The Meeting of the Board of Selectmen held on Tuesday, March 28, 2023, began at 6:00 p.m. at Harris Brook Elementary School Library.

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Members Present: Derek DeBarge, James Gennette, Antonio Goncalves, William Rosenblum, and Manuel Silva.

First Order of Business: The Pledge of Allegiance

VISITATIONS:

6:20 p.m. Board of Selectmen to meet with the School Committee along with members of the Finance Committee to discuss the proposed FY24 School Budget.

Moved by Mr. Rosenblum to open the Board of Selectmen meeting at 6:15 p.m., seconded by Mr. Silva. Vote 5-0. All in favor.

Dr. Tiano explained that they are discussing the FY24 budget. He has shared with everyone from their website the budget summary, proposed budget summary and budget sheets for all 130-line items. He presented information to his committee in order for them to make an informed decision and that included a percentage level or the number of dollars they would need to meet a level service budget for FY24. A 3% increase in their general fund appropriation would equal a dollar amount of $1,033,979 and from a level service budget, they would be reducing about $2 million. Enrollment between FY19-FY23 is down to 8.1%, English learned language is up 100%, economic disadvantage or low income is up 18%, special ed is up 6%, high needs is up 10%, DCF involvement is up 212% and homeless students are up 200%. The landscape is shifting, and the educators need to shift with that change. He explained their variable costs or unfunded mandates. Dr. Tiano reviewed level service budget from FY21 to FY24. Since Dr. Tiano has come on board as Superintendent he has revised the budgeting process. The district will get a 3.2% increase from the state. For the district to stay at level service it would be 8.8% increase, but Dr. Tiano is requesting 5% for FY24. He went through the potential areas of impact, which would be increased class size, reduced high school electives, reduced elementary specials, reduced foreign language offerings, reduced athletic schedules, and increased fees.

Mr. Laing thanked Dr. Tiano for his hard work with the budget. He understands they cannot ask for 9% increase, but they need to minimize the loss of teachers and services. He believes 5% is fair.

Ms. Bowler explained that Ludlow is low in comparison to the surrounding communities as far as how much of the budget goes to the schools. Ludlow schools receive 43% of the total budget and most communities receive 48% of the budget. The school employees the most people also. She admits that using ESSR funds last year was not a great idea. There is enough problems in Ludlow and doesn't want to bring the school system down as well.

Mr. Saloio was thankful for the cut in transportation. He remembers when you would have to stand on the bus because there was no room to sit down and now the buses are practically empty.

Mr. Stratton thanked the Board of Selectmen for working so hard on the budget. In 2014 the school was 48% of the budget and as of 2023 it is 44% of the budget and the budget is $60-70 million. The benefits are going up every year for employees and he wonders if that is why their portion of the budget is getting reduced. He feels that the state has failed the town quite a bit and feels that a conversation with Jake Oliveira and Aaron Saunders needs to be had. He feels that with the cuts, they are seeing morale dropping.

Mr. Dias asked about getting some of these numbers down, for example a 282% increase in substitute teachers.

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Dr. Tiano explained that they are trying to be sure that each line item is budgeted appropriately. They are slowly cleaning this up.

Ms. Demetrius explained that some costs they just were not prepared for, like the homeless transportation increase and the substitute teachers because of teachers out on medical leave or full-time positions that have not been filled.

Dr. Tiano stated that they also have a staffing shortage like everyone else. Staffing is 75% of their budget.

Mr. Laing stated that they cannot continue to cut people every single year. Right now, there is a 55/45 split between the state and the town for the school district. The school employees more than 50% of the employees in the town with only 43% of the budget. Cutting 22 full-time positions is not acceptable and the residents will be upset with this.

Ms. Cincone stated that Ludlow has been doing this for a long time and it's time for the state to step up and change the Chapter 70 calculation. If the school goes above the 5% then the town will have to request a 2 ½ override and that is not going to happen in this town. She has grandchildren in the schools, and something needs to be done. They need to start pressing the state.

