

Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee (ABRSC)
FY17 Budget Meeting Minutes (approved 2/4/16)

Library
R.J. Grey Junior High School

Saturday, January 23, 2016
8:30 a.m.

Members Present: Diane Baum, Mary Brolin, Michael Coppolino, Amy Krishnamurthy, Maya Minkin, Paul Murphy, Kathleen Neville, Maria Neyland, Deanne O’Sullivan, Kristina Rychlik

Members Absent: Brigid Bieber

Others: Marie Altieri, Marilyn Bisbicos, Deborah Bookis, Clare Jeannotte, Glenn Brand, Beth Petr, ABRSD Principals, Administrators and members of the Acton and Boxborough Boards of Selectmen and Finance Committees, as well as members of the public

The ABRSC was called to order at 8:35 a.m. by Chairwoman Kristina Rychlik. The Superintendent welcomed everyone to the annual “Budget Saturday” meeting. The meeting was taped by Acton TV.

8:40 Panel 1: Budget Overview

- Superintendent’s Budget Overview - *Glenn Brand*
- Financial Highlights FY17 Budget - *Clare Jeannotte, Director of Finance*
- Staffing, Enrollment, and Elementary Class Sections - *Marie Altieri, Deputy Superintendent*

Questions from the School Committee and the audience:

Mike Coppolino referred to slide 67, and asked how the 24.8 in the high needs category was determined. Marie Altieri explained that the DESE calculates it taking into account all high needs students. The chart in the binder is more complete. Mary Emmons said that because some students are in more than one category the number of students cannot just be added up. Diane Baum asked if the number of choice students who leave our District, is offset by the number that choose AB. The number who leave is the base for calculating the number to accept. The district is paid \$5000 per student who enter.

Bill Guthlein asked about the comparison scores on slide 66, noting that MCAS CPI is 100 for all students and 70 for High Needs special education students. This is the largest gap among these two groups and he asked why it was happening. Was it random or something specific? Deborah Bookis explained how the CPI is calculated and stated that the District has made some progress but there is quite a way to go regarding this gap.

In response to a question, Clare Jeannotte explained how circuit breaker is calculated, as well as last year’s midyear cuts by the Governor. She explained how his cuts to regional transportation reimbursement (last year) were restored by the legislature after regional school districts demanded a review of the law. This year the Governor filed legislation to allow him to cut regional reimbursement and that is being watched. This is all part of the challenge of budgeting for the future.

Marie Altieri noted that to be consistent with the last page of Tab 4 of the binder, slide 59, Projected Multi-Year Personnel Planning should be slightly revised. Under FY18, a 1.0 Groundsman should be added for a total of +1.8 on the slide.

Acton Finance Committee member Jason Cole asked if the removal of a class section translated to the removal of a full time employee. Marie replied that it did not always. The district expects 12 retirements and some attrition, so no one will lose a job as a result of reducing a section. They may be reassigned.

Jason asked why the administration recommended cutting classes if our caseloads are some of the highest in the state. Marie explained that many hours of discussion and decision-making about priorities go into every recommendation being made. Kristina Rychlik noted that the School Committee has talked a lot about this, and class sizes are generally within our class size guidelines, but it is a “constant push and pull”.

Jason asked how nimble the District can be if student enrollment does not turn out as expected. Dr. Brand stated that this is the heart of the tension that the Administration and School Committee members all feel. Focusing on downward trends in enrollment spread out over 8 schools is part of the reality. A drop of 20 – 25 students depending on where they are placed, is a challenge. Watching trends is critical. The District does not base their plans solely on long term projections only involving enrollment. Marie emphasized that this is a plan for the next two years and it will be adjusted if needed. The District’s plan five years ago was that four sections would be reduced this year but we have decided now to eliminate only two.

Amy Krishnamurthy asked about the mixed grade 1/2 classroom planned for the Blanchard School. Marie explained how the mixed grades plan would address the increased enrollment at this level at Blanchard that would result in large class sizes if both grades were left at one section each. This approach has been used successfully at a number of the schools over the years, and it has provided a good educational experience. Dana Labb has been talking to the faculty and parents about it and they are excited.

