Meeting of the Board of Selectmen held on March 23, 2022 beginning at 5:30 pm in the Selectmen's Conference Room, Town Hall.

Members Present: Antonio Goncalves, Chairman, Derek DeBarge, James Gennette, Manuel Silva

Members Absent: William Rosenblum

First Order of Business: Pledge of Allegiance

Visitations:

Finance Committee, School Committee, Town Accountant at 5:30 p.m.

Mr. Goncalves: Okay, I'd like to welcome everybody. I know we have members of the School Committee, Finance Committee and the general public here. So, maybe we'll just go down the table if you want to introduce yourselves.

Mr. Goncalves: Mr. Vice Chairman, I call for nomination to open up a school committee meeting.

Mr. Harrington: Seconded.

Mr. Mullen, School Committee, Chris Desjardins, School business manager, Lisa Nemeth, Superintendent, Sarah Bowler, School Committee, Jeff Laing, School Committee, Kim Downing, Finance Committee, Chip Harrington, School Committee.

Mr. Goncalves: Anybody else, officials in the back? Okay, so I guess, the reason for our getting together today is to discuss the School Committee budget. Seems like we're moons apart on what's been recommended by the subcommittee and what's been presented. Finance has to still vote on it or look at it officially, I believe. Mrs. Downing?

Mrs. Downing: Next Wednesday.

Mr. Goncalves: Next Wednesday, but maybe everybody can get a better understanding of the discrepancy, I think it's around 1.2 million, 1.1 million, overall. I don't know if you want to start and give some explanation.

Mrs. Nemeth: Well, we are going into next year with almost a one million dollar deficit and only a 1% increase from the Town. When we first proposed our budget, we proposed a 5% increase knowing that we need a 4.85 to possibly have a 2.5% COLA increase and step raises. That is normally what we are given by the Town. Last year, we were given 2.73 and therefore we lowered it to 2.5, hoping that we could secure those funds. At our first meeting, I presented 5%. I was asked to get it down to about 3%. So, at our next meeting, I came prepared for 3% and was told I have 0%. Obviously, I wasn't prepared for 0%. Zero percent would be talking about almost a 2-million-dollar deficit so we're talking almost 25 to 30 teachers if those are the cuts we're going to make. We have been cutting every single year, even though you may not know that, we have been trimming a lot and there's nothing left to touch except for teachers. So, it was unbelievable that we went from 5%, to 3% then we were given 0%. I had asked how that came about. It was just the will of that committee. Before leaving the meeting, I was at a half percent which still was unbelievable. So, I went back to the school committee presented everything, looked at numbers and met with Ms. Collins and Ms. Villano, really pushed and gave numbers and we got it up to 1%. 1% is still a million-dollar deficit, maybe about seven hundred and fifty. Our business manager can give you exact numbers, but over all we're looking at some substantial cuts. We gave our proposed to our Unit A because we have five contracts to negotiate. We proposed a 1% increase only and that's where we are right now. Knowing that the other departments got 8% and all different percentages. It's not, in my opinion, obviously equivalent to what some other departments are getting. It is only a $200,000 increase to our budget. Last

year it was almost a $9,000 increase so, that's where we're at and a little confused as to how those decisions were made. I know you voted on a level two budget even before the Finance Committee had voted and made their recommendations so that's why I was concerned, you already voted.

Mr. Goncalves: And the comments made, a million-dollar deficit from what you requested, you didn't actually run a million-dollar deficit?

Mrs. Nemeth: Meaning now or last year?

Mr. Goncalves: Last year

Mrs. Nemeth: Yes

Mr. Goncalves: You ran a million-dollar deficit?

Mr. Desjardins: We are a million-dollars short, if that's what you're asking.

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Mr. Goncalves: Right, well it's a deficit that means you...

Mr. Desjardins: We had to cut a million dollars

Mr. Goncalves: You had to cut a million dollars. You're not a million dollars in the hole?

Mr. Desjardins: Right.

Mr. Goncalves: Right. So, I think some of the questions that have come to this Board. Can you explain the ESER money and what exactly it came in for and what's been done with it?

Mrs. Nemeth: I have made some handouts for everybody. The top page is my summary. The second pages are the actual requirements for the use, the allowable expenditures of ESSER III. Our targeted expenditures for ESER III funding are: addressing learning loss, extended learning opportunities, which has to be 20% percent of the grant. We're addressing the needs of those students that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and these are the exact wordings that you have to use with the grant. There are 19 categories you can use the money for and we've chosen like 7, however many are on here. We are addressing learning loss. We have to. It's 20% of the grant; addressing the needs of those students disproportionately impacted. Most of it is going to students with disabilities and our English learners, purchasing of educational technology for social, emotional, mental support. That is a program called Panograma. And some of our other tools that we use to assess students social and emotional health, high quality instructional material, that's self-explanatory, school facility repairs and improvement; that is talking about very specifically what you can use it for and I believe it's on the attached paper. If not, I can go into it, but we are using that for replacing our water fountains. It's not a mouth to spicket contact it's specifically putting a water bottle under there. So, you can't use it for anything other than something related to COVID; reducing the risk of virus transmission exposure. We are using that. We consistently have to buy more masks and other types of paraphernalia for our specialized population. District health and safety are self-explanatory; training and professional developments self-explanatory; and the other categories, additional compensation for teachers and other staff assumed risk of duties during national health crisis COVID-19 staff retentions.

If you turn the page, when you are doing the ESSER funding you have to identify what you would be using the money for. I am using it for educational technology, planning, coordinating closure, mental health service, activities. Everything I just said on the front page and it goes all the way to the last page. Those are the things that we are using it for.

Mr. Goncalves: ESSER III was what amount of money?

Mrs. Nemeth: 3 million dollars. I broke it down into a spreadsheet as to almost exactly what we are using the money for. There are some missing, not missing components, just some components that our business manager has in a separate place, but we can definitely discuss those. If you look at the top right corner, it's kind of in purple and it says assessing learning loss. That is related to number 8 on your other handout as to where you're getting this from. That's exactly the wording, accessing, addressing the learning loss and activities related to summer learning. If you look at what most of this is used for, it's used for mentoring or tutoring programs throughout last summer, this coming summer and throughout the year. I know there's a lot of information there, a lot of numbers, but in a nutshell, we basically are providing support throughout the school year with mentors and tutors for those students that are falling behind or need social, emotional support. Our teachers apply for that and they help students and then during the summer we have enrichment courses, especially for 8th and 9th grade to help the students with Algebra 1 or some of the skills that they are lacking that will make them successful in high school. We are also targeting our elementary reading and writing. It just goes on and on. The very top is all the programming of mentors, coordinators, how many hours, how much they get paid, how many positions and what the funding is. At the bottom is the educational technology which is number 1 on the ESSER funds and the educational technology you can see is all different types of apps and curriculum programing for TEARED interventions and trauma specific offerings for our paraprofessionals, our teachers. I could go through each and every one and tell you what they do, but you can see it there. We did purchase a new 8th grade social studies text, our dismissal manager for safety, security and health and then we have after school transportation at the bottom to provide after school help with the mentoring and tutoring.

On the second page, you have classroom teachers. We did budget for 16. We only are paying this year 7 out of the budget. We've moved those 7 positions into next year's budget. It has to be that way otherwise when the money dries up those teachers are gone. We would like to retain those teachers. They are our EL teachers, our English language learner teachers, kindergarten teachers and some other specific teachers that we need. We moved them into this year's budget because next year the money would dry up and we've reached that cliff so many people talked about. Even though we've budgeted for 16 we've only used seven. Our custodians were laid off before COVID due to budgeting issues. We brought them back obviously due to COVID and having to clean. Paraprofessionals, I know that looks like a lot, 38 were put in there because we were trying to balance our budget last year. We did not spend that amount of money. We are only paying 2 out of the budget this year, but that's just this year. Moving forward will be a different story. We know that we will be using more next year due to the students that have enrolled recently in the district, which we could talk about more.

Again, the bottom here is all the stipends; summer tutors, ESL summer tutors, that's really part of the grant where they want you to spend most of your money addressing learning loss and extended learning opportunities. With those teachers, you obviously need coordinators. So, you have coordinators there for each level. That's where most of our money is going, but our business manager could get more specific if you needed that.

Mr. Goncalves: So, I can follow this. We are looking at this staff here, the 38-full time equivalent million to...on the second page, support staff, etc. That's part of the three million dollars?

Mr. Desjardins: Correct.

Mrs. Nemeth: That's one million four hundred eighty for this year.

Mr. Goncalves: Are these in addition to whatever you're asking for; an increase in the budget for or did I miss something? These are fiscal 22's.

Mrs. Nemeth: These are this year and moving forward.

Mr. Goncalves: So, the ESSER funds created these positions here and you're asking for roughly 7 and 2 custodians moving forward into the '23 budget?

Mrs. Nemeth: Yes, if you want to say it that way. Yes, we put them into the budget for next year. So, I think what you're getting at is, yes there's money in ESSER funds but next year is year 2, next year is year 3...

