



Town of Wilmington

Finance Committee
121 Glen Road Wilmington, 01887

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TOWN OF WILMINGTON, MA

Meeting Minutes

Thursday December 9, 2021

Finance Committee Chairman, John F. Doherty III called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm. Members present were Theresa M. Manganeli, Marianne Gallezzo, Andrew Lavigne, David Tamang, Jonathan Dugas, and Scott Neville. Leigh Martinson and Joseph Lavino were absent.

Also Present: Jeffrey Hull, Town Manager; Shelly Newhouse, Director of Public Health, Dr. Glenn Brand, Superintendent of Schools, Ruggiero, Assistant Superintendent of Administration and Finance, Jennifer Bryson, School Committee Chair, Mary Jane Byrnes, School Committee Secretary, and Jo Newhouse, School Committee Member.

Mr. Doherty starts by saying that they would like to do the agenda items a little out of order and start with the Covid 19 update.

COVID-19 UPDATE

Person in interest; Shelly Newhouse, Director of Public Health

Shelly provided a Covid-19 memo to Finance Committee. As of today, we are at 239 new cases, with a 7% positivity rate which is the highest they have ever been at. There are a lot of people in the hospital who are unvaccinated, & we are not sure if we have any cases of the omicron variant. Case investigation and contract tracing is overwhelming, but we are managing. We are hoping it will get better but think there will be a winter surge. We are no different than any other community we are all looking at high numbers. Mr. Doherty asks, are you seeing any age group that has higher numbers? Ms. Newhouse responds the age group with the highest numbers are in elementary schools. And with the elementary school kids you are also getting their parents and grandparents. We did see an increase in numbers from Thanksgiving. I think we will see this again for the Christmas holiday. A lot of people are interested in getting booster shots. Mr. Doherty asks, what about breakthrough cases, are we seeing a lot? Yes, probably about half of our cases. Ms. Manganeli asks do we have any idea the percentage of Wilmington residents who are vaccinated? Ms. Newhouse responds about 64% of residents that are eligible are fully vaccinated. Mr. Neville asks if someone has an at home kit and tests positive are they supposed to then contact you? They are supposed to, but most don't. If you get an at-home test and get a positive you should still get a PCR test. Even if it is negative and you aren't feeling good you should still get the PCR test to confirm the result. The state has Project Beacon Sites where you can drive up and get tested. My advice to people is if you are sick stay home and get tested. Even if it isn't covid, stay home get better. I am hoping that I can keep my nurses for the rest of the year even when the CARES money dries up. Mr. Hull adds that another reason he wanted to have Shelly present a Covid update is that there is a possibility for a need to come back to the Finance Committee before the end of the calendar year for a transfer for contract tracing.

Chair asks if there are any further questions.

Chair asks Dr. Brand and Mr. Ruggiero before we begin, I wanted to ask about your Covid clinics. You went with Cataldo, how did that go? Dr. Brand responds It went well; they had a few issues with staffing. We had 300 appointments for our first clinic. We are looking at Cataldo and another company for a clinic in January and to expand it by another 100 vaccinations. Chair asks will you be providing boosters as well? Dr. Brand responds that not at this point in time but is something we could possibly do along the line.

REVIEW OF CURRENT SCHOOL BUDGET, REVOLVING ACCOUNTS, GRANTS ETC.

Person in interest; Dr. Glenn Brand, Superintendent of Schools and Paul Ruggiero, Assistant Superintendent of Administration and Finance

Dr. Brand begins by saying that they are in line for what was laid out in the budget plan. The school committee meeting will be next week where we will present the first pass on the budget for next year. Mr. Ruggiero references the Q&A packet that was sent to all the members. The handout presented to the Committee has the FY23 budget informational timeline, including the date to present the initial budget to the School Committee and ending with the March meeting with the Finance Committee to present the school committee approved budget. Mr. Ruggiero talks about the revolving accounts and grants chart included in the packet.

Chair asks if there is any questions.

Ms. Gallezzo asks do you have to refund any of this money if you don't use it? Mr. Ruggiero answers that some of the program money can be refunded or used as credit for the preschool program. Which is tuition based.

