

MANCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION

BUDGET WORKSHOP

Wednesday, January 24, 2018

6:00 p.m.

Manchester High School – Room 293

PRESENT: Conyers, Leon, Maio, Meggers, Pattacini, Scappaticci,
Stefanovicz, Thames

ALSO PRESENT: Superintendent of Schools Geary, Deputy Superintendent &
Special Services Radikas, Director of Finance & Management
Clancy

ABSENT: Hagenow

A. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:08 p.m. by Neal Leon, acting as Chair of the Personnel & Finance Committee.

B. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

All in attendance participated in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, led by Mr. Leon.

C. OPENING REMARKS

None.

D. SUPERINTENDENT'S BUDGET PRESENTATION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Mr. Geary addressed some previously asked questions. He noted that increase in the salary line for administrators was a total increase of 3.7%, which included both wage increases and step increases; for certified staff the total increase to the budget line was 2.3%, which incorporated the contractual 3.2% salary increase, but accounted for a drop in higher salaries due to those that had chosen to accept the early retirement incentive package.

It was explained that the dues and licenses line is mostly for programs for students with disabilities and different needs. An example of such a program requiring a license is the Odysseyware program for credit recovery for the high

school.

Mr. Geary reviewed his original recommended budget was \$116,650,479, which was a 4.4% increase over the last budget. In subtracting the \$750,000 insurance "holiday" that number decreases to an actual cost to the town of \$115,900,479 or a 3.7% increase. Mr. Geary then reviewed if we subtract the \$627,728 in his recommended reductions the budget proposed is \$115,272,751 (this also accounts for the insurance holiday), or 3.2%. He noted there is the potential to decrease the budget another \$248,000 with other potential reductions, which would mean a 2.95% increase.

Ms. Maio pointed out that last year the administrators wages and steps were frozen. Mr. Geary agreed, and clarified this year they are advancing a step as they would have last year, not taking two steps, and their wages are going up as contracted, not more to make up for last year.

Mr. Pattacini asked Mr. Geary to walk through the potential \$248,000 of reductions. Mr. Pattacini clarified that with the reduction of \$627,728 there is no cuts to programming and is fiscally responsible. Mr. Geary reviewed the reading consultant and library media specialist at Bennet are being moved to grant funding.

Mr. Pattacini wondered if we have yet maxed out the Priority grant. Mr. Geary noted he budgeted for \$415,000 for next year, but explained the grant was unexpected and came last month with \$415,000 to spend for this year and that number is supposed to rise next year. However, the formula to determine the amount is quite complex and so he has only budgeted for the \$415,000. This year he is going to try to move some items typically covered in the Alliance Grant to the Priority grant, thereby freeing up Alliance funds for summer school or technology purchases that we were unable to make this year. Each grant has specific requirements for spending.

Mr. Pattacini noted he is comfortable with the reduction of the \$627,000 not impacting education. Regarding the other potential reductions, it is like trying to squeeze things tighter and some of those reductions would impact students in some way. In other lines, we would just be making do with less.

Mr. Geary noted that historically, we have not budgeted appropriately for tuition. This budget has corrected that and the result, Mr. Geary hopes, is that next year there will be no need to freeze the budget. He is trying to be fiscally responsible.

Mr. Pattacini noted his first reaction to cutting into the instructional supplies line is no. He wondered what would be cut. Mr. Geary noted it likely would be reducing classroom libraries. He did note that some of that impact would be

lessened with the Priority funds. He stated that we have to think flexibly. Mr. Geary also hopes that with the possible increase in excess cost this year we may be able to unfreeze the current budget to free up some funds for spending.

Mr. Pattacini appreciates the thoughtful, fiscally responsible budget. Continuing on the list of other potential reductions, he pointed out the phone upgrades and radios would simply be put off another year. In regards to the capital repairs line, he feels this Board has done a good job of not just kicking the can down the road and he would prefer not to cut that line. Mr. Geary pointed out that line is, per policy, a direct percentage of the budget, so if the budget decreases it would then decrease that line. The line would remain fully funded per policy.

The Consultants for plant maintenance and special education reduction was addressed. Mr. Geary explained that the consultants used for special education are retired special education teachers that we contract with to attend PPTs for our students in other schools (ie magnet, parochial, outplacements). If we do not have an available consultant a special education supervisor attends those meetings, which is time consuming. It is hard to find these consultants as we need talented, sharp, retired people who want to chair PPTs. Mr. Geary feels confident he can trim this line simply because it is hard to find these people and over the last few years money has remained in this line due to the lack of available people. He is proposing trimming it from \$125,000 to \$100,000. The plant maintenance line looked at spending over the last several years and the number was reduced based on that.

Ms. Maio pointed out that last year we returned \$250,000 to the town and Mr. Geary corrected that we actually returned \$320,000. Mr. Geary explained that some funds we typically use at the end of the year to purchase classroom libraries, replace furniture and use it for other items, without going over budget. However last year instead of doing those end of year things we returned the monies to the town because they got less state funding. We are trying to work with the town as partners. People want better schools and we need the community to come together on how to do this work.