Mr. DeBarge: There's no sustainability.

Mrs. Nemeth: Right, and then we're done. Whether we leave them in the budget and use the money now, I'm still going to have to do something next year, or the new superintendent will allow the school committee to sustain those positions or not and make some tough decisions.

Mr. Goncalves: I think we brought it up and...James, do you have any questions?

Mr. Gennette: Oh, I've always got questions, do you want me to go right now?

Mr. Goncalves: Are we good on ESSER III? Maybe questions on ESSER III?

Mr. Gennette: I'm not sure with ESSER III...

Mr. Goncalves: Well in general and I was thinking, you were going to probably have a question on school population.

Mr. Gennette: Well actually I do. That's where I'd like to go first.

Mr. Goncalves: Mrs. Nemeth mentioned it, maybe we can touch on that.

Mrs. Nemeth: Sure.

Mr. Gennette: How many teachers are employed by the School Department right now?

Mrs. Nemeth: I would say 263.

Mr. Gennette: 263. The reports I am looking at by the State is what was registered for people and that's all of them, right? We are talking about regular professionals, right?

Mrs. Nemeth: Not current ones. Are you looking at the (DESI) site?

Mr. Gennette: No, I was looking at Mass Education and...that was it? I have 2020-21 numbers. Basically, what I am looking at is in 2008 Ludlow School population was 3,113. It's been going down ever since. In 2022, it's 2293. I don't know what the population is for 2023. That's a decrease of roughly 820 students over that time. We started with 224 teachers in 2008 and since that time we really haven't dropped that much, and it looks like we're at 263 now. If you did the student ratio from then we're at 13.3 to 1, students per each teacher.

Mrs. Nemeth: You cannot actually calculate it that way because you have a special ed population of approximately, maybe 100, 120 special ed teachers that don't have a classroom. I'd have to do the exact numbers, but you deduct that and then you actually have your classroom teachers at maybe 220. The rest of that is support staff and that includes school psychologists, guidance counselors, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy that don't have student to teacher ratio.

Mr. Gennette: Okay, that's fine. Basically, what this comes down to is that I also looked at the Mass Foundational Budget for Chapter 70 coming into it and it didn't go back too far but, in 2020 it was $29,000,000 Ludlow was coming in at, school budget at $32,000,000 and it was a 9.6% increase over what the fundamental was. That seemed to be about normal. In 2021, it went to 11.42%. In 2022, it was 12.91% and now you're asking this year for it to be 15.95% over what the fundamental budget is for what the State is doing as far as Chapter 70. So that's the return back of what we are actually going to get from the State to help cover the cost of the school budget.

Mrs. Nemeth: Chapter 70 funds only went up to about $25,000-$30,000.

Mr. Gennette: No, they didn't go up much, but your school budget did and that's the difference between those Chapter 70 funds and your school budget escalating at a very rapid rate. That's what we are feeling on that. The other issue, and I understand that there's a lot of improvements certainly now with COVID, that you had extra janitors you were bringing in to clean, you had teachers that were maybe out who had COVID and, you had to have people replace them. There's a lot of things having to do with that. I understood the extra custodians and the overtime, the school nurses, special education aids, student substitute teachers, student resource room teachers. I completely get it, but I'm also looking at teacher's salaries, an increase in teachers with a decrease in students. I don't understand that parallel when it comes to increasing the budget 5%. It tells me that it's not really the teacher's salaries that are the problem, it's not really the teachers that are the problem. It seems that it's everything else that's around it. Seems like, and I don't want to cast stones or anything, but it looks like there is some mismanagement somewhere as far as allocation of funds. I don't know if that comes back to Mr. Desjardins. I don't know who it is, but that's why it's so hard to increase a 5% budget, that's huge. We would end up, that alone, just with that budget would put us into a 2½ override. So basically, we are asking the tax base to fully fund the school and not do anything else in the rest of the Town.

Mrs. Nemeth: So, coming in with a 5% budget obviously wasn't realistic, that was your pie in the sky Level 1 which we were asked to bring to the table, so I fully knew that would be cut back. But thinking it would be cut back to maybe 4% even 3% I was ok with because we had budgeted 2½%, which is usually what we get from the Town. I agree with you, 5% was, I'm not going to say ridiculous, 5% was doing what every other department does, coming in high knowing we're going to meet somewhere in the middle. I was absolutely, and so was the school committee, expecting 2½, 3, 2½...we'd be thrilled with 2½. Mr. Desjardins and I even spoke about at the Level 1 budget, what if it was 2% what does that look like. We spent a long time looking at 1%, 2%, 1.5%. I'm just saying we were not expecting 0. We certainly weren't expecting 1. Are we going to go forward with it, yes it hurts but I think this process. I'm just surprised at the process that happened, that's the other thing. To answer one of your questions though, is it mismanagement, absolutely not. We are probably saving the Town and I'm going to be a little arrogant, millions of dollars with the amounts of students we keep in district that are special ed. For some reason Ludlow has an umbrella over them that we have the best special ed department, which of course I'll say we do, in Western Mass if not in Massachusetts. At the beginning of the year, we had 390 students in our special ed program. Throughout the year we had over 40-50 students enroll. I don't even know how they are living in Ludlow. I didn't know we had that much housing, but we are up to 450. Forty of them are intensive learning disabilities, meaning 1 to 1 teacher, paras. We have students that need 2 paras, 3 paras and those are the students that normally would be outplaced. Just for an example, we outplaced one last week and it was $150,000 for one student. So, 40 students that enrolled, from kindergarten to first grade, are in our intensive learning autism program. Starting next year, we are moving already to 25 students. We have very intense needs here in Ludlow. We are very proud to keep them in district, but the amount of physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, psychology that we need is where this budget is blown out of proportion.

Mr. Goncalves: Before we go on to a different subject, how many of the special ed children that we have here, that need that help, are coming in on school choice?

Mrs. Nemeth: Very few.

Mr. Goncalves: What happens, and I'll ask a silly question, if one of those kids come in on school choice they're here and having to outsource them are we buying it because they were here when they needed to be?

Mrs. Nemeth: We usually split it with the district, correct?

Mr. Desjardins: If a school choice student moves into Town, or comes to this district from another Town, we automatically get $5,000 for that student. In June, every June, there is what's called the special ed increment and so what we do is we look at all those students that have higher costs and we submit it and the descending town has to reimburse us for that.

Mr. Goncalves: But the outsourcing where you just said, you had to send somebody out and it was $130-140, that would never be somebody that was school choice here from another community and because they live here, they go out and we're flipping the bill.

Mr. Nemeth: It's usually a discussion that is had with descending community and we usually agree to a 50% split.

Mr. Goncalves: So, somebody school choice's in then we get caught with a $60 or $70,000 bill?

Mrs. Nemeth: Yes.

Mr. Harrington: School choice is by lottery. We don't know the student's name. We don't know who they are. It's literally a number out of a hat that gets picked so we don't get to pick and choose who the school choice students are. We have 110 slots available for the school choice, so when 10 graduate, 20 graduate, we take that number and allocate it throughout the district. We had a lottery that just took place, I think in February, so we know who we are about to get but we don't know what those students are coming in with whether it's disabilities, whether they are high achieving, whether they're athletes, we don't know. It's truly by a lottery so, we can't cherry pick who we get.

Mr. Goncalves: Right, right no but do you see what I am getting at with the other situation? I mean wouldn't it be great if, for these communities to give us somebody that needs to be outsourced then we end up, they are not our residents and we're flipping $60-70,000.

Mrs. Nemeth: Right, and I like I said before not to offend anybody that has enrolled recently but I didn't know we had 40 available homes or apartments here in Ludlow but from September to now we...

Mr. Goncalves: You don't, you don't, I can tell you, you don't. I have a really good idea about what's available for housing in Ludlow.

Mrs. Nemeth: We have enrolled 40 students with legitimate addresses, legitimate licenses, legitimate paperwork and we have been very, very tough on the paperwork. They're really good then, 40 of them have been special ed.

Mr. Harrington: To speak to Mr. Gennette's point a little bit regarding state funding Chapter 70. Over the years, I've been on the board for 18 years and when I first got on, the state was providing about 55% of the funding for school districts. It is now flipped to where the town is taking 55% and the state is only providing 45%. So, the formula of Chapter 70 has changed where it has put the onus back on the town. Longmeadow, Wesley those wealthy communities, they can absorb it, the cities can also absorb it because they are the ones that benefited from the change in Chapter 70. Chicopee, Holyoke, Springfield are getting a much larger percentage.