Michael Coppelino read a statement objecting to the projected property tax increase of 5.6% for the average single family homeowner in Acton. He wants to take a broader view and compare AB department by department to our comparable towns to see why they spend less per student than our district does. He asked that the Committee consider convening a Regional Task Force comprised of both towns’ Finance Committee members, Selectmen and community members. Kristina stated that this idea could be considered at the end of the day for School Committee discussion as well as perhaps at a future meeting.

10:25 Panel 2: Student Services Inclusionary Practices, Budget, Enrollments and Trends

- *Bonnie Bisbicos, Interim Director of Pupil Services*
- *Mary Emmons, Director of Special Education*
- *Many special education staff in the audience*

Questions from the School Committee and the audience:

Mary Emmons explained to Michael Coppelino that many of the Student Services Leadership Team members belong to collaborative groups with local communities’ members and they often discuss what each other are doing. Marie Altieri said that that is true of most administrators.

Kristina Rychlik said that she was concerned about the very small amount of direct ELL instruction time provided to our students last year, and she had hoped this would improve for FY17. Bonnie Bisbicos replied that adding two specialists will help bring the district closer to the required hours, but there is still progress to be made. Mary Emmons noted that there is really no way to know how many level 1 students they will have when school starts. Kristina is concerned about the increased demands on regular education teachers, when their students who need specific ELL instruction are not getting it.

Several Committee members commended Bonnie and Mary for proposing the Pathways program. When students move beyond the grade level of the program (and still require services), a decision must be made whether to move them to another appropriate program (if available), whether to provide services in another way, or whether to consider expanding the program. For some, when services are provided very young, it may mean they do not need as extensive services when they are older.

Acton Finance Committee member, Margaret Busse, asked if the large group of 5th and 6th graders requiring special education services who are moving into the Jr High would translate to a reduction of services needed at the elementary level. Mary Emmons said that is not necessarily true because they are trying to correct the very high caseloads that have developed at the elementary staff level. Dr. Brand pointed out that the District is moving toward having three learning centers at each elementary school to address this. Mary Emmons stated that it is the District's mandate that new programs continually be considered that keep students within their district. Dr. Brand underscored this point and the extremely high cost of Out-of-District placements. He stated that it is very hard to compare some aspects of what we do to other districts because there are so many variables. Some programs have more space, more staffing, larger age/grade range, and all of these pieces can lead to a district being able to offer more choices to address a variety of student needs. Bonnie Bisbicos explained what reconstructive costs are for an out of district private school.

Margaret Busee asked how our teachers' salaries and annual increases compare to other communities. She said that the Finance Committee would be very interested in this. Marie Altieri will gather this information.

LUNCH BREAK

12:00 Panel 3: Proposed Student Services Positions

- Junior High Special Education Learning Center – *Andrew Shen, RJGJHS Principal*
- Elementary Learning Center – *Mary Emmons, Ed Kaufman, Merriam Principal*
- Elementary School Psychologist – *Hilary Bonnell, Counseling/Psychological Services Chairperson*
- English Language Education (ELE) – *Roberto Soto-Garcia, English Language Learners (ELL) Services PK-12 Chair*

Questions from the School Committee and the audience:

Diane Baum thanked Roberto Soto-Garcia for his presentation and noted that in the Worcester and Leominster schools where she has been, she saw level 1ELE class sizes of 6 to 8 students. She expressed frustration that our class sizes for this level are much larger and stated that it is a problem we need to address. Roberto used to work in Worcester agreed with her. Mary Emmons described the numbers as “striking”. She agrees that the district needs to do more. She stressed the need to understand the benefit of addressing these issues as early in the elementary school level as possible. She described this as critical to the students' success.

Mike Coppolino asked if it is mandated by the state that a district have one psychologist per school, or if it is our preference. Mary Emmons said it is not a state mandate, but we were commended that our psychologists also work directly with our students and staff. We had to retrain some of our staff last year. We have an increase of 15 – 20 assessments per year that each psychologist now has to do, but we believe this is the best way to educate our most vulnerable students. Mike suggested from a testing standpoint, the district should be careful about over analyzing.

Maya Minkin encouraged the Committee to consider how universal kindergarten and prekindergarten could provide additional support to young students, particularly regarding ELE and other educational needs. Regarding the 2 teachers that Andrew Shen is asking for at the Jr High, she thinks this will specifically have long term benefits to the students coming up.