Ms. Stefanovicz pointed out that a 3.17% increase is the minimum budget we can work with and below that we cut into things that we shouldn't be cutting. She does not support a minimum budget that only allows us to keep doing what we are doing and getting incrementally better over time, maintaining the status quo. Ms. Stefanovicz doesn't want "just good", she wants to see passion. She would like to see a focus on a specific area that needs improvement and focus that \$600,000 that we can safely cut from the original proposed budget to that area to close one gap. She would like to show vision on closing some specific gap.

Mr. Pattacini noted we have put back 7 FTEs. Mr. Geary clarified he originally was down 5 FTE with the consolidation of 5th grade and the closing of Robertson. He added back in 3 special education teachers for Bennet. He left the elementary special education teachers intact at their schools, even though their caseloads would be lower with no grade 5. Mr. Geary noted that the STEM specialists, who will now have more time in their day as they are not teaching grade 5, will be helping with math intervention. Mr. Geary noted he has also left the assistant principals at the elementaries even though some schools will be losing about 80 kids with grade 5 moving. He feels we cannot move much faster than we are moving. Two special ed teachers were also added to the high school as there are more students coming in and less leaving. He added a reading consultant, which will now be grant funded, and a library media specialist.

Mr. Pattacini noted that sometimes more money doesn't mean better results. Mr. Geary agreed, noting that teachers need time to learn and work a new curriculum. We have been investing in a lot of resources and now we have to let them work. There is little evidence that changing the plan every 2-3 years works. Mr. Pattacini wondered if there was one thing we could invest in that we currently are not, that would further the district, what would it be? Mr. Geary stated that adding more reading consultants to the elementary schools would be his choice. He noted that there are many other things that could happen, but the school day is only so long. Math intervention will be improved with the STEM specialists having more time freed up. We need to let our teachers build their skill set and their confidence in the curriculum changes that have been made over the last several years and support them with resources. Mr. Geary noted the data at the elementary level is promising and moving in the right direction. Mr. Pattacini wondered why the additional reading consultants are not in the proposed budget. Mr. Geary noted we have to go in to the Board of Directors with a reasonable amount. He wondered if maybe we could use some Priority money to fund a couple reading consultants. We need the entire community on board and engaged with our school system. Mr. Pattacini pointed out that we need people to see what we are not getting. Mr. Geary noted that just because people are concerned with spending doesn't mean they are not concerned with education. This is not a simple challenge. We need to add resources to support targeted needs.

Mr. Leon appreciates the passion coming from Ms. Stefanovicz and Mr. Pattacini. To Mr. Geary, he noted most of his time is spent at Illing and he wondered what can we do to make a difference there. Mr. Geary noted the middle school has a good shell and a ton of talented people. There have been changes made with new electives and new staff. Curriculum changes at Illing are about a year and a half behind the elementary schools. He would like to see more interdisciplinary work, but that is a scheduling issue. He has added behavior techs to the budget for Illing in order to free up the Assistant Principals

to be in the classroom more. He has expanded math intervention and will fill some other previously unfilled positions. He noted Dr. Radikas has done a great job getting the new curriculum in place, which replaced an unsound curriculum that was previously used. Mr. Geary is confident things will turn out. He noted there are also 5 retirements there this year and 2 positions being restored in the budget, so there will be 7 new staff bringing in fresh ideas.

Mr. Leon noted our budget process is backward. We will submit the budget to the Board of Directors, they will chop it and then we will come back and try to fit to the new budget. Everything we talk about here, at the town level becomes about numbers. Mr. Leon would like to have a unanimous consensus here on the budget so we can present a united front to the Board of Directors and tell them this is what we need. History has shown the budget gets cut by the Board of Directors every year (*except Mr. Geary's first year, when he presented a very low increase of 1.75%). Mr. Leon noted that unless we say we are cutting programs or athletics or art/music the public will not come and advocate for the budget.

Mr. Leon reviewed we have basically three options at this point:

- a 4.4% increase (which is really about 3.7%)
- a 3.17% increase, or
- a 2.95% increase.

He asked if anyone wants another option or should we be choosing from these options.

Mr. Pattacini agreed that no matter what the number is, the Board of Directors will reduce it. He supports the recommended 3.17% budget increase. We will do right by the kids, not cut programming, and make some investments. He would like to advocate for more with the Board of Directors, but feels it is not realistic. He is comfortable with the 3.17% increase. To lower the budget to the 2.95% increase would be done only to appease the Board of Directors.

Mr. Geary noted the other issue is sustainability. That \$750,000 medical holiday will be added back into the budget next year. We don't want to add things we cannot sustain over time.

Mr. Meggers is wondering why we are taking off the \$750,000 when next year it will be back on, why not present the budget incorporating that figure. He also thinks that in presenting to the Board of Directors, we need to show if there are cuts to the budget, what would be cut to resonate with them.