Mr. Rosenblum explained that if they were to approve the 5% then they're looking at a negative excess levy of about $92,000. If they went to 4%, they would have $235,000 excess levy. To get to the 48% it is going to have to be gradual. However, the farther along we go the ask just gets bigger and bigger and bigger. The 48% would be $3.5-4 million a year. That is a hard ask as to where the town is currently. Mr. Strange has already cut $800,000 out of the budget on the town's end. The Board of Selectmen is not anti-teacher, but he cannot see them getting to 5%.

Mr. Silva stated that we are governed by 2 ½, the levy can only go up by 2.5% and now we are talking 5% there, 4% there. We cannot do that. He also explained, to Ms. Bowler's point you cannot compare communities because Ludlow's services are far above and beyond other community services. Not necessarily the schools but other services. Other communities do not have trash pick up or a full nursing staff. The ambulance services here are far above others. There are a slew of things that Ludlow has that brings up the other budgets rather than the schools budget and that's where you get the disparity. He agrees with Mr. Rosenblum that they only way to get to 5% would be a 2 ½ override and it's not going to happen in Ludlow. There are a lot of departments that have cut back and not everyone gets what they ask for. Increasing our taxes will only make our senior citizens more poverty stricken. He got on this board 12 years ago to look out for the taxpayers and will continue to do so.

Mr. DeBarge explained that Chief Valadas has been requesting 9 full time officers to the tune of $1.1 million for over two years now and the Board has said no because we just can't afford it. Mr. DeBarge thinks that the town needs to start cutting services. He agrees with Ms. Cincone that they need to start pressing the state for more funds. He also explained that the track and field was going to cost $2.8 million a few years back and now it's going to cost $4 million. The town is funding that project with the ARPA funds. He believes that the teachers and patrolman are very important to the town and understands they need to invest in them. It is the Board's job to try and help each department. He would be inclined to approve the 4%.

Mr. Gennette is very happy that the school came down to 5% from the 9% that was forecasted. He feels that with the $800,000 that Mr. Strange has cut from the budget will save a lot of teachers and asked if the state is supposed to come through with an additional $623,000?

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Dr. Tiano stated that is was a little less than $454,000.

Mr. Gennette stated that $454,000 will also save some teachers as well. So, everyone is doing what they can to save the schools and teachers. Everyone on this board and in this room today value the Ludlow Schools, however the school committee cannot take the stats for comparisons for other communities, the ones that benefit them and then shoot others down. Mr. Gennette had asked why the cost per student in Ludlow was higher than the other communities and he was told by one person on the school committee that Ludlow is incomparable to the communities around them. We are trying to save money across the board, our community is getting killed. If the school committee needs to go above the 2 ½ then you will have to argue that at town meeting. That will be on them.

Dr. Tiano clarified that the Chapter 70 money from the state is a 3.2% increase this year but that's not a lot of money. The $162,000 is a reimbursement for transportation of homeless students, you cannot use it as part of the operating budget. It helps but not significantly.

Mr. Gennette appreciates the school committee, and they don't want to hurt the schools, but we have to keep everything within reason.

Mr. Goncalves thanked everyone that stepped up to run for school committee. He asked how many employees were hired with ESSR funds?

Ms. Demetrius explained that when COVID first hit and there was a new cleaning protocol, additional custodians were brought in and paid with ESSR funds. Contact tracing people were brought in. The custodians they have now are not the ones that were brought in during COVID. Two custodians were paid with ESSR funds last year and this year is it one custodian.

Mr. Goncalves stated they are actually stealing from Peter to pay Paul in this situation.

Dr. Tiano agreed with Mr. Goncalves. As reductions have been made, it's been filled with one-time monies and that money is running out.

Mr. Goncalves asked Ms. Nemeth about the ESSR funds they had used last year and how many teachers it funded?