Amy Krishnamurthy appreciated that the agreed upon proposals were a team effort, and an example of how limited resources are prioritized. Maria Neyland appreciated the way Andrew Shen laid out his requests because it is very important to look beyond just the next year

1:10 **Additional Positions**

- Finance Position .5 FTE Accounts Payable/Payroll reallocated from a HS office support position - *Clare Jeannotte*
- Strings Program – *Mark Hickey, K-12 Director of Performing Arts*

Questions from the School Committee and the audience:

The Committee was happy to be considering the return of a program that was lost many years ago. Mark Hickey said this is a first step of a group for violin, cello, bass and then who knows. It was noted that Community Education offers some excellent music lessons and groups, including great ukulele classes. Mark expects a large number of students would participate with a team taught approach. The fees would help offset that cost.

Deanne O’Sullivan asked why this string program would start in 4th grade when band starts in 5th. Mark looked at other districts with string and band programs and many start at grade 4. If a child decides they don’t like one instrument, it gives them time to try a different one. This proposal would make it uniform that all students would do one of the 3 ensembles. Mary Brolin noted that a Blanchard subcommittee looked at the benefit of music programs to academics and mental health, and there is a connection.

Margaret Busse is “thrilled” about bringing a strings program to our schools. When asked if eventually having a full orchestra is Mark’s vision, he said that at the High School he anticipates a string ensemble and if there was need for a string orchestra for an event, some students would be asked to participate in that way.

Diane Baum asked why the District is not outsourcing some of our payroll. Clare responded that there are now systems in place so outsourcing does not make sense.

1:30 **Superintendent’s Closing Remarks**

Dr. Brand thanked Karen Coll and Beth Petr for their work compiling the materials and setting up for the meeting. He also thanked Deputy Superintendent Marie Altieri and Finance Director Clare Jeannotte and his entire team for the many hours of preparation that they have contributed to the day’s discussions.

He described the proposed FY17 Budget as reasonably responsive to our expanding student needs, given our financial reality. All areas have been thoroughly reviewed with staff and adjustments and revisions have been made along the way. He noted that the District’s long term capital needs will be specifically reviewed and discussed in the upcoming months as part of the Capital Study being undertaken.

Dr. Brand thanked the School Committee, the two towns’ Boards and Committee members and all of the community members who attended the presentations.

2:00 – 3:00 **School Committee Discussion, Feedback and ABRSC Preliminary FY17 Budget VOTE**

Kristina Rychlik reviewed the process. She reminded the Committee of the Budget Hearing on February 11th and that the FY17 School Budget can go down, but not up, after the preliminary vote is taken.

Kristina noted that the annual elections are coming up. Michael Coppolino has decided not to run for a 7th term as a School Committee member from Acton. He encouraged others to consider the opportunity. Kristina Rychlik is running again, as previously announced.

Mike Coppolino asked a question about reserve levels and E and D which Clare Jeannotte responded to. Marie Altieri noted that free cash for the town of Acton is over \$7 million. This creates an opportunity for taxes to not increase the full 2 ½ % if citizens agree. In response to a question about comments made in a Moody's Bond Rating memo, Mary Brolin stated that as a School Committee member, it is not Moody's opinion that is important to her, it is the Committee's decision about how much reserves to maintain and how to replenish it.

Kristina brought up Mike Coppolino's earlier comment regarding a comparable communities task force. Kathleen Neville likes this proposal to consider best practices. Stating that the School Committee is a separate entity from either town, she feels it is inappropriate for finance committee members to comb through the schools' budget line items. Agreeing with Kathleen, Maria Neyland stated that if the Committee chooses to do a task force, it needs to be more than just budget numbers. She stressed that this could not be decided until the Committee has a clear understanding of what the goal will be. She wants a more detailed Committee discussion after speaking with the Administration. She does not want to "just pick 3 districts that spend less money than we do" and study them. She advocated for considering this at the Summer Workshop due to how busy everyone is at this time. Mary Brolin agreed with Maria and Kathleen. She understands Mike's concern, but wonders if analyzing data from a website will give us that much valuable information. Her biggest concern is that a lot of work would be done, but the result may not be actionable. Mike reminded the Committee that one of the concerns expressed early on with regionalization was that in a worst case scenario, the new K-12 Regional School Committee could end up making decisions separate from what the community at large wanted. Mike stressed that the Committee must always consider the Acton and Boxborough communities' point of view. There was general agreement. Several members felt it would be appropriate as part of the summer workshop.