Ms. Maio is okay with a 3.17% increase. She feels like dropping to 2.95% is nickel and diming the budget. That is running too close to the bone for her. Ms. Maio would like to see a more clear vision of where we ideally want to be down the road and each year work to get closer to that goal. She wants to see the

schools centered around modern day learning with a clear picture of what we are working towards. Mr. Geary noted the Barr Foundation planning grant is trying to do something like that at the secondary level. Discussion ensued about internships and class schedules and how things needed to be worked out. Mr. Geary noted we need to partner with local businesses and work with them on what they need from us to mentor our students.

Mr. Thames feels there is a disconnect between the numbers and the outcomes. He noted that when a grant proposal is written it is started with a statement of needs and a plan to resolve those problems, and then with a budget to address the needs. The budget narrative lists goals and activities that will take place. He has no problem with a 3.17% budget increase. He shares the concern that we want to have adequate resources to continue to move in a positive direction.

Mr. Leon noted that this Board has done a great job at being non-political in the past, but the fact of the matter is that on both the Board of Education and the Board of Directors there is a 6/3 Democratic majority. He feels there is no excuse for that to be overlooked. We need to put pressure on our directors. Now is the time to get things done. Each one of the democrats on the Board of Education should be working to that end. Mr. Leon noted that nobody was in favor of the 2.95% increase, so that option should be scrapped.

Mr. Meggers was concerned about the lines not reflecting the \$750,000 medical holiday. Mr. Geary explained that the budget presented would show the number without the \$750,000 deducted, but then would show the \$750,000 as a revenue. It was clarified we are really considering between a 4.4% budget increase (which is 3.7% after the reduction of the \$750,000) and a 3.9% budget increase (which is really 3.17% after the reduction of the \$750,000). Mr. Geary pointed out that the town also will have this premium holiday, so they should clearly understand the explanation.

It was clarified the second choice is a 3.84% increase, not 3.9%.

Ms. Stefanovicz wondered if we could take that \$627,000 that we are comfortable reducing from the original recommended budget and reallocate those funds to invest in 8 reading consultants. She would like to see a budget with that idea and one without.

Mr. Leon would like to know what type of result we could expect to see if we did invest in more reading consultants. Mr. Geary felt we could move our gap of students reading at or above grade level from the current 70-75% by the end of the year to 85% over two years.

Mr. Scappaticci is happy to vote for a 4.4% increase or even more. He feels

we will not affect true change unless we put our money where our mouth is. He agrees with what Ms. Maio stated at the last board meeting, that we will pay either with our wallet or with low test scores.

Discussion centered around the possibility of finding qualified reading consultants, and the realistic cost. Mr. Geary suggested there may well be current teaching staff that has the right credentials that we could hire, thus replacing them with new classroom teachers. It was determined that the actual cost, including benefits, of 8 reading consultants would exceed the \$627,000 and be closer to \$800,000 or more, which would make the budget increase about 4.56%.

Mr. Leon suggested that since there seemed to be backup consensus on a 3.84% increase, that Mr. Geary work the numbers to get an accurate accounting of what it would add to the budget to add 8 reading consultants and we would vote on the budget with that added figure (an approximate 4.56% increase) at the February 12th Board meeting. If that motion fails, then we would vote on the 3.84% increase. Either way we need to be ready to pass a budget that evening, as it is due to the town February 15th. It was decided that Mr. Geary would supply Board members with the information for their review by Friday and this plan would take place at the next scheduled Board meeting, February 12th.

E. PUBLIC COMMENTS

Matthew Borrelli, 38 Hampton Drive, was not in favor of adding reading teachers. He feels our children have major difficulties, not just reading, but attendance and behavior. He feels that we should take our best teachers and they should spend half a day the first semester with a group of 10 teachers. He feels those teachers would get more training in 6 months than their entire career. It is a gamble that he thinks would work.

Tom Stringfellow, 183 Hillstown Road, thought it was a good presentation. We can throw money at the problem, but we should go for the middle ground. He hopes the Board of Directors are open-minded about the future generation. Mr. Stringfellow recommended articles on math, homeless youth, and mentoring. He noted we are all in this together and we should try to be an inspiration to others. He mentioned articles about Christa McAuliffe as well as Enfield's budget rising by 1.85%. He noted Manchester was mentioned in *Money Magazine* as a good town to live in. Mr. Stringfellow recommended the book *Beyond Measure*. Last, he hopes students are able to go to school in a safe manner, mentioning a recent school shooting across the country.

F. CLOSING COMMENTS

Ms. Stefanovicz noted she doesn't care if it is reading specialists or instructional coaches, she is good with either option to move our children forward.

Mr. Thames felt this was a very good workshop with innovative ideas and we are being thoughtful about the process. He noted he had a recent discussion with parents who didn't know his position on the Board. He noted these parents had children that had attended a magnet school and our public school and had noted that our schools had more advanced instruction. We need to continue to invest in our future, which is our children and our town.

Mr. Leon agrees this is a great district and we have done a great job moving forward in a short amount of time.

G. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 8:14 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Daryll Thames,
Board Secretary