REVIEW OF THE SCHOOL PERSONNEL/CONTRACTUAL EMPLOYEES/GRANT CONTRACTORS AND OCCASIONAL PERSONNEL. STATUS OF UNION AND NON-UNION CONTRACTS. CURRENT AND HISTORICAL STUDENT POPULATION. 2020 AND 2021 RETIREES AND THEIR RESPECTIVE REPLACEMENTS.

Person in interest; Dr. Glenn Brand, Superintendent of Schools and Paul Ruggiero, Assistant Superintendent of Administration and Finance

Chair asks if the school personnel contracts are settled. Mr. Ruggiero responds that the Wilmington Teacher's Association contract expired August 31, 2021 and the Nurses' Association contract expired at the same time. We are still in negotiations. Both groups are currently working without a contract this year. The Educational Assistants contract and the Administrative Assistants contracts will expire June 30, 2022. The cafeteria workers contract was done in 2020.

Mr. Doherty says the student populations have gone down but personnel hasn't. Dr. Brand responds that they have been watching this closely. He goes on to discuss elementary, secondary, and high school levels and the factors that go into these projections. It is true that the High School enrollments has gone down significantly if you look at the 10-year trend. What are we offering for studies or what do we have comparatively with other districts? He goes on to discuss the complexity of the student needs and the staffing required to meet these needs. We try to keep as many students as we can in district. They go on to discuss the teachers to student ratios and moving teachers around schools to accommodate students need per year. There is also a big difference in what courses are offered at the high school today as opposed to 10 years ago. Mr. Ruggiero goes on to say that we built some special education programs that has reduced the number of out of district placements.

Mr. Doherty asks with the Educational Assistants do their contracts specify the number of students per class? Mr. Ruggiero responds no they don't. Some have one on one classes and some have in class assistants helping the teachers in individual classes working with multiple kids. Ms. Manganelli thanks the School Administration

for the Q&A packet and then adds that she is confused as to what the plan is and how the issues will be addressed. Dr. Brand responds that there are a couple of things. With the high school, we want to offer a robust educational system. To make sure it is a place where Wilmington students want to go. He goes on to discuss programs and teacher retirement possibilities and balancing what we can provide to the community. They are looking at 30 other high schools, what they offer, where we compare or where we have gaps. Then look at what we need for staff to accommodate these programs. The concern is the number of students not making their way from 8th grade to the high school, there is a significant number of students moving over to the Tech. Mr. Doherty asks does anyone from the High School administration contact these kids that aren't moving to the high school from 8th grade to find out why. Dr. Brand responds to Mr. Doherty saying that it was done last year, and we will try to do it again this year. To reach out to these families to better understand why and what the rational was. Ms. Gallezzo adds, you said this was done last year? Dr. Brand responds that is correct, we did not have a high response rate last year.

Ms. Manganelli asks how many students was the high school built for? Mr. Ruggiero responds that it was built for 960 students. Ms. Manganelli it looks like we have lost maybe 280 kids in 10 years and overall, 980 kids in the district. She goes on to say that I appreciate the complexity of the HS Curriculum and trying to make changes, but this is something the Finance Committee has brought up for 3 years now. It seems like to me that we are late in the game in addressing this. It is hard to stand behind these numbers which represent dollars when we bring these numbers to the taxpayers. I would be very interested to hear from a parent who has a student at the middle school why they would leave the town. I understand the Tech and why some kids choose to go there. Dr. Brand goes on to say that he is interested in the answer as well. As for the students that do make the journey to the high school, they have reported they have had a terrific experience there.

Mr. Doherty asks do you hold an open house for the high school? Dr. Brand responds, yes, we do, and we are thinking we maybe shift to more of a promotional campaign to communicate what a great option the high school is. I would like to go back to say that I completely understand that we need to make some adjustments. I also want to point out the educational assistance program we mentioned earlier, and the pandemic, it has taken a toll on our students. Everyone is struggling and we are worried about them in the longer term.