Towns like Ludlow, South Hadley, Wilbraham we kind of get caught in this little ... zone where they just assume that, well they're wealthy enough to afford these increases, and you're exactly right the onus is being put back on the taxpayer and thankfully in Ludlow we have a strong industrial base, but it has been flipped where it was 55% from the state and now the Town is doing 55%. One other point about the state funding formula and the source is that we fall under unfunded mandates. You guys do as well too, but we really fall under unfunded mandates. If a student moves into Town tomorrow regardless of our funding supply, we have to provide student services for them and that's where special education comes in. We would have to take from regular education to support the special education department sometimes and it's incredibly challenging for Chris and whoever the superintendent is to balance that out because we have to prepare for the next year's budget. We don't know who might move in. On the reverse of that, we might have a student with high needs who moves out and now we have $150,000 that we can apply someplace else. We just had this discussion at our meeting just the other day. One of the reasons the school departments have the ability to kind of move money from line item to line item is because we have to have the ability to do that, but the unfunded mandates have really...education reform changed that in 1994 and it really has hampered a lot of school districts and how we can allocate the funds. To your point of the student populations going down, but the teacher level is still staying all the same, it's transferring regular education to special education. Fifteen years ago, we made a commitment, the school committee did at that time to bring more and more programs inhouse. Meaning if a student had a specific need, we're not going to tuition them out to a district we want them to stay in Ludlow because that's where their peers are, that's where they seem to do their best and to Mrs. Nemeth's point, other Towns are now tuitioning their students into us.

Mr. Goncalves: We get $5,000.

Mr. Harrington: Initially with $5,000 and then to Chris's point, you'll get a special education, it'll balance out later but initially you'll have to absorb those costs.

Mr. Goncalves: And am I right? Like we are around $14,000 and change a student?

Mr. Gennette: We are higher than that. I am looking at it right now. Ludlow is $17,500.

Mr. Goncalves: That's what, on which site James? The state sites?

Mr. Gennette: This is the state site. Compared to Longmeadow...I'm sorry this is 2020; so, it's gone up from that, I don't know how much, it looks like it's incremental. It's minor in increments going up from the state, but Longmeadow was at $15,532 at the same time. There's a $2,000 per student increase between Ludlow and Longmeadow.

Mr. Goncalves: Title 1 money, right?

Mr. Harrington: For special education, Chris can answer that.

Mr. Desjardins: Title 1 is not for special education. We get about 450, $450,000.

Mrs. Nemeth: The other thing just to note is that we have, we're part of the collaborative so we team up with seven other schools around us so, Longmeadow, Agawam, that side. We send schools to, what you've probably heard, C-tech. I mean that's a great opportunity for our students to go to C-tech to learn a trade, that seems to be where a lot of our students are choosing to go but next year...this year we spent $789,000 sending the students there which is fine, that's to be expected. Next year, we are allowing 8th graders to come in, because that's an unfunded mandate that we have to now start in 9th grade where we used to only start at 10th but we have to start it in 9th grade. We currently we have 36 students signed up, so we did the math and it's approximately $250,000 extra that will be paying to send those students out there.

Absolutely fine, but something we have to put into our budget. The other thing which I learned only last year as being the principal is if students choose to go to an online school, so they are not succeeding, and this has nothing to do with COVID, your online schools are called Connection Academy which is also termed TECCA, Greenfield Academy which is a completely online school, you get a Massachusetts diploma. I thought students just went there and signed up. It's actually the sending district that pays the approximately $8,000 for the students to do that. We had I believe 15 to 16 students go to TECCA which comes out of our budget also. Some of them we never even have seen. They've moved into Ludlow. They're going to TECCA. That's also part of our budget that isn't always understood.

Mr. Gennette: We lost our Chairman, so does anybody else have anything they'd like to say?

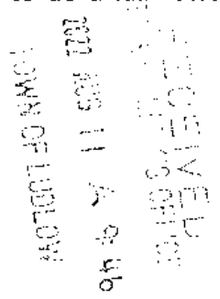
Mr. Silva: We're going to have to wait for him. He's got the only authority to allow speaking.

Mr. Gennette: I see. I still have the table.

Mr. Silva: Oh, you did, I'm sorry.

Mr. Gennette: As far as you talking about special resources and stuff like that and pulling hats out, everybody in the state is required to do that, right? Every town?

Mr. Harrington: Anybody who accepts school choice. They're supposed to do a fair lottery system.



Mr. Gennette: But not every school accepts...

Mr. Harrington: Not every school has school choice.

Mr. Gennette: Do you know if Longmeadow does?

Mr. Harrington: They absolutely do.

Mr. Gennette: So, we are looking at a difference between our average per student and their average per student by about $2,000 per...and I don't know how we rank in the school system in the state and where we are division wise. Are we even relatively close to Longmeadow or are they better than we are, are we worse?

Mrs. Nemeth: What are you comparing?

Mr. Gennette: So, just the money versus where we rank in the state as far as the school district.

Mrs. Nemeth: Rank as in MCAS scores, rank in attendance?

Mr. Gennette: Sure.

Mrs. Nemeth: Rank in discipline, rank in athletics, rank in...

Mr. Gennette: Rank in MCAS.

Mrs. Nemeth: Yes, nobody is going to be a Longmeadow; different demographics, different social and economic status. We are considered one of...I'm biased of course, but statistically we have improved leaps and bounds the last couple of years. Our MCAS scores have gone from the middle school 14% up to 50% passing and at the high school, when I came in it was at 30% it's now close to 70% passing on the first try. Our graduation rate is right up there with Longmeadow along

with those attending four-year colleges. So, we are not...we are equivalent, I would say, closely to Minnechaug. We're twins on that one.

Mr. Gennette: Thank you.

Mr. Goncalves: $450,000...where is that in the budget? So, we're $35,000,000 now that 400 comes in on top of the money that the Town gives you? Is that it?

Mr. Desjardins: Yes.

Mr. Goncalves: And so whatever budget and expenses your proposing to us, there's 400 of expenses somewhere to offset that 400 you're not showing us or it's actually the net you're proposing here, we do spy 400.

Mr. Desjardins: No, it's already netted out with the number we give you.

Mr. Goncalves: It's netted out. So, you've already spent that, and we are not seeing those positions or whatever it is; electricity, water, etc. Yeah? Okay.

Mr. Goncalves: So, $2,000,000 ESSER III, there's an ESSER I and an ESSER II, right? Can you tell us about that money? The amounts and what we did with it?

Mr. Desjardins: ESSER I is the smaller, $363,082 and that was used last year. We funded extra positions. We had to hire for space requirements to keep students away from each other. We had to add staff to open extra classrooms to keep the students six feet apart. We also bought Chromebooks, many Chromebooks so every student would have one for remote learning. There were a lot of tech upgrades that were done, again to accommodate for the remote learning needs. Cleaning of the school, PPE, obviously there was a lot of that bought and that was it.

Mr. Goncalves: The Dias Foundation never did anything for the schools on Chromebooks?

Mrs. Nemeth: I don't think so, maybe the library.

Mr. Harrington: I'm sure there was some technology involved in the library, but I'm sure it wasn't specifically for the Chromebooks.

Mr. Goncalves: Okay, and number two?

Mr. Desjardins: ESSER II, that was in this year's budget...

Mr. Goncalves: Like a million two, something like that?

Mr. Desjardins: Yeah, actually it's a little more than that. We used $1,000,334 this year in the budget; paraprofessionals, we paid substitutes from that line, more software and hardware upgrades. The software costs that we have are now higher because of all the remote components that we brought in. Obviously, there's a software requirement with him licensing, etc. That was paid from that as well. A custodian salary was paid out of that. Rather than laying them off, we kept one in. There were teachers' salaries paid from that. A lot of that grant, quite honestly, was kind of used to keep the staff at the levels we had...

Mr. Goncalves: For me, if you're hiring substitutes is it because you're covering vacations because I would think that the teachers aren't getting paid and that money would come over for the subs, right? If you're not actually increasing...

Mr. Desjardins: It's not for vacations. It would be for sick days, items like that.

Mr. Goncalves: But it normally happens.

Mr. Desjardins: Oh yeah.

Mr. Goncalves: It's something that is ongoing anyhow, right?

Mr. Desjardins: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Mr. Goncalves: So, that's like those ESSER's you just mentioned are 3.7 million...

Mrs. Nemeth: ESSER III or II?

Mr. Desjardins: Actually, ESSER III is about 3.2 million.

Mr. Goncalves: So that's even more.

Mr. Desjardins: ESSER II is about 1.4 million and ESSER I was $360,000.

Mr. Goncalves: Okay, so about 5 million? Fair, somewhere around there?

Mr. Desjardins: Give or take, sure.

Mr. Goncalves: So, how much, like compare that to FY21...did we have ESSER money?

Mr. Desjardins: In '21 we did on ESSER I. We had the $360,000.

Mr. Goncalves: And so, before that, there was no ESSER money?

Mr. Desjardins: No.

Mr. Goncalves: 6 million or 5 million that we just got in in the last couple of years that we didn't have prior.

Mr. Desjardins: Correct.

Mr. Harrington: That were targeted specifically toward COVID impact by ..., you know the first year was PPE as Chris just mentioned and then we were able to put in budgets...and as Chris just mentioned we had to socially distance. When the kids did come back, we had to get more staff for that and then of course every time a student tested that cohort including the teacher would have to be out for a certain amount of time and we had to get a substitute teacher which was very hard to find.

