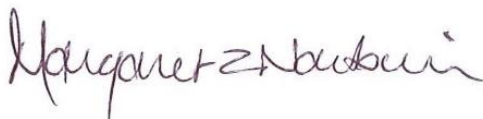
VOTED unanimously to adjourn at 7:13 p.m. on April 4, 2019.

Respectfully submitted,



Athena O’Keeffe

Approved April 22, 2019



Margaret Z. Nartowicz

Clerk of the Council

Record of Agenda Packet Materials and Documents Presented

04-04-19 FINAL Agenda 3-22-19

2020 Region Budget Document 3.11.19

Town Council Budget Hearing