Ms. Gallezzo says as a follow up with students going from Wilmington to the Tech school, we, the taxpayers of Wilmington, will now have to pay for this student twice. We need to figure out what is driving these numbers. Dr. Brand replies, I am aware that there are multiple costs/impacts of these students going to the Tech. Mr. Tamang adds, what is the ideal class size? Dr. Brand responds that what is best for a child when they are learning, smaller classrooms are better, but we also must balance our ratios and contractual commitments when planning. He goes on to discuss student interest in courses & benefit of average class sizes all while keeping the budget in check.

Ms. Manganelli talks about an invitation extended to the Finance Committee from Shawsheen Valley Technical High School for a walkthrough a few years ago. And how It was a wonderful experience. One thing that impressed me was the Engineering/Robotics lab. In the packet that you noted that you haven't taken a closer look at the current course offering since 2007. Maybe we could consider upgrading the course offerings.

Mr. Neville adds that when I was in high school it was kids who went to public school went off to college and kids who went to the tech school when right into the workforce. Do we have an idea how that breaks out now? What are the kids doing after graduation? Are a lot of kids going to college? Dr. Brand responds that they are not exactly sure of the number of Shawsheen kids that are going off to college. I do know that they have expanded their college prep track. The distinction of the high school should be an institution where largely

speaking we are supporting students who are on the college path but also career readiness. We cannot expand our curriculum to be a smaller scale of a tech school. But certainly, it would be wise to look at the courses and possibly make some changes. Mr. Ruggiero adds in that there is a Robotics Club at the high school & maybe we need to look at adding a course like this club to the curriculum. Mr. Lavigne asks is there some way we can track this trend like sending a survey to the students to ask the where and why? Dr. Brand responds yes that is part of our plan, but I think we will see the trend to continue.

Ms. Manganelli adds that we mentioned earlier that there are probably multiple reasons why kids are leaving the district it's not just covid. I know a lot of kids who have gone on to private schools. I think this is starting in the Middle School and we need to look at what is going on there. Mr. Neville states that he has heard from several parents that there are some issues with bullying and lack of consequences at the middle school, are a factor in leaving the district. Ms. Gallezzo adds to that point that it could be due to a lack of leadership and staffing there.

Mr. Lavigne asks is this happening in the towns around us? Are towns like Burlington and Woburn seeing the same trends. Dr. Brand says that with the tech numbers yes. Burlington and Bedford are two districts that only send single digits there. It looks like Billerica has gone down and up with their new high school. I am not sure of the private school's factor.

Mr. Doherty asks are you looking at the roster and planning for upcoming retirees? Mr. Ruggiero responds, not really, our contracts require teachers to submit it by December and are allowed to rescind by March. We have had a few who have done that in the past year. If we do know ahead of time, we can budget for it but mostly we don't always know. Ms. Manganelli asks do we have teachers leaving to go to other towns? Dr. Brand answers, yes, we do sometimes and for different reasons, like its closer to home or because of family or maybe compensation. One thing that has been different this year is teachers leaving mid-year. This is happening all over the commonwealth. We have lost about a handful of staff after the school year began. Ms. Manganelli adds that its off the enrollment topic but where do we stand with salaries, how do we compare with neighboring towns and are we lower? Mr. Ruggiero says that it is part of the contract negotiations. We were lower but we did bring it up to the middle of the pack. The current contract is in now in negotiations. There is a brief discussion about Wilmington salaries and keeping up with other towns in our area.

Ms. Gallezzo asks are there currently any open teacher positions? Dr. Brand replies no not now, but we do have other staffing positions available. She responds are you down educational assistants? Mr. Ruggiero answers, yes, we are down a few. Mr. Neville says that he watched the school committee presentation last week regarding the social emotional and family specialists for the district and their numbers have doubled. Dr. Brand responds yes, there are a lot of families in crisis right now and they are a huge help. Mr. Neville then asks is it my understanding that any resident who attends the school district, tech or even private school can get an evaluation? Dr. Brand responds yes, it is not just a Wilmington agreement it is a state requirement.

Ms. Manganelli asks of the Social Emotional workers at the school, what are their credentials? Dr. Brand responds that he is not sure, but he thinks they are both licensed.

Chair asks if the School Committee members have any comments.

