

ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE (ABRSC)  
"FY22 BUDGET THURSDAY" MEETING APPROVED MINUTES

Virtual Public Meeting

March 4, 2021

To attend: <https://www.youtube.com/actontv1>

**NEW TIME: 6:30 p.m.**

To preregister for Public Comment (required):

[https://abschools.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_G2KRppcRSK244tLLgBe71Q](https://abschools.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_G2KRppcRSK244tLLgBe71Q)

(pre-registration must be submitted 24 hours prior to the start of the meeting, see memo)

***NOTE: Because the focus of this meeting is the FY22 Budget, comments on items NOT included on this agenda will be welcomed at the next meeting on March 11.***

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Members Present: Evelyn Abayaah-Issah (6:32 pm), Diane Baum, Kyra Cook, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer (6:33 pm), Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, John Petersen, Nora Shine, Angie Tso, Yebin Wang (6:50 pm)

Members Absent: none

Others: Marie Altieri, Dawn Bentley, Deborah Bookis, Peter Light, Beth Petr, Dave Verdolino

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The ABRSC was called to order at 6:30 p.m. by Chairperson Tessa McKinley.

She noted that the meeting was being conducted remotely via Zoom with the following members in attendance via zoom: Diane Baum, Kyra Cook, Adam Klein, Amy Krishnamurthy, John Petersen, Nora Shine, Angie Tso and herself. The other three members were expected shortly. Per Remote Participation policy, BEDJA, all votes were done by roll call. The Chair stated that the meeting was being recorded and would be posted on Acton TV's website at actontv.org.

In an ongoing effort to make the meetings as secure as possible, members of the public were asked to view the meeting using Acton tv's youtube channel (found at the top of the agenda). Those who wished to comment during the meeting, were asked to register 24 hours prior to the start of the meeting using the link also found at the top of the agenda. These procedures are now posted with Public Participation policy BEDH. Because the focus of the meeting was the FY22 Budget, public participation on items NOT included on this agenda will be welcomed at the next meeting on March 11.

## **PRESENTATIONS**

Mr. Light welcomed everyone to the 4<sup>th</sup> of the 5 FY22 Budget meetings. He noted that it has been 357 days since students were in the buildings and during that time, the District has served almost 200,000 meals to community members.

He began the presentation by describing the budget process as a balancing act between best meeting student's post-pandemic educational needs and the financial impact of the schools' budget on the communities. This is particularly true in a year of so much uncertainty and when taxpayers are also paying for construction of the new Gates/Douglas school building. The

preliminary budget voted on February 11, 2021, includes a 2.90% increase from the prior year (2.67% operating budget increase), Acton assessment increase at 2.97% and the Boxborough assessment increase at 4.64%.

Dave Verdolino gave an **FY22 Finance Overview**. Comments and questions included:

- Structuring OPEB to retire in 2059 makes sense, but what happens if we suspend OPEB payments for a couple of years? How would it affect slide 29? Dave explained that 2059 is the actuarial date and carries a lot of assumptions. Just a couple of changes in them could affect the end date greatly. As a result, he suggested not focusing too much on the exact end date. Other cities have found that the problem with not funding OPEB for a year or two, is that it is very hard to start up again. Several members strongly agreed. In addition, because we have continued to fund OPEB, the District received an excellent bond rating.
- The MTRS bill for the next year will be \$4M less so that will be an opportunity for the district. The plan for FY22 is much more targeted.
- Slide 22 - Sources of budget growth helps to show that assessments are fueling our budget requirements but reserves are becoming an increasing part of the budget. For FY23, it's important to be clear about what we are doing with surplus money at the end of the year, to know how we are replenishing the funds. (Section 2 of the binder shows turnbacks over the years.)
- Slide 29 of comparative communities shows how efficient our District is. Being at the bottom of the list for pupil spending is not due to anyone's belief in education, but due to the number of students we have and the lower amount of property values. : Mr. Light noted that the slide is ranked in terms of average change over the four fiscal years, it reflects changes in net school spending, not hard dollars.
- Jason Cole from the Acton Finance Committee commented that replenishing the Capital Improvement Plan requires the future School Committee members to honor it and he hopes that that will be the case. He also added that when existing debt rolls off from the Junior High and High School projects, it is not a vacuum that has to be immediately refilled. When presented to the Town, these projects are presented as temporary increases.

Marie Altieri reported on **FY22 Staffing**. Comments and questions included:

- This year's faculty and staff have done an outstanding job with the Remote Learning Program. Flexibility has been key with so many unknowns.
- We still have a goal to reduce All Day Kindergarten tuition but not next year.
- We thought the lower enrollment we saw this year was due to covid, but we now think it is a real drop over the past two years. Only 17 kindergarten sections will be needed. Enrollment projections have been very off the past few years from NESDEC. Marie will try to get more input on that next year.
- Slide 41 shows how covid affected unemployment with a 150% increase. The increase in overtime includes groups like custodians.
- Why are there big decreases in enrollment but not in staffing? We have had decreases in elementary classroom teachers but the needs of students have increased over time as well. When we had rapid growth, we didn't keep up with staffing, which led to big class sizes.