Mr. Goncalves: Just for ha ha's, how many teachers could I hire with the $5 million for a year?

Mrs. Nemeth: I can't do that...

Mr. Desjardins: 100.

Mr. Goncalves: 100?

Mr. Desjardins: Yeah, give or take new teachers.

Mrs. Nemeth: All of the schools had ventilations that were required to be updated. The high school had all of the windows that had to be opened. They never opened. There was probably about $250,000 maybe, with all the equipment that needed to be used to open every single

window. The amount of windows that had to be, well you had to have your windows open teaching, so it got pretty cold in the winter, so ventilation if I remember correctly, windows, HVAC, plumbing, um...

Mr. Desjardins: We had a number of expenses. Some of that, the HVAC, a lot of that was paid with the Town COVID money, but there were so many other things. The request for air conditioners in classrooms was... We put in so many air conditioners it was insane. Then of course, you have to hire somebody to actually install them etc. It's not just a window unit you just throw in a window because we don't have the typical home windows at our schools. There was a lot of money spent on that kind of equipment as well.

Mr. Goncalves: Let's get through ESSER questions from the Board and any comments. We will give you guys a couple of minutes as long as we are not dwelling on the same thing over and over and then we can go from there onto whatever we want to talk about next.

Mr. DeBarge: I do have a question actually. I'm looking at ESSER II and I guess my confusion is on the salary part. Let's say a school custodian salary is $227,214, special education aids $527,579, are those new positions just for this? And then you're either going to let them go because this isn't sustainable or you're going to or was this part of the 5% that you are asking for, for this year going forward.

Mr. Desjardins: There were some new positions that were pulled in because of COVID. A lot of this is used basically to balance the budget.

Mr. Goncalves: Part of what you're asking for now is the seven and two. Right, the seven positions you want to carry forward and the two custodial of those positions that were created?

Mr. Desjardins: We already netted that out of the budget.

Mrs. Nemeth: But we also have the step raises that...

Mr. Goncalves: The contractual stuff, sure.

Mrs. Nemeth: Again, get off the 5% that's not on the table, 3%, 2.5% we can work with that. We could have worked with that. We are working with 1% right now. I just want to ask a question, what is the purpose of this meeting? To analyze our budget completely? Or to talk about the process? Or to work together to come to some solution moving forward? What is the purpose of this meeting?

Mr. Goncalves: Yes, all of those and so as the Selectmen with a 75-million-dollar budget when there's 35 of it in one department about 0.45 cents on a dollar up until now, we all really had no idea what's going on with your ESSER money, ARPA money and 35-million-dollar budget. We felt it was important for us to have a really good understanding and I know as an individual I'm getting asked by the constituents a lot of questions. So, rather than emailing you, and then I know the answer unless I tell Manny and Derek, put it on the table and we can all talk about it at one shot and we've got the Finance Committee that will listen in so you don't have to repeat a lot of this conversation and everybody has a better understanding what we're doing with 50% of the budget, basically, the town's budget. For me in my opinion is what I wanted.

Mrs. Nemeth: Are we the biggest department in the town?

Mr. Goncalves: You're 0.45 cents on a dollar, 45% of our budget, 35 million out of 75 million.

Mrs. Nemeth: So, we should have the biggest budget.

Mr. Goncalves: You're the biggest employer of the town, obviously and more building than anybody else.

Mr. DeBarge: Mr. Chairman let me segue into this. I know where she is going with this. I was going to talk about this at the end too. The difference between 8% for one department, 1% for another, the police department has 42 total; I think they're earmarked for another one; so 43 total. We granted new positions there. We were asked for nine new positions, a total of somewhere around 1.1 million dollars in salary and benefits and didn't grant it because we can't afford it. The fire department is likeminded or like in numbers we granted a position there, or some different things there, promotions I should say. But to your point about being the biggest department, I think that's where...you can't make that comparison between one department getting this percentage and the other one getting another where there's needs, well what I'm saying is...that's what I'm hearing. That's what I have heard, and I just don't think that you can make a comparison with those departments. Let me speak for me, I know when I listen to department heads with the Level 1 budget to Level 2 and all of that because I know that there's this idea out there that maybe some of us don't think about the future and sustainability as we've mentioned and I know I consider that but one thing I'm gravely concerned with moving forward, and this is without frivolous federal spending and the inflation with the way it is and all of that, I'm concerned with how we are sustaining our employees in this town, salary wise, with contracts. We are behind with some. We are way behind with others. We have to continue to keep up to be like, if you want to compare to Wilbraham, the school, fine, that's your realm but when I think visually of that town and our town, I see great, great differences. I would like to put money that we have available in our budget without going over the levy into different places that would make our town better as a whole. Sometimes for some departments it's a larger amount of money for one budget year and sometimes it's different for another budget year.

Mr. Mullen: Just a quick question for your Mr. DeBarge. Are you talking about from a total compensation package looking at employees across the whole town? Are you talking about everything from benefits to where we are from market rate? What we are paying our folks? Are you talking about looking at that entire employee...?

Mr. DeBarge: I'm talking in basic generality to be honest with you because of what we get asked for by every department. You have to consider if you hire, if you give the school department a certain percentage, well, obviously that's going to be a lot more money.

Mrs. Nemeth: Right, I think we are all on the same page. I don't want to belabor how we spend our budget unless you guys really want to do that, but my understanding of this meeting was to fix the process and I just hope going forward that the departments heads can sit down like we do at the school department. I mean as a superintendent I sat down with the principals; what do you need, what do you need, what do you need? And kind of take turns as to who is going to get the bigger pot of the pot. As a principal, I sit down with my department heads and say okay, we need new social studies book this year, we'll hold off on Math but that's our 5-year plan. I would have liked to have seen this year sitting down with the fire chief, the police chief, whoever and talk about how much money do we have as a town and where is all the pieces of the pie going as a town. I'm not here to say the school department needs everything and I don't think any of our school committee members believe that either. We just want to have a fair play in it and it just didn't seem fair this year. That's fine, we're moving forward, I've got contracts to sign, I've got things to do. We're fine with that. After we received the 1%, I called the police chief and had a conversation. What are your biggest needs? You've got $250,000, what are your biggest needs? He had no idea about his budget. He's like "what do you mean I've got $250,000, I haven't even talked to anybody." So, if we could of all sat at the table in November and he would have said, "Mr. DeBarge, I need 4 policemen" and fire said, "I need 7 firemen" and I said, that's fine all we need is an increase because we're are selling contracts. We would have made decisions as a group which is what I think the Board of Selectmen would like this town to run as is equally across the board. Yes, we're the biggest department. We understand that but just to see the process

this year. I think as a school committee I went back and said, is this how it always runs, and the answer was, no. I am just trying to say I thought this meeting was about the process; here's our information about our numbers, we will do whatever you want; we are fine; we settled; we understand what we are doing, tomorrow is a different day. I just hope moving forward the process is a little bit different, number one, as a sit in superintendent, number two, as the principal next year and number three, as a town resident. That's my spiel.

Mr. Goncalves: Mr. Silva

Mr. Silva: I'm not ready. I'm not ready. I think we should have the town accountant speak a little bit about the process that we've been doing and what's wrong. I just got to say that you are a member of the budget subcommittee, you are a member of the budget subcommittee, I'm a member of the budget subcommittee, she's a member of the budget subcommittee and I believe we have, obviously, Ellie, which is not with us but Marc will be a member of the budget subcommittee and, do we have another one? Never shows but ok. Yeah, so we have a budget subcommittee and we go over this stuff.

Kim Downing: No, I'm going to interrupt you.

Mr. Silva: I understand that, but we did, I sat on it. We did.

Kim Downing: I was there at every meeting.

Mr. Silva: And yes, we proposed that we go to the Selectmen with this budget. We proposed it, the Level 2 budget, we sat in, we proposed it.

Kim Downing: Where did those numbers come from Mr. Silva?

Mr. Silva: They came, Ellie and Kim wrote the numbers...

Kim Downing: Not the subcommittee, no.

Mr. Silva: Well yes, they proposed those numbers, but we reviewed them.

Kim Downing: No, no because Lisa was there at the same meetings. I have the sheets we were handed. We were handed in December a full sheet. We were handed in January a full sheet when we got there. The numbers were plugged in and at that time the school committee, the school got 0%. And that's when there was discussion, am I wrong Lisa?

Mrs. Nemeth: No, that's what I said.

Mr. Silva: That's initial.

Kim Downing: The next meeting, we had was on 2/15 and that was, we walked in again, there was really no discussion, except Lisa spoke about getting 0%. She was surprised. I spoke about a couple of other things which was too much in finance and not enough in stabilization and we really didn't have any further discussion. We went to the 2/15 meeting and the school got 1% and that was after I met with Lisa and a couple of the school committee members and we talked about it. We did a liaison meeting and I said to her, I don't know where these numbers came from, these numbers were not plugged in, they were plugged in at Town Hall level. Then on 2/19, we went back and we got a final sheet and this was the final number showing us that we had $86,000 and change left in our levy limit which meant, and again, the adjusted numbers were not, there was no input ...comments we made at our prior meeting, so these numbers were not plugged in or discussed or researched or backgrounded by anyone except Town Hall level. That is totally different than prior years, maybe not COVID...