Ms. Byrnes replies that she is the longest serving member of the committee. And in the 10 years that she has sat on the board, education has done a 360 from what she has known and recognize. This is a whole new venture. I do recognize the comments and validate a lot of the concerns because they are often shared with us

for the same reason. The conversations for financial stability has been consistently a topic for the past couple of years. We have gone through a lot of transitions over the past 6 years, especially with leadership. I believe we have reached stability now and it is time to review. I know that it may not be timely enough to respond to the data that you are searching for and that you need to make decisions for taxpayers. Students are always worth the investment. New schools are always worth the investment. Teachers cannot teach in an environment such as the Wildwood. It is an investment in our children and our community. When we opened the new high school, our numbers did bump up from the previous year. Yes, since then they have gone down. I think there are many aspects of that we need to look at. One being leadership and stability, it cannot run without consistent stability. We have had rocky roads and transitions, but I do have to say that within the past two years with what the pandemic has brought and what the responsibility of the administrative teams/roles have now found themselves in is a whole other monster. Private and Tech schools don't have the same rules that the public schools have.

I do want to comment on the Shawsheen Tech, they have an excellent and more diverse program. Giving students the opportunity to seek a trade or go on to college they offer that. If you look at our dropout rates haven't been significant like we are seeing in more urban areas. The kids facing dropout are ones who are at most risk and at most need. I am terrified in listening to Shelly Newhouse speak about our covid rates in this community. I am terrified because remote learning is not an optimal way to learn for any student. That is why you are seeing an increase in homeschooling and in social emotional issues. Across the nation and in the commonwealth, we have seen it on the news, in every school community we have outbreaks of dysregulation amongst kids. The fighting in Lawrence, school shootings we that we also must be mindful of. As well as trying to navigate and deliver education in a pandemic. We are in a national health crisis, trying to keep our kids safe. We had school shootings and social emotional issues prior to the pandemic but now there is a catalyst so to speak. The challenges have only tripled and in my opinion as an observer of the board I sit on. I appreciate the time, thank you.

Chair asks if there are any further questions.

Jennifer Bryson replies I want to say thank you for your time and your continued support. These are all questions we have been concerned with for the past couple years.

Chair asks if there are any further questions.

Ms. Manganelli states that she would like to revisit this issue during the upcoming budget meetings. Maybe you would be able to come back to us in March you will be able to give us some degree of comfort that we are getting somewhere. Ms. Gallezzo asks says according to the timeline you have given us in the handout it looks like you will have a lot of decisions on the issues by budget season.

Chair asks if there are any further questions.

Mr. Neville asks about the MSBA and with the numbers has it been discussed, bumping the 8th grade over to the high school along with the consolidating and moving things around. Dr. Brand responds that he appreciates the question. We applied for the MSBA grant program just as the pandemic started and things need to be left largely intact to remain in the program. But depending upon how this plays out this could be something to consider. School consolidation makes sense for the student transitions and fiscally. Mr. Doherty asks regarding the feasibility study, we are addressing at the Special Town Meeting, will discussions be brought up about consolidation? Dr. Brand responds if we can engage in the study, it will analyze all of this and all possibilities.

The study will expand beyond taking the Wildwood and renovating it. Mr. Doherty goes on to and says the Special Town Meeting will be on March 8th and the Public Hearing will be February 15th.

Chair asks if there are any further questions.

Mr. Ruggiero asks if he can add one more thing. In the QA memo they explain the staffing they will be adding are all completely grant funded with the cost of their benefits (the towns portion) included with the funding. Likely the positions will go away when the funding is up.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The Finance Committee reviewed the Minutes from October 26, 2021. A motion was made by Mr. Doherty, seconded by Theresa Manganelli, and by the affirmative vote of all others it was:

VOTED: To approve the minutes from October 26, 2021.

OTHER BUSINESS

At the conclusion of the discussion, there being no further business to come before the Committee, a motion was made by Mr. Doherty seconded by Marianne Gallezzo and Theresa Manganelli. it was unanimously and by roll call

VOTED: That the Finance Committee adjourn.

Meeting adjourned at 9:10 pm

Respectfully Submitted,



Recording Secretary
Jennifer Swanson