

TOWN OF GROTON FINANCE COMMITTEE

Minutes of Meeting Held April 1st, 2013

2nd Floor Meeting Rm., Town Hall, Groton, MA 6:00 p.m.

Present: R. Hargraves, M. Flynn, J. Crowley, J. Prager (Chair), S. Webber, G. Green, P. DiFranco, P. DuFresne (Town Accountant, Recording)

Absent: None

Guests: Mark Haddad (Town Manager), and Kerry Clery (GDRSD Director of Teaching, Learning and Accountability), Alison Manugian (School Committee Chair),

Board of Selectmen Present: Anna Eliot, Josh Degen, Stuart Schulman (Chair), Peter Cunningham, and Jack Petropoulos

Documents available at the meeting: GDRSD Technology Request Summary
Spring Town Meeting Warrant - Draft

GDRSD Technology Funding Request – Mr. Prager asked Ms. Clery to summarize the outstanding need and the underlying plan for the school district's IT capital requirements. Ms. Clery stated that a glaring district-wide concern has been identified specific to poor or non-existent wireless services and a lack of technology being utilized in classrooms. A recent technology audit was accomplished which targeted particular problem areas which must be corrected. While this will be a multi-year effort, Article 6 will fund issues which should be addressed immediately. Mr. Webber asked for a rough estimate regarding the amount of money that will be spent annually on technology going forward. Ms. Clery replied that while the numbers are not yet firm, an estimate of \$100,000 to \$150,000 is probably appropriate. These incremental costs will target equipment rather than staff, although IT staff is expected to increase over time. The school district plans to do a phased refresh of technology each year, to be partially funded by new revenue (for instance increased seats for the School Choice program). Mr. Webber asked whether the school district was considering any type of leasing program. Mr. DiFranco agreed that leasing this type of equipment can help avoid issues of obsolescence. Ms. Clery said that while leasing had been discussed, there were concerns regarding financial exposure and opportunity costs should budgetary priorities ever force the premature cancellation of such a lease. Mr. DiFranco would like to see a trade study of the costs associated with leasing versus purchasing of computer equipment. Mr. Prager was not convinced that leasing would be beneficial for this kind of project. Mr. Hargraves wondered whether it would be more prudent to hire an IT Director first, so that this individual could help develop and spearhead the IT capital management program. Ms. Clery assured him that interviews for this position were already in progress and the district plans to have a director in place by July 1st to direct spending efforts. She reminded the group that the capital spending outlined in the Town Meeting warrant article is not an aggressive plan, and will only boost the district to a minimum baseline for technology.

Mr. Webber asked for information regarding the organizational structure of the current IT group. Ms. Clery explained that the IT staff is considered a single department. Their home base is the Middle School, although each member has a specific territory that they tend to focus on. Mr. Degen asked for assurance that any funding voted at Town Meeting for IT capital needs would in fact be restricted to that purpose. Ms. Clery assured him that any funds awarded at Town Meeting under Article 6 would be set aside specifically for the fulfilling of technology needs. The group discussed the importance of the district retaining some flexibility in spending going forward. Ms. Clery said that while she did not expect drastic changes to be made to the current spending plan, the district would certainly be open to input from the new IT Director. Mr. Webber suggested that the warrant article should be worded in such a way to allow more flexibility in implementation. Ms. Clery replied that the specific wording was chosen in order to provide as much transparency for the public as possible. Mr. Haddad mentioned that once the funding is appropriated, the School Committee will have the final say over how it is spent. They have outlined a roughly 4 to 1 ratio breakdown for planned spending on equipment and infrastructure. He felt this would be the best way to present the plan at Town Meeting.

Mr. Prager expressed concern over a lack of plan or vision for the use of this technology in the classrooms. He does not believe that the IT Director will be the proper individual to address the issue of creating a better educational experience. Ms. Clery replied that the IT department will have a staff member with instructional technology expertise. This person will have an understanding of which teaching practices will be most beneficial to the learning process. The group discussed the school's potential need for both an IT Director and an Education Manager. Ms. Clery stressed that as Director of Teaching, Learning and Accountability, her role would support the educational component of the planned IT upgrade. She explained that technology properly integrated into the classroom helps shift the teaching focus to innovative and creative thinking as well as developing problem-solving skills. Mr. Webber stressed the need to get the staff trained on the new equipment. Ms. Clery agreed, affirming that the school district is committed to providing teachers with as much professional development in technology as is needed. However, that training cannot begin until the equipment is purchased. "Bring Your Own Device" programs have also been explored, but the school district is not in a position to implement this kind of strategy now. "BYOD" plans allow for a device for every student, but require infrastructure capacity that the school cannot supply yet. Such a plan may be rolled out sometime in the future. The Finance Committee briefly discussed the efficiency of using computer carts in classrooms versus sending students to a centralized "computer lab." Ms. Clery felt that the carts more fully augment the learning process.

Mr. Haddad explained that there are 3 possible strategies for funding this article: taxation, transfer from Stabilization, or a hybrid of the two. The Free Cash projection for FY14 will not be sufficient to repay both Stabilization accounts and still leave a "cushion" of \$250,000 for unanticipated needs. Mr. Haddad is currently exploring the possibility of partnering with the Electric Light Department in a plan under which GELD would contribute approximately \$134,000 up front as part of their PILOT arrangement. Mr. Haddad will be discussing this further with the Electric Light Department next week. This plan would take some of the burden off the Stabilization accounts, although it may still not be possible to meet the full 5% reserve requirement stipulated in our Financial Policies for FY14. Mr. Haddad reminded the group that if Dunstable does not vote to accept this article, then Groton would not be required to provide its share of the funding.

On a motion by Mr. Green, seconded by Mr. Hargraves, the Finance Committee voted to support Article 6 (GDRSD Technology Funding) The Vote: 5-0-2

Ledge Rock Field CPC Funding – Mr. Prager expressed concern that this funding is being requested for construction of playing fields that would be nice to have, but are not really necessary to have. He mentioned that there may be certain costs that have not been completely vetted at this point, for instance fertilization expenses. Mr. Green mentioned that this project will use a large portion of the balance in the Unallocated CPC Reserve, which is the main funding source for the Surrenden Farm debt service. This could be risky given the unpredictable nature of the state matching program. Mr. Prager said that while he believes that this is probably a viable project, it is also a very expensive project being attempted in a year when the Town is already committed to spending large amounts of money (i.e. the bridge replacement, IT infrastructure for the schools and the new center fire station). He wondered whether it would be more prudent to put this project off for another year.

On a motion by Mr. Webber, seconded by Mr. Flynn, the Finance Committee voted against supporting Article 16 (Funding for Ledge Rock Field Construction). The Vote: 1-5-1

The Finance Committee scheduled their next meeting for 6:30 pm on April 22 in the GDRMS cafeteria (immediately prior to Town Meeting).

Mr. Prager officially adjourned the meeting of the Finance Committee at 7:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia Dufresne, Recording Secretary