Mr. Silva: I disagree with that. I've been on the budget subcommittee for 4 years. Every year, we have done this process, we have sat here, we have discussed where we could go with this, our numbers are our numbers, we cannot go over the budget or levy.

Kim Downing: Of course not, of course not.

Mr. Silva: The Selectmen met with the Fire Department. They requested to come in. The Police Department requested to come in. They proposed what they needed to us and we sat here, and we decided, well we can't do this, this is ridiculous but here is what we can do, we gave them a little bit this year. We'll give the Fire a little this year. So, those numbers were put into this budget.

Kim Downing: You met mainly on new positions and new things. You did not sit down and go line item by line item on the regular budget to see if they can find any money to fulfill any of those new positions. What happens is... you know there was a comment made to me that the Finance Committee shouldn't make the budget. Nobody makes the budget. The budget is made by the wants and needs of the community. It is overseen by the departments and their heads and for me how I feel is that the Finance Committee partners with the department heads to fit their wants and needs into the entire town's available budgets and what we can afford as an entire town. That never happened, now I'm excluding COVID. So, if you've been on for 4 years; that's this year and 2 years of COVID. Prior to that, I can tell you it was not. The final numbers were not plugged in. The Finance Committee worked with each department head and went line item by line item and we plugged in a Level 2 budget. Then we went through with the Town Accountant, she gave us the final numbers, can it work? Will it work within the Town? How will this affect our tax rate, our levy limit? All of that. Then all those numbers were totaled up and the Level 3 were final, voted numbers that came to you, as the Board of Selectmen, for a final recommendation. This is what we feel sitting with every single department, line item by line item and understanding everything. That didn't happen this year. These numbers were all plugged in by the town...

Mr. Silva: Can I just stop you for one second? Let's stop with "the town". You want to talk about the Selectmen's office or something...but the town, the town is all of us. We are all trying to do the same thing, all trying to...

Kim Downing: Representatives of the town. Okay, I'm not going to single out anybody.

Mr. Silva: Right, but the department heads are supposed to communicate with you, communicate with the executive secretary, with the accountant, it's...send in their needs which I believe they did and they should communicate with you. Now, when we get this, and I saw some meetings, okay, I watched the meetings, say that the Selectmen voted this...we didn't vote on anything.

Kim Downing: We did.

Mr. Silva: No, we did not vote on anything! We voted on proposing Level 2, obviously we can't vote on a budget, where's the budget voted on? The budget is voted at town meeting.

Kim Downing: Well yes, of course. But this is the recommended budget that you were going to put forward.

Mr. Silva: We usually get a level, a Level 2 but we usually put parameters. So, okay each department has a 2% increase in expenditures and that's it or and then positions, we are, yes, we are ultimately the ones' that vote on positions.

Kim Downing: The positions absolutely are voted on. You get the background, you get the history and then it's put in as a classification change, if they can afford it. Beyond that I can tell you this is not...and Lisa, you've talked to how many people? I've talked to the police chief, the fire chief, everyone on my committee. This is not the process that used to happen. We don't care if you change the process and I was here last September, when I wasn't the chairman, and I said to you, we don't care if you want to change the process but just let us know and okay that's fine you've done all the work. The problem comes when you get departments that haven't sat, line by line, which is where you can clean a lot of money. When you sit, and you work with every department, you will be surprised. They are willing to give up things. They find things. It's compared to last year and the year before. It's hours and days and meetings. It's at least 2½ months' worth of work meeting every single week, but you can find a half a million to three quarters of a million dollars in those line items. Now that didn't happen because you can't tell me that Ellie or Kim, I'm not saying whatever you did was wrong, you guys didn't sit down with every department and go line by line. Because at the last budget subcommittee meeting, Ellie commented that, well we don't need to bother line by line, that's just crazy and that's fine, you want to do totals, you do totals, that's your decision but...

Mr. Silva: What you're telling me is that the departments did not sit down and go line by line with the Finance Committee, which should happen, I'm not disagreeing...

Kim Downing: It's not happening now.

Mr. Silva: That's way before the budget subcommittee sits here and says, here's what we got...

Kim Downing: That's right.

Mr. Silva: So, if that didn't happen then there's a miscommunication.

Mr. Goncalves: Why didn't that happen?

Kim Downing: Because the process was changed.

Mr. Silva: Okay, so let's back...I'm sorry, Mr. Chairman, it's up to you.

Mr. Goncalves: Yeah, go ahead Kim.

Kim Collins: So, I just want to speak to what happened to this budget. So, way back, probably September-October, I sent out emails to all the departments. They get a spreadsheet, they can put in their salaries, put in what their contract negotiations resulted in 2% raises, 3% raises, whatever it is. There was also a 1% raise put in because our insurance is changing July 1st, everybody put that in. I get emails from every single department. I communicate with every single department. We talk about their budget. I've spoken with the police chief 3 times about his budget. I have spoken with the fire chief about his budget. I speak with every department all throughout the year trying to figure out what they need so I have a really good understanding of what the departments need. In addition to that, the departments speak with the Town Administrator and she, well at the time, had a very good understanding of what was going on in other departments. When the initial Level I requests came through, Level I is our requested budget, Level II is our recommended budget that Ellie and I go through, we bring it to the subcommittee, the subcommittee votes on it, to send it to the Board of Selectmen. The Board of Selectmen review it, if they approve it, they send it to the Finance Committee. It becomes a Level III budget to be reviewed by the Finance Committee. The Finance Committee gives the recommendations at town meeting, but first they come back. They meet with the Board. They determine...these are the changes we'd like to make after they meet with all of the departments. That is the third process in the budget. I provided a detailed budget to the Finance Committee over a month ago. At the last meeting, it was said at the meeting, that that detailed listing did

not go to the Finance Committee numbers because you weren't meeting with the departments, so it didn't matter. The concern that I have is the budget process and I'll say Level I, everybody's requests came in 1.6 million over excess levy. The town can't afford that. We would be in an override. Ellie and I go through that Level I budget, and we look at, okay the Board has approved all of these departmental positions to our classification plan. They only approve the positions. They can't approve the funding. Town meeting has to do that. So, I go through and I say, okay well they approved a grant writer, they approved a police officer, they approved a fireman, so, we have to go in and say...we have to add the amounts to the request so when Finance Committee reviews it, they can look through and say, you know should these really be in here and just because they have been approved positions doesn't mean they are approved for funding. That has to go to town meeting. Our Level I was 1.6 million over budget. Ellie and I went through all the departments. We said okay if they requested two positions we could only give them one. If they requested nine positions, we could only give them one, we could only give them two. We made all of those changes. We've got changes in the health insurance. We've got changes in the retirement. We had to make all those changes. After we did that, we were still about a million over excess levy. At that point, we had to reduce the school. Once we went to the subcommittee, we had a couple hundred thousand in the levy. We went to the subcommittee. We talked to the superintendent. We talked to you. We talked to Manny. We were able to add in a half a percent because of the insurance. Then later, we reduced more positions and we gave the school 1% so the 1% increase is the equivalent of $340,000. Every 1% that we add to the school is another $340,000. If we add anymore to the school, that means that the three positions that were approved by the town cannot be given to them. We would have to take those positions out of the budget. Over the past few years, our budget is increasing sustainably due to debt for the Senior Center, for the school. It's increasing because we now have to insure empty buildings, vacant buildings. They are twice as expensive. It's increasing because health insurance is going up, retirement is going up. There are so many costs that we cannot control that we absolutely have to put in the budget before we give anything to anybody else. What I can tell you is since I've been here, I've been here six years, this is the budget process we conduct...wait Kim, I think there is some confusion because we are calling it Level I, Level II and Level III whereas before it was called; requested, recommended and approved. If you look at the past two years, these were the first two years from the six years that I've been here that the Finance Committee did not agree with the Board of Selectmen's recommendations to go to town meeting. The Board two years ago, there was an increase to add a facility's manager to an existing position, the Finance Committee did not agree with that. We went to town meeting the Board wanted to do it, Finance Committee stood up, the Town agreed that's not a good idea, so the budget was reduced. Last year, there were 4 positions that that were added to the budget. The Board wanted to keep them. Finance Committee did not. So, for the second year, Finance Committee disagreed with the Board of Selectmen. We went to town meeting, the Finance Committee stood up for 4 items. The Town did agree with you on one of those items. It was recreation. And then 3 of those positions the Town said, no, we want to keep them. So, the process worked, the Town decided, that is our form of government.

Kim Downing: Absolutely.

Kim Collins: The concern that I have here is that we are stuck in a budget process. We are on Level II which needs to be reviewed by the Finance Committee and that has not happened.

