

**BOARD OF SELECTMEN MEETING
MINUTES FEBRUARY 18, 2014
APPROVED**

Present: Peter S. Cunningham, Chairman; Josh A. Degen, Vice Chairman; Anna Eliot, Clerk; Stuart M. Schulman; John G. Petropoulos

Also Present: Mark W. Haddad, Town Manager; Dawn Dunbar, Executive Assistant; Groton Finance Committee Members Jay Prager, Bud Robertson, Joe Crowley, Bob Hargraves, David Manugian, Gary Green; Dunstable Board of Selectmen Members Walter Alterisio, Kenneth Leva; Dunstable Finance Committee Members Christine Muir, Ron Mikol, Kevin Welch, Harold Simmons; Groton-Dunstable School Committee Members Alison Manugian, Leslie Lathrop, Jim Frey, John Giger, Luis DeLoureiro, Thomas Steinfeld; Superintendent Anthony Bent and Business Manager Jarod Stanton

Mr. Cunningham called the meeting to order at 7:00pm adding that the purpose of the joint meeting was to talk about the schools budget issues and the budget that was released the week before.

Mr. Cunningham said that he would like to take a minute to recognize the passing of former Selectmen Fran Dillon. Mr. Haddad said that the calling hours would be on Thursday from 3-7 at Anderson Funeral Home in Ayer followed by funeral services on Friday at 10:30 at St. James in West Groton. The Groton Police Department had been working with the Ayer Police Department to provide shuttles to and from the services and the DPW was working to plow out the Tarbell School parking lot to allow for additional parking. He added that Town Hall would be closing at 10am on Friday so that employee may attend the services.

Mr. Cunningham said that he wanted this meeting to be an open meeting for members to be able to ask questions and get a general feel for where they are at. He said that Groton had been looking at the possibility of cutting from the municipal budget and what it would do to services provided to residents. He said that they met the previous Saturday and went through a list of potential cuts. Mr. Cunningham said that they looked at potentially cutting \$500K from the municipal budget and were considering things like taxing their additional levy capacity and a possible debt exclusion on the new fire station. Mr. Haddad said that in his proposed budget, he had set aside \$377K (2 ½%) like he always had done, that they had \$402K in unexpended tax capacity and \$448K in debt service that can be excluded. He added that they had also proposed cutting \$275K out of the municipal budget. He said that the districts proposed budget was looking for Groton to contribute \$1.9M adding that they had \$1.4M they could put on the table. He said that if they had to come up with \$1.9M it would devastate town services and the average tax bill (on a home valued at \$400K) would see an increase of approximately \$400.

Mr. Ron Mikol, Chairman of the Dunstable Finance Committee said that Dunstable was only in the data collection process of their budget adding that they were behind Groton by a few weeks. He said that an increase of \$675K for Dunstable would be a significant increase. Mr. Haddad asked when the School Committee needed to certify their budget by. Ms. Alison Manugian said by March 5th. Mr. Degen asked Mr. Mikol how close Dunstable was to their levy limit. Mr. Mikol said that they reached their levy limit every year. Mr. Degen said that he would prefer not to have to look into an override. He said that it will be important to know that they are not going to be faced with the same problems year after year adding that it will be important for them to have projections so that plans can be made. Ms. Manugian said that she was hearing their concerns adding that it was difficult for them to make projections as their mechanism for funding was being changed at the State level. Superintendent Bent said that there was such volatility in the school budget adding that things could not be predicted from year to year citing special education as an example. He said that he saw the logic in a 3-year projection but also saw difficulty in getting there. Mr. Kevin Welch of the Dunstable Finance Committee said that he wasn't sure how they got where they are. He said that in looking at the proposed budget he did not see numbers for special education and didn't even know that a forensic audit was being done. Mr. Jim Frey, School Committee Member said that they had communicated to both

Town's that an external auditor had been brought in by the State to see where there problems were. He said that special education had been included in the proposed budget and they would work with everyone to show where those numbers were. Mr. Frey said that audits are conducted every year adding that the audit done on the FY13 budget is how they found out there were problems. Mr. Giger said that the primary purpose of the audit was so that the correct data was given to the State. He said that all this information could be found on the district's website.

Ms. Dotty Janes of 247 Main Street said that she didn't realize that there was a \$2.6-3M problem adding that maybe cuts to the snow removal budget should be made if the Town wasn't going to remove snow from the sidewalks adding that the only sidewalks done in the center were in front of Town Hall. Mr. Cunningham said that they held the meeting despite the weather conditions outside as it is tough to get so many people together for a meeting. He said that the purpose of the meeting was to have a conversation with the School Committee and to look at budget numbers for the upcoming fiscal year. He asked that all comments stay on the topic at hand.