- The Health Insurance Trust governs the insurance rates over time. The market rate for health insurance has increased 8-10% for the past 15 years. Because we are self-insured we have been way below that and negotiated good rates. The trustees are trying to moderate the swings in cost.

Debbie Dixson gave an **FY22 Special Education update**. Comments and questions included:

- Members were very excited about the DBT mental health training to be given to all mental health staff. This is a 24 hour course by a licensed trainer and it can be ongoing.
- What is the tuition trend rate for the private day schools? We budget a 3% increase for the schools every year but the rates are set by a group. Some schools go up more by applying for relief if they offer something particular.
- With DBT for mental health staff and certified technicians for ABA staff, will this be done as Professional Development – will it continue going forward? All skilled teachers should have these skills. Because Debbie is leaving after June, she will advise the district and new director to focus on continuing to train staff in these key areas, including Wilson Reading Training. The i-ready assessments for students are being reviewed as well and staff are very excited about bringing students back in person. Members were “thrilled” to learn of all of this new staff training.
- As we get clinicians and counselors trained, the vision is to share it with parents and families with their students. Susan Root and Heather Stout are working on this.
- Stating that he was not familiar with many aspects of special education, a member asked why we spend such a significant amount of money on 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the students on such expensive out of district placements. Debbie explained that collaboratives often provide less restrictive environments than other placements, while offering specific resources. Often they are more expensive because the students that go there have low incidence disabilities or intensive disabilities such that the typical school like AB cannot offer what they need. If we have only one student with a particular disability, it wouldn't make sense to create our own program for just one student.
- How have we prepared for bringing students back to school? They have been away for a year and we won't be sure of their mental state when they return. Staff will be seeing students much more this spring and getting to know them better before we finalize our programs and return to School Committee with details.
- Amanda Bailey from the Special Education Parent Advisory grouped suggested members who are not familiar with Out of District schools' costs read some of the program descriptions to better understand the services they are providing. She also noted that summer programming for special education students will be determined by their Team meetings.
- Debbie was thanked by several members for making some substantial and positive changes during the past 2 years.

JD Head gave a **Capital Update**. Comments and questions included:

- What will be done to replace all the trees that were taken down on the Main Campus? An arborist assessed the health of every tree on the site for the district. The ones that came down looked great but were not healthy and one did fall down. We have a landscaping plan with the goal to ultimately have no tree loss.
- JD explained the major capital projects planned for FY22.

Amy Bisiewicz gave a **Technology Update**. Comments included:

- Although keeping a computer throughout a student's high school years sounds good, the devices don't usually last/stay up to date for four years. Is it fair to ask a senior to use a 4 year old device? This will involve a big budget request.
- We are really thinking a lot about technology given that we are planning for the new school. Teachers want more than a laptop.
- All of this will require more bandwidth and EdTech is expanding greatly in that area since covid and everyone being on zoom. The new budget will double the bandwidth from Comcast and the infrastructure will be in place. All switches will now be upgraded and the oldest will be 3 years old.
- What about cybersecurity? A grant from DESE was received this year for cyber security training and we are rolling out a number of new resources for the district.
- A member stated that he was fully in support of this technology to improve the learning and productivity of the teachers. Don't be thrifty on this type of thing.

### **WRAP UP and NEXT STEPS**

Mr. Light reported that BLF has not met yet but ALG met today. The ALG model is down to a \$200,000 gap which will get resolved in a week or two on the Town side. There is still a difference of opinion on how reserves should be used.

The next step is the Final Budget vote on March 18. A meeting was added next Thursday to primarily talk about school reopening plans for the hybrid program. There will be a budget item for questions and follow ups from tonight.

The take away from the presentations is that there is tremendous uncertainty this year and the Administration and staff know they will have to revise teaching over the spring and summer and that will require budget adjustments. Mr. Light stated that they are confident that this is a responsible budget that balances the needs of students with those of the taxpayers.

Several members thanked the Administration and staff for their tremendous work and accomplishments during the past year. Highlighting the budget process that was used where the main budget drivers were identified and all the line items were reviewed, a member stated that there are really only a few main drivers that can be adjusted. He appreciated the administration's focus on priorities and the very efficient and productive process. Another member appreciated having a much better understanding about how this year's budget decisions will flow through to teachers and students after the pandemic. She didn't have that before. She appreciated the alignment with our budget guidelines and thanked the Administration for hard work and their insights about how education will be delivered.

### **WARRANTS**

Adam Klein moved, Amy Krishnamurthy seconded and it was unanimously,

**VOTED by roll call:** see motion in memo

(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Baum, Cook, Klein, Kremer, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Shine, Tso, Wang)

It was noted that one of the warrants is very high because it includes a large amount of debt service.

Kyra Cook moved, Adam Klein seconded and it was unanimously,

**VOTED by roll call:** to adjourn at 10:00 p.m.

(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Baum, Cook, Klein, Kremer, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Shine, Tso, Wang)

Respectfully submitted,  
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: see agenda, budget book