Kim Downing: First of all, to respond to you, everything that you've done...we understand and all of it. The only difference is that...the budget subcommittee would get together, and they would make a recommendation of guidelines, not money, no totals, guidelines that would go out to the departments. The departments, would definitely fill in, they would get with where their budgets were last year. That's what they would use to fill in their requested budgets. The second step, instead of being the Town Administrator and the Accountant, didn't fill in any numbers. That's when the Finance Committee would meet starting usually in January with every

department and go line item by line item and we would come up with what would be this Level II. Those are from the guidelines.

Kim Collins: Mr. Chairman. I totally have to disagree with you. That's not the process and it has never been, since I've been here, maybe it was seven years ago, I don't know.

Mr. Goncalves: Why don't' we do this...I think, maybe it's something we can visit first couple of meetings in April to make sure everyone is on the same page.

Kim Downing: You just need to decide. You guys need to decide what the process is. This is fine if that's what you want to do. You are missing a lot of available money but I'm going to tell you it's too late now for Finance. I have met with every major department personally. We sent out a letter that if there was anybody who would like to meet with us, talk to me. I spoke impersonally, on the phone to 2 or 3 different departments, explained the situation, did they want to come in, nope, they were happy, everything. So, we had figured that we would have a few next week. Nobody wants to come in because we've talked to everybody because there's no changes that could be made on this budget. There's no room and we got the budget on March 2nd. That's when the Finance Committee got the budget. The departments got the Level II budget on the 3rd after your email to me, right?

Kim Collins: I actually gave the budget to Bev over a month ago.

Kim Downing: Not this one.

Kim Collins: Well, that was given to you at the subcommittee.

Kim Downing: No, this one was given out, left for the Finance Committee on our meeting in this room on the 2nd.

Kim Collins: ...subcommittee, it's the same report.

Kim Downing: But they were not...the changes that were made and suggested and the subcommittee were not made on those sheets. They were made on this sheet.

Kim Collins: On what sheet?

Kim Downing: On this sheet.

Kim Collins: They are on both sheets. I've given you a detailed listing of all of the departments...it mirrors that report.

Kim Downing: Okay, alright. So, that's fine it was still given to us on the 2nd. We met on the 20th... No, we met on the 17th. That was our last meeting...on the 19th. The Board of Selectmen met on the 22nd and they voted on this budget, Level II budget, to approve that...

Mr. Goncalves: To send it to you, I believe.

Kim Collins: Send it to the Finance Committee to review.

Kim Downing: Right, so you wrote it on the 22nd of February, well, my meeting on the 2nd when we got this, when the rest of the team got this, and we sat down with no changes that could be made because the totals are the totals. Us going through...and we don't have any time.

Mr. DeBarge: I'm sorry Kim, I've got to ask you this because you...it's almost like you're calling our town accountant incompetent because you're...

Kim Downing: No! Absolutely not!

Mr. DeBarge: Let me finish, because you're saying that there's money left out there. So, my question is, if there's money left out there because I have the utmost amount of faith in Kim and Ellie when she was here, I've been on the Board of Selectmen for six years and this process has been the same way since I've been here. Now let me finish. If you meet with the department heads and go line by line by line, who sets up that meeting?

Mr. Goncalves: And when does it happen?

Kim Downing: The Finance Committee sets it up after we get the guidelines and we get their requested budgets, not Level II, we get their requested budget and we start setting up probably in the end of January, beginning of February and we meet every single week and then we go through until we are done usually the end of March, middle of April sometime and we calculate up what they are willing to do and I'm not saying...she's an excellent accountant, ok excellent. She's dealing with totals, totals and that's...

Mr. DeBarge: ...it's the Level II budget with $86,000 left or under the levy limit and you get that Level II budget, and then you go ahead and meet with all of them and you find this money that's left over then you come back to us? So, I still don't understand what the ...it is.

Kim Downing: First of all, the Finance Committee should have come in before this Level II budget was done.

Mr. DeBarge: I don't think any of us have a problem with that but like I said, who does the meeting between you and the departments?

Kim Downing: The Finance Committee sets it up.

Mr. DeBarge: So, why didn't you do it in September?

Kim Downing: Because we...in September?

Mr. DeBarge: Yeah, or November or...

Kim Downing: The request comes in...and the request came in from the departments.

Kim Collins: So, think the requests were this year...

Kim Downing: ...December or January, right?

Kim Collins: This year the HR Director asked that all positions be requested by October 15th. We received them mid-October and then in November the requests, we put the requests together. Now Kim, I just have to point something out, because you keep saying you get the requests, right? Have I ever given you a Level I budget and told you to figure it out with a 1.6-million-dollar deficit? That's never happened in the six years I have been here.

Kim Downing: No, because what happens...we would get requested budgets that sometimes had a deficit of a million dollars and that's when the finance committee would sit down, massage the budget down, take those requests and we would come up with the next level of recommended and we would work those numbers, you would work those numbers...you do your magic because she is excellent. There's no question about it she's excellent. She's worked the numbers up and see where we were with the massaging. The Finance Committee doesn't make magic. We do

the grunt work. The grunt work is sitting with every department line by line saying, "well, last year you didn't use this line item, can you give it up this year?" "Sure." There's another 20 grand.

Kim Downing: When we finish totaling up that lined box after requested, we work it up and then we say, ok, where are we? Now, if we are still over then we go back, after talking to them, and we make cuts. In the meantime, Ellie and Kim come in and say our insurance is either up or down; this or that; all the outside affects and then we sit down and we say, this is what we need to come up with, it's a final, probably Level III, whatever you want to call it and that's what gets recommended. It fits ... of the Town. That's what gets recommended to the Board of Selectmen and they want to make a few changes, fine, and then it goes to town meeting. Now, we are not complaining because we didn't get a chance to sit with the departments...utilized us as the grunt people to do all the hard work, the hours and the meetings and the days.

Mr. Silva: Kim, when would the Finance Committee like to meet with the departments? When would they like, and actually have time to meet with them...?

Kim Downing: This year?

Mr. Silva: This year, we are obviously beyond that.

Kim Downing: No. It should be done as soon as the departments send in the requests to Kim and she'll send us the sheets...

Mr. Silva: Do we have liaisons? Has any liaisons texted the department and said, I am your liaison, I would like to meet with you.

Kim Downing: Yes.

Mr. Silva: And did they?

Kim Downing: Yes.

Mr. Silva: So, if they did, I don't understand what the issue is.

Kim Downing: Because what happened was, we, the Finance Committee, didn't get and I don't believe the departments got this finished...

Mr. Silva: It's not finished Kim, you keep saying finished, that these numbers, totals...

Kim Downing: These totals were never filled in, so they never went until whatever time you say, whether it was the end of February or whatever, this was never done before so the departments wait until they put in their requested budget. Then we get it, Finance Committee sets up the meetings starting in January, February, March, some of April.

Mr. Silva: What you're telling me, January you would like to sit with each department; the Finance Committee would like to sit with each department and go through the budget.

Kim Downing: It takes months, yes, we start.

Mr. Goncalves: What prohibited you from doing that this year, exactly.

Kim Downing: Because we never, because Kim and Ellie plugged in all the numbers and there was no levy limit left and we didn't get this until the end of February, beginning of March.

Mr. Silva: ...numbers are plugged in, but those numbers are numbers that she plugs in. It's just a look at...they can certainly be changed...

Kim Downing: Of course, yes, of course, if it was done in January.

Mr. Silva: Right, so what you're telling us, okay and what I think we should be going to, and let's forget this year, obviously, hopefully the budget, the Finance Committee could look at it somewhat, at least go over and see if there is anything you can find and give a recommendation, be whatever it may be, but from here on you, the Finance Committee, are requesting that they in January get the budgets as whatever way that the...Marc, you're on the hot seat and Kim, whatever they look at it and say, hey look at Finance look at this, start your process.

Mr. Goncalves: And I think that if you don't have that Level I or that initial set, what's wrong with January looking at last year's budget and start to dissect that...

Kim Downing: We didn't have the sheets.

Mr. Goncalves: You didn't have last year's budget sheets?

Kim Downing: We didn't get any paperwork until the end of February, beginning of March.

Mr. Silva: Let's move forward.

Kim Collins: I just want to point out that everything that I do with the departments I do cc the Chairman and at the time, I think, the Chairman might have been ...

Kim Downing: It was someone else. It was...it was someone else.

Kim Collins: Okay, so, last year it would have been sent out in October, in November, in January, in February. So, all of those items do go to the Chairman all leading up to this process. If the Finance Committee did not receive them, I apologize for that but that would be because they didn't get somebody to you from your chairman. The concern that I have, like if you're trying to determine how we are going to move forward, my question is, does the Finance Committee really want the budget just requested by the departments where the Town Administrator and the Town Accountant have not reviewed it at all and try to get you within a levy limit, you just want to see the 1.6 million negative and then the Finance Committee is going to solve the budget issues?

Kim Downing: We don't solve the issue, that's the point. We don't solve it, but yes that's what we used to do when I was Chairman, way back and that's four years ago.

Mr. Goncalves: We are going to move on. There's a lot of people and we are getting a little off subject, yes James.