Mr. Prager said that it was hard for the average person to see where the money has been spent. He said that it would be helpful to see how much money is from the state and how much is spent on transportation. He said that if those numbers were used as a starting point, it should be easy to project year to year. Ms. Manugian said that they would need to see how close information would be. She said it wasn't impossible to project but she wasn't sure the results were predictably possible. Mr. Cunningham said that they may not know the exact numbers but would see trends and how things were moving. Mr. Bud Robertson said that 80% of their spending had been on wages. He said that if they had a good budget in place for FY15, they should have a good idea of projections for FY16. Mr. Degen reiterated how important it was for them to see what the numbers will look like in the future. Superintendent Bent said that they would look at the budget calculations.

Mr. Jarod Stanton, GD Business Manager said that a report by function was something he could do to show things like special education costs together. Mr. David Manugian asked if the School Committee should provide a sustainable budget to meet the 21/2% set aside every year. Mr. Cunningham said that the conundrum was how they get there. Mr. Bob Hargraves said that he thought a 2 1/2% override would be a tough sell. Mr. Degen said that he knew that the district's E&D fund was dangerously low and knew it was important to them. He compared it to the Town's stabilization fund. He asked if they had considered reducing their fund to \$250K (1/2 of \$500K they usually carry) which would reduce the assessments to the Town's. Ms. Manugian asked if there was an appetite to grant a portion of the stabilization fund to the E&D fund. Mr. Haddad said that Groton was already working hard to make reductions in their budget to free up money for the schools.

Ms. Leslie Lathrop said that they had already cut programs adding she would rather restore programs. She said that you wouldn't find many districts that fund as low as they did. Mr. Cunningham said that because both communities were primarily residential, that had an impact. Superintendent Bent said that no programs had been eliminated at that point only reductions in staffing. 7 full-time positions had been cut in January. He said that the FY15 budget was very conservative adding that they proposed 15 full-time staff positions be eliminated with not significant reductions in programs.

Mr. Jack Risdon of West Groton asked if buses were being looked at as many of the buses he saw were always 1/2 empty. Superintendent Bent said that that topic was on their agenda the following week. Mr. Risdon added that if they had to go for an override vote, the seniors would not vote for one.

Ms. Dotty Janes asked again why only in front of Town Hall had been shoveled. She said that she had watched a recent Board of Selectmen meeting and read in a local newspaper where there was talk about eliminating the HR Director position and making Dawn Dunbar the new HR Director; someone who had been hired illegally was not being promoted to HR Director. Mr. Cunningham said that none of what Ms. Janes said was true and not being accurately reported. He said some of the HR functions had been given to the Executive Assistant to the Town

Manager but the position had not been given to her. He said that her assentation that something has been illegally done was wrong.

Mr. Fry said that some of the special education costs were offset by grants and what was being paid was not all coming from the towns. He said that he understood that everyone wanted to see a complete cost to run the district but that State did not want them to see these numbers. Mr. Prager asked how much special education costs net to the towns. Mr. Fry thought that was a good point adding that that it what they should be projecting to the towns.

Mr. Brian Digiovanni of Robin Hill Road said that as much as the parents understood the issues, a rising concern of parents was that needs are not being met due to changes in services. He said that as a pediatrician he held that all the time from parents. He said that they as parents saw waning teachers and support staff and thought that the excellence of the Groton-Dunstable school system was in grave danger if not fixed. Mr. Cunningham said that the larger picture was that they were only a committee and there were only so many slices in the pie. He encouraged everyone to contact their local legislatures and voice their concerns. Mr. Degen said that anyone upset about the lack of money needed to look at how the municipal budget was managed.

Ms. Terry Roberston of 146 Paquawket Path said that he had 8 kids in the school system adding that a lot of the same questions remain unanswered. She said that consolidation of school buildings had not been mentioned and personally would like to see quality teachers and paraprofessionals jobs remain intact instead of what there is for separate buildings.

Mr. Cunningham ended by saying that he thought the meeting was productive and said that they would continue to work on the municipal side to help the schools.

Mr. Schulman moved to adjourn at 8:45pm. Mr. Degen seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

Approved: _____

Anna Eliot, Clerk

Date Approved: 3/24/14

respectfully *submitted*,
Dawn Dunbar, Executive Assistant