Ms. Nemeth explained that there are only about 4 teachers left using ESSR funds.

Mr. Goncalves asked what the 8.1% decrease in enrollment equates to in the number of students?

Ms. Bowler stated that is about 210 students.

Mr. Goncalves asked what the average per classroom is, teacher to student ratio?

Dr. Tiano explained that it depends on the grade level, elementary classes are about 18 or 19 and the middle school and high school are about 23-25.

Mr. Goncalves asked how many kids in McKinney Vento (Homeless) has it increased to, he would rather that than the percentage.

Teacher/Principal stated that in FY20 they had 14 students from McKinney Vento and now they have 24.

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Mr. Goncalves asked how many students in ELL?

Teacher/Principal stated 162 students as of February in ELL and 2,312 total amount of students.

Mr. Goncalves also asked how many babies were born since COVID and what they are looking at for kindergarten enrollment in a few years.

Dr. Tiano stated that he doesn't necessarily have that but they do look at the birth rate, students who are in private preschool, and they look at ELL students coming in from other countries. He also went on to explain that the amount of staff has gone down. He also mentioned that mental health has taken a big toll on a lot of students with the interruption of education due to COVID.

Mr. Goncalves explained that while he understands the schools employee a lot of people and they help over 2,300 kids for a lifetime; the town also has an elderly population of 6,000 people that only get 1/10 of the school budget. It's difficult to go to those people and say their 6% increase in social security is not quite enough for their increase in taxes on their homes because the town needs an additional $2 million for the schools. Trash is currently costing the town $1.8 million annually and surrounding communities have all done away with trash collection because of that.

Ms. Bowler stated that half the town of Ludlow is not happy with the way trash is done anyways so maybe if they get rid of it, they'll be happy to have a dumpster in their driveway.

Mr. Rosenblum stated that we are paying less than getting a dumpster because most people are paying about $700 a year and the Town of Ludlow is about $325 per year. So, if the town eliminates trash, they eliminate $325 but then you're going to be paying $500 or $600 and they will still hit you in the back door with taxes.

Dr. Tiano states that he understands there's only one pot of money and the school committee has not stated they want to pursue a 2 ½ override. The state level is going to take time, but there are people advocating on behalf of the schools. Western mass towns are not poor enough but they're not rich enough either. He understands that a 1% increase for the school is a 5% increase for other departments, but it is like a feast or famine in this town.

Mr. Silva asked when the next school committee meeting is?

Ms. Bowler stated it is April 11th.

Mr. Silva stated that the budget has to be complete by April 18th and suggested that both of the boards go back and look at every single item that they possibly can and see if they can come up with any more funds. He does not believe the two are that far off so hopefully they can come up with something.

Ms. Bowler stated that she was watching the FinComm meeting and Dolly stated that they couldn't go any higher than 5%. Has something changed since then? We can't go for 5%?

Ms. Cincone explained that the budget number she had that night was already increased for the school. The town cannot go up to 5% for the schools because they will be over the levy limit.

Mr. Silva stressed that they can't go into town meeting and if something suddenly happens and they don't have the funds because they will have to go back quickly and call a special town

meeting, tell every department to cut 5% to get under the levy. Otherwise, it could be a big problem.

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Mr. Rosenblum stated that after town meeting last year, the DPW needed $300,000.

Mr. Strange agreed with Mr. Silva, and he will go back and take a look on the town's side and see if there's anything else they can do. He also stated that the Treasurer/Collector's position being combined will definitely help a little bit.

Mr. Laing stated they were suspending their vote tonight.

Ms. Cincone is going to request that they have their next meeting on April 5th. This way their board can discuss what was said tonight and also any suggestions that Mr. Strange will have and what will be recommended to the town.

Moved by Mr. Rosenblum to close the Board of Selectmen meeting at 7:36 p.m., seconded by Mr. Silva. Vote 5-0. All in favor.

Chairman

Ludlow Board of Selectmen

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