Mr. Gennette: I'm going to be quick. Most of us at this table right here are elected officials and we are an oversight. We pay good people like Ms. Collins to do her job and then they submit those to us for our review to move on. We don't get into the day to day. You as an elected board as well do not get into the day to day. That's why you're getting a Level II budget. They come to us after they've done all their work that we pay them to do to figure all of that out and then we say, you know what, this looks pretty good, send it over to Finance to see if they can find anything. That's what you receive, that's Level II, and you did get it two months ago...not two months ago, a month ago because I watched both of your Finance Committee meetings and your first one, which was two meetings ago, you sat at that meeting and said, this is already done, there's nothing to do. You didn't schedule any meetings at that time...

Kim Downing: It was too late.

Mr. Gennette: It wasn't too late. It was a month ago. Now at the last meeting, you guys had mentioned that you needed to start calling people in, but that was now two meetings before you started calling people in. My point is that if you're an elected official you're only supposed to be overseeing what's going on and if the Town Accountant has prepared stuff to present to people and different boards to make those decisions then that's what you have to work with. It goes to us. It goes to you. You give us your recommendations and then we say we agree or disagree it's going to Town Meeting. That's all it is.

Kim Downing: But it should be reversed. That's all I'm saying.

Mr. Goncalves: Alright we can talk about that process a different time. I think we can agree that we are beating a dead horse now, not a lot we can do right now, but maybe we do need to fine tune that and come up with something sooner rather than later. On the balance, and I think one of the things that I heard over here was 1%, 5%, 4% and I think the balance of the departments have come through with an idea and a plan, not just a number. So, maybe next year a little bit earlier on you can come in and say you know we need five more teachers, not 1%, we need, you know, we need another custodian, this is what it's going to cost and maybe that way a little earlier on we have a better idea and it's just not you guys are hoping to get 5 or 6 and then when you got zero you've got mad and now you're going to be happy to get 1 or 2. But it's like, I think, if we gave 0 to the police department we'd be in trouble and they'd just wouldn't be excited to get 2 they would have a specific reason why they needed the 2 and the 0 absolutely off the table and we would know what it is.

Mrs. Nemeth: I think that's Ms. Downing's point and I'm not going to beat the dead horse, but if you would have given us all parameters to start at 2% and you can't go more than 3%...

Mr. Goncalves: I believe that goes out, we gave an indication to everybody what it was that we were focused on.

Kim Collins: The parameters in the past have always been go by your contracts for your personnel, 2% if you don't have a contract. Well so the town always goes by 2% because we never get more than 2. The Town goes by 2% if you don't have a contract, negotiated yet, and it's always been since I've been here because we've been very tight, no increase to general expenses.

Mrs. Nemeth: Right, and that's what we came forward with.

Kim Collins: Our parameters for this year because, everybody...we haven't had any new positions in the past six years. We haven't had any increases to general expenses...

Mrs. Nemeth: I'm not asking for any new positions. We are asking for 2% minimum.

Kim Downing: But there were no guidelines.

Kim Collins: The guidelines said, give us your 2%...

Mrs. Nemeth: What guidelines?

Kim Collins: When we sent them out to everybody back in early October, it was either the end of September early October and I do cc the Business Manager so...

Mr. Desjardins: But the school budget is a little bit different with that.

Kim Collins: School's different because you're parameters...

Mr. Desjardins: You give a total.

Kim Collins: ...generally the school gives us one number. They say our budget is going to be 35 million and we, that's what we get. Over the past couple of years, probably the past two or three years, the school has started putting in detailed budgets from Level II, not necessarily Level I. They just put in a total and then Level II we usually get a very detailed request. So, the Town's parameters this year said, 2% if you don't have a contract. If you have a contract, let us know what your department needs. So, we didn't give a parameter to say you can only increase it 2%, you can only increase it 3...what does your department need and then we reviewed that.

Mrs. Nemeth: I just want to make one comment. Mr. Silva said that usually you go with 2% parameters, which we did and Kim you also said, after Level I we said we can't give Fire or Police two positions we will give them one. We have to cut the school budget that's the concern right there is that yes they are paid positions and those were the decisions that were made, but I know talking to other department heads it would have been better to sit at the table and say perhaps they don't need those two positions we can, you know, the school's need is bigger, or we could of said, oh yeah, we absolutely can go with 0 percent. We understand the fire as a town. We're not in here, singleton here all the department heads would like to work together but we didn't have that chance from Level I to Level II the numbers were just given. The other thing I also said at subcommittee I literally said why am I here because as Ms. Downing said the numbers were given and I go okay why am I here then I thought we were going to discuss all this and talk about it and the answer was, it's pretty much there.

Kim Collins: The subcommittee has the right to change anything they want. Nobody voted to change anything. Everybody voted to send it to the Board of Selectmen. The concern that you brought up is actually Fin Com's review. When that budget goes to Fin Com, they sit with every single department, bigger departments. They don't sit with all the little ones that are $1,400 or this, or that. The bigger departments, they meet with all of them and they come up with what everybody's real need and then they come with recommendations to the Board. That process did not happen this year.

Mrs. Nemeth: How does the process go from Level I to Level II and the two members just pick and say you don't get this because they need that, that should be someone... I think that should be the department's decision to play that role and then the Level II goes to the Board of Selectmen.

Mr. Silva: Those are recommendations, the two members did. Let's understand that. They don't just pick. They don't just say this is it. They recommend this. They actually put it before us.

Mrs. Nemeth: Recommend and pick is pretty much the same thing.

Mr. Silva: Okay, they recommended.

Mrs. Nemeth: Because they said, the school department gets 0 percent.

Mr. Silva: That's what they recommended. They recommended 0 and you're not getting 0. Then we analyze a little more. We got a little more money; you got a half. You're not getting a half. So now, we went further, we did further things and said, well, it looks like we could give the school 1.

Mrs. Nemeth: But if the parameters are always 2 with no contracts, we're going to work with 1, but I'm just saying, there's an equity and there's where, a tighter process needs to occur, and department heads need to be a process of that, sitting at a table all together, not possibly meeting one on one.

Mr. Silva: I've never heard of that. All the departments together?

Kim Downing: Yes, with the Finance Committee.

Chip Harrington: Yes, used to hold quarterly meetings, all departments are supposed to...

Mr. Goncalves: ...quarterly meetings where everybody came into the Selectmen and gave us updates too.

Mrs. Nemeth: I spoke with the other department heads after I realized I got 1% and we had very fruitful conversations.

Mr. Silva: Oh, we have departments, and maybe I'm wrong, but every department is getting 0.

Mr. Silva: ...the small departments and what not but we can't say, you know...

Mrs. Nemeth: No, I didn't finish. I sat with other department heads and you know, the conversation was I could have done this or done that, oh wait a minute I didn't... So, they were unaware of the process also. My previous predecessor also had called me at the beginning of this whole thing and said, what are your parameters, how much are you getting, what did the police say. I said, none of that happened. So, that goes to what Ms. Collins is saying that that used to be the process. Again, let's not beat the dead horse, we're going to move forward.

Mr. Goncalves: ... Let's say you would have gotten 4%, you probably wouldn't have called the fire, but if you would have gotten 4% you wouldn't have called the police chief or the fire chief because you would have sat back, and you would have taken the money and been good with it. I think everybody is guilty because we are one town not school department here, DPW, and then...

Mrs. Nemeth: Absolutely, I was expecting a process of everybody sitting down. That's how the school department does their budgets.

Mr. Goncalves: ...we should have...moments during the whole year just...we get in trouble or we don't get any money or something we needed doesn't show up. I think, hopefully it's what we can accomplish.

Mrs. Nemeth: Absolutely, absolutely.

Mr. DeBarge: ...I don't see that happening.

Mrs. Nemeth: I wouldn't ask for that.

Mr. DeBarge: No, I'm not seeing them doing that.

Mrs. Nemeth: I am here to talk about the process not somebody else's budget.

Mr. DeBarge: Right, ok.

Mr. Goncalves: So, while we have you, can you give us an idea of what's happening with the school portion of the ARPA money?

Mrs. Nemeth: We don't get ARPA money.

Mr. Goncalves: So, that's the ESSER money ok. So, there's nothing else. We're just dealing with this $5 million, nothing else because I know Mr. Brillo was into ...looking for...

Mrs. Nemeth: That's the ARPA town money which we were invited to that meeting.

Mr. Goncalves: Okay, so...

Sara Bowler: ...ARPA money, I think he came in...

Mr. Harrington: Your question regarding ESSER earlier, excellent questions we probably should have had that conversation in January, as you were building the budget, so you had a better understanding of what ESSER was, what we were going to be spending it on. Next year, I guess, assuming we are all going to be here, I think so, right? Can we meet in January, so we can talk about ESSER? If we can have a joint meeting between the School Committee and the Board of Selectmen prior to the budget process, really kind of getting ramped up to talk specifically about ESSER so we can let you guys know where we stand, how much we have spent, and then you can pass it on to whoever is going to be making budgetary decisions and incorporate that because we are telling you this now but this has already been established.