Kristina Rychlik emphasized that the community should be proud of where the District stands with low per pupil costs and great results. She advocated for looking at other districts that spend more AND less than AB to learn from them. She is concerned about initiative overload – the capital study, the demographic survey and other efforts, in addition to the usual workload for the Administration and staff. She suggested that the Regional Financial Oversight Committee or the Budget Subcommittee could be an appropriate group to do this work instead of creating a new one.

Marie Altieri described how the Administration currently stays connected with other districts. Two or three years ago the AB leadership team went to Westford and spent a lot of time looking at their practices. All of the Administrators belong to groups that discuss best practices. The Westford HR department recently came to AB to share ideas. Principals also get together with colleagues from other districts. Although not opposed to the new activity, Amy Krishnamurthy is comfortable with what the Administration is doing now and how they make decisions.

Kristina concluded that there was not a clear consensus on how to proceed other than there is potential value in reviewing what other communities are doing. She felt a better understanding of what is already in place and how the proposal could move forward was needed. This will be added to a future School Committee meeting agenda.

The Committee returned to discussion of the proposed FY17 Budget.

Maria Neyland expressed her support for the proposed budget and wished that more could be done. She likes that the Pathways program is new and a way to save money while addressing students' educational needs. She stated that, "This budget has been scrubbed."

Acton Finance Committee member Bob Evans appreciated the “quite complete materials” that were presented. Referring to the Finance Committee “Point of View” document, he said that with a 5% Acton assessment increase from the schools, taxes will have to increase 2 ½% every year and there are many people that cannot afford it. He would like to see a 4% Acton assessment rate and believes that it is possible to do. He stated that “Regionalization” promised a far different future.

Paul Murphy asked how the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) and United Way presentation, which shared some alarming conclusions, have shaped the proposed budget. Dr. Brand replied that broadly, he believes there is a responsiveness to help our High Needs students starting with the increase in psychological services. Mike Coppolino stated that he will vote yes on the motion given that it is a cap. He hoped that the School Committee will “sharpen their pencil and try in good conscience to lower the budget” that will be voted at the Hearing.

Paul Murphy understands the concern about Acton’s high taxes and a 5% assessment. He expressed frustration that state aid is not high enough. Maria Neyland advocated for sending a letter to the elected officials about state aid. Kristina told Senator James Eldridge in person yesterday that the District needs more funding.

Diane Baum needs more time to consider Mike’s comments. She understands that taxes are too high but when thinking about where cuts could be made and the impact on student learning, she is at a loss. She advocated for putting programs in place that will pay off later, and acknowledged that there are some red flags in some programs because numbers are not all improving like the Committee hoped they would. Kristina Rychlik asked the Committee to remember the last time they had to make 11th hour cuts and they were not sustainable. She feels they are making up for those decisions now, and wants to avoid causing problems now just to get a budget passed. Deanne O’Sullivan agreed with Kristina, and with Paul’s concerns regarding the YRBS and United Way survey results. We are missing a lot already in this budget now.

Maria Neyland moved, Mike Coppolino seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: that the total appropriation for the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District for the fiscal year of July 1, 2016 through June 30, 2017 be set at \$83,426,767, and that member towns be assessed in accordance with the Education Reform Law and the terms of the Regional Agreement and amendments thereto as follows: Acton \$55,839,692, Boxborough \$11,564,116, remainder to be accounted for by the Anticipated Chapter 70 Aid in the amount of \$14,531,276, Anticipated Charter School Aid in the amount of \$27,683, Anticipated Regional Bonus Aid in the amount of \$74,000, Anticipated Chapter 71, Section 16C Transportation Aid, in the amount of \$1,190,000, and a transfer from E&D Reserves in the amount of \$200,000.

The ABRSC was adjourned at 2:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents used: See agenda and FY17 Budget Binder

ABRSC FY17 Annual Budget Hearing will be held Thursday, 2/11/16 at 7:00 p.m. in the R.J. Grey Junior High Library