



Minutes of the Joint Workshop of
City Council and School Board
2023/2024 Proposed School Budget
Monday, February 6, 2023
6:00 p.m.

Council Members Present: Mayor Dana Hilliard, Councilor Martin Pepin, Councilor Robert Gibson, Councilor Donald Austin, Councilor Richard Michaud, Councilor David A. Witham, Councilor Matt Gerding, Councilor Nancie Cameron, and Councilor Denis Messier

Council Members Absent: Councilor Kenneth Vincent

School Board Members Present: Maggie Larson, Paul Hackworth, Jr., Marcia Brown, Barbara Wentworth, Susan Tierney, Todd Marsh and Mandy Demers

School Board Members Absent: Kari Clark and Mark Richardson

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Dana Hilliard at 6:00 p.m.

Mayor Hilliard began the meeting by welcoming all in attendance, he shared that the path of the Joint Commission of the School Board and City Council which began approximately 9 years ago as an effort to increase communication between both groups. He added that tonight's meeting is a way to continue to evolve the budgetary process and determine the needs of both the School and City sides while maintaining quality education and keeping the City affordable. Mayor Hilliard asked that each Councilor share their comfort level with the School Board's Proposed Budget and informed all that nothing is binding or being decided during the meeting.

Superintendent of Schools, Lori Lane, provided all in attendance with a total budget summary of where it stands currently. She shared that State revenue is the most challenging part of the budget noting that there has been revenue lost compared to the last budget season. The most significant loss is attributed to the reduction in State of NH Adequacy Education Aid for a total loss of \$895,802. Ms. Lane shared that a vote to authorize the use of \$100,000 of anticipated School Department FY23 unexpended funds is going before the Council tonight which, if approved, will become available for the FY24 proposed budget as shown, she added that the amount is conservative but reasonable.

Ms. Lane reported on additional general expenditures pertaining to increases and decreases noting that medical insurance increased 12.1% for custodians and 8.1% for all other staff while there was a small percentage in decreases with the NH Retirement System. She continued to explain that the proposed budget includes the recently approved salary increases based on the negotiated contracts, SAU56 approved budget increase, First Student Transportation contractual increase and expected utilities increases based on rate increases. Ms. Lane shared the School Board's decision to reduce teacher positions based on enrollment numbers which has remained stable for the last few years at around 1,350; she added that the Board reviewed the positions carefully and strategically to ensure students continue to receive quality education. To conclude the total budget summary, Ms. Lane stated that the proposed budget increase is \$1,031,227 coming in at \$934,467 under the tax cap budget with an estimated tax impact of \$0.90.

There was additional discussion regarding the reduction in positions as well as the decrease in State of NH Adequacy Education Aid.

Mayor Hilliard asked that each Councilor share their thoughts on the proposed budget allowing the School Board to gauge their “temperature” of where it stands and what they may be willing to consider.

Councilor Pepin stated that the proposed budget is sound and comes in way under the tax cap, he does however, have concerns about the \$0.90 tax impact but doesn't have an amount to counter with as he doesn't want to decrease the quality of education. He did add that he would not be in favor of going above the \$0.90 and worries about the impact to taxpayers.

Councilor Gibson stated he felt similar to Councilor Pepin's comments and cannot argue with the figures presented. He shared concern with the reduction of some positions and wants to be sure that the City is keeping quality education.

Councilor Austin supports the \$0.90 tax impact. He appreciates the work that the School Board has done in providing a match of students to staffing numbers and has his focus on the bottom line and services being provided.

Councilor Michaud commented that the \$0.90 tax impact is steep but recognizes that the School Board did what they needed to do and kept it under the tax cap.

Councilor Witham stated that the proposed \$0.90 tax impact does not worry him and in fact he would be worried if it came in under \$0.90. He recognizes the effort of all that went into the budget process and the reductions being done. He commented that the shame in this process is the continued cuts and downshifting in costs from the State that gets passed on to the taxpayers.

Councilor Gerding commented that the revenue loss from the State is disappointing and shared his concerns with the future of education with the reduction of important teacher positions. He worries that cutting staff will place a burden on current teachers. Councilor Gerding stated that the \$0.90 tax impact is reasonable and like Councilor Witham, would worry if it were less. He encouraged everyone in the room to hold discussions outside of the workshop and reach out to their State Representatives about the loss of education funds.

Councilor Cameron stated that although the \$0.90 sounds nerve racking, the School Department has always presented a conscientious budget that is under the tax cap. She too does not like seeing positions cut however trusts that the School Department has done their research in maintaining a student-teacher match and appreciates all the effort that went into the proposed budget.

Councilor Messier thanked the School Board for their efforts on the budget and is comfortable with the \$0.90 proposed tax impact.

Mayor Hilliard is proud of the budget process in the City of Somersworth and applauded