Mr. Silva: You have to understand that we have so many constituents of, just today, they know that we are meeting, they say, can you do me a favor and ask the school committee where all that money went and now, we've got some information and hopefully they watched.

Mr. Goncalves: Because I have the printouts...

Mrs. Nemeth: We are not hiding any money. We are more than happy...

Mr. Silva: We have a big problem...

Mrs. Nemeth: It's also on our website.

Mr. Silva: We have a big problem at the track, was there any idea or could there be, I'm not saying any money could be set aside for that...and I know that a lot of this stuff has changed...

Mrs. Nemeth: The parameters that are in there are specifically for COVID related; ventilation, um...

Mr. Silva: Recreation was COVID related, but ok...I'm not going there. This is the questions that I get though, you know, was there any consideration given to that?

Mr. Harrington: We did ask that question to Chris and some of the other people because really the track and field it's a classroom as far as I'm concerned. Gym class takes place out there. Coaches are out there. We tried putting it into this basket like geez maybe we could use some of these ESSER funds to fix the track and field if we call it a classroom, and we were shot down by saying it's not the case, we can't use...

Mr. Silva: And by me asking that, is the questions that I get out there. It also gives us a little push on what we need to do. We obviously, we have ARPA money, there's no secret that I've decided or for myself that it should go into Vets Park and the track because it's ridiculous.

Mr. Harrington: But have we had this conversation in January, all those constituents, you would have been able to give them the facts rather than...today.

Mr. Silva: True, true so but they're saying, well, the school department needs this now you're going to...and mind you yes, it's our facilities but to a lot of people it's the school that we are giving all this money to. The track is a school, saying, why didn't they keep that track before, why do we need to give some more money to the school. We have to answer this stuff.

Mrs. Nemeth: But not to be fastidious, the track is used more by the community than it is the school.

Mr. Silva: Understood! You understand it, I understand it, a lot of residents don't understand it.

Mr. Harrington: We get those questions.

Mr. Gennette: I just wanted to follow it up for a little bit and I'm going to give some credit to the school department here because the new numbers that I found is saying that the teacher retention rate for Ludlow is at 92% which is pretty astronomical. I mean it's higher than anybody else in the category and I love seeing that. I would rather pay experience. I would rather know that we have good qualified teachers and we're not rolling through a lot of people so kudos for that. I would rather pay experience.

Mrs. Nemeth: Thank you.

Kim Downing: Mr. Gennette, I think you can also go online. I did a couple of years ago and you can. There's a listing of how much town's go over the minimum requirements, the schools, and we were always right in the middle, Ludlow. So, you may want to go on that Mass site. I don't know where you would find it, but I'm sure one of the school committees could tell you and it lets you know exactly how much money the minimum requirement for each town is, how much they gave and how much they went over percentage wise and dollar wise. It lists the towns in order of; who gave the most, who gave the least, and we were always in the middle. We were never way up on top. We were always in the middle. So, you could update yourself on that information.

Mr. Gennette: I actually did. That was the percentages on the first thing. We were really starting to do this and it's a concern and that's why it was brought up.

Mrs. Nemeth: The other thing is with all the grants they have to be posted on our website. So, all of the grants are on the website. All this information I gave you today has been on our website. So, you just have to go under curriculum or grants and it's there.

Mr. Harrington: I've sat in your seats. I was a Selectmen and I used to look at the schools and be like they've got bags of money in the basement. I guarantee they have it down there and then I became a school committee member and that was 18 years ago and it's a whole different world over here. Special education is something, a big learning curve that we all have to learn by, but by no means I hope anybody watching or listening is getting the impression that we are sitting here whining about our budget. It's a process. There was a process and the Kim's that are here, we did have the regular meetings where we would go in there and present our budget line by line and we'd spend a good 3-hour meeting going through that thing. I do think that as a result of COVID, maybe this is like a byproduct, things are kind of...communication, if we could fix that. But absolutely I could speak for every school committee member, we appreciate the support that we get from this community. We are so very fortunate to Kim's point that the Town supports the schools, a brand-new school. East Street is updated, the high school and Baird are updated. So, we are incredibly fortunate, but our community is as strong as its school. You know when your schools start deteriorating the whole town kind of falls apart. We are very, very fortunate and we thank the Town Meeting members and we are at 1% this year. We are going to live with it. We are making it work. There are going to be some painful decisions that need to be made by Lisa and the next superintendent, but we are going to do it. Hopefully next year, we can get back to a process. We can sit in front of the Finance Committee and go line by line or sit in front of the Town Accountant and Town Administrator and go line by line and then we can move forward. This was a good discussion. I just wish we had it back in January.

Mr. Goncalves: And it might not have changed a whole lot, money wise, because when you look at this particular budget there's not a lot of fat there. There really, really isn't. Maybe Finance could have found a little bit of fat, but I don't think they were going to find the other 1.2 million from your initial requests for sure.

Mr. Silva: Again, yes there isn't a lot of fat, but we did some things that been needed to be done like a couple of positions. I mean regardless of what people think out there, again it's another thing I get; why do we need so many police officers, why do we need so many firefighters and when you look at the numbers we're well below on both.

Mrs. Nemeth: Yes, we are.

Mr. Goncalves: It's the difference between us being Indian Orchard and being Ludlow. It's what happens at that safety complex.

Mrs. Nemeth: And I will say publicly that the Police Department has been tremendously generous with us the past couple of weeks with our needs at the school and Chief Valadas has been overwhelmingly supportive along with Lieutenant Brennan sending us any police officers when needed. So, I want to thank the Police Department publicly.

Mr. Goncalves: Anybody else from the Board? Does anybody have a general comment from the audience that you'd like to make?

Mr. Silva: Once more, so Kim if you can and have time to review, your board or something certainly you can come back still to see if there's something that could change?

Kim Downing: Meeting on the 30th committee is going to look and see...it will only be, maybe a position that was in there, like the Grant Writer, which we've talked about, Kim suggested, but you're talking $65,000.

Mr. Goncalves: There's another $35,000 in here. I saw that today that maybe that can be loosened up.

Kim Downing: ...and where would you see that?

Mr. Goncalves: We will go over it. Kim will fill you in.

Kim Downing: Send me an email or whatever.

Mr. Silva: Yes, certainly there's a little bit of time.

Kim Downing: We are meeting on the 30th and we are happy to again, work on whatever process you want, that's all. And Kim does a great job!

Mr. Goncalves: We're $86,000 off levy. That means that if we spent $87,000 more we'd need an override at Town Meeting, which we just don't have it to spend. I don't believe in a million years our Town Meeting is ever going to allow us an override. So, we are really limiting what we can do to keep taxes reasonable. If this budget is presented right now, we will give the average homeowner an increase of $262 a year. A $234,000 house is going to get a $260 increase. So, half a million dollar accessed homes are looking at a $500 increase right now if nothing changes on this budget and they got a little bit of a break last year. It's already going to be a shocker.

Mr. Harrington: That's before the evaluations changed too.

Mr. Goncalves: Well, the levy is the levy and hopefully it will be what it is. Some will pay more, some will pay less. It depends.

Mr. Harrington: The average taxpayer just seized up a lot of money. They don't break it out, evaluations versus taxes.

Mr. Goncalves: But people are getting smarter where you can't drop the rate to $18 and then raise their average home to $400,000 in Town so it comes up the same. They're going to complain about something. So, can't have too many moving parts at the same time.

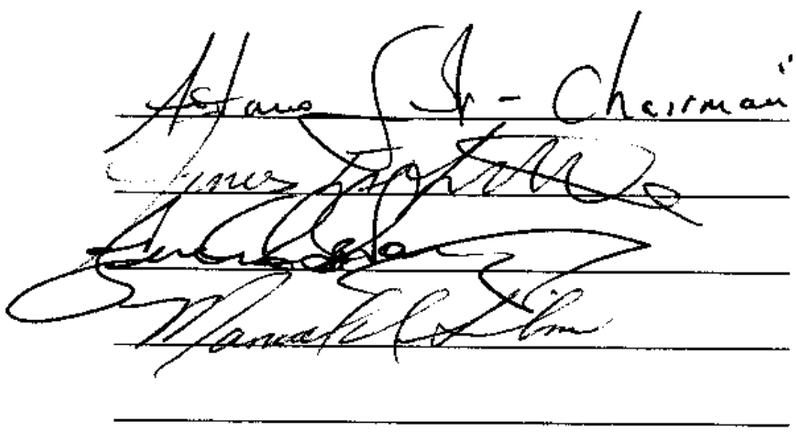
Mr. Goncalves: Everybody is good? Want to adjourn your meeting first?

Mrs. Nemeth: Yes

Mr. Goncalves: Do you want to adjourn the meeting Chip?

Mr. Harrington: Yes, if we're good.

Moved by Mr. Goncalves, seconded by Mr. Gennette to adjourn this meeting at 7:08 p.m. Vote 4-0. All in favor.



Ludlow Board of Selectmen

All related documents can be viewed at the Board of Selectmen's Office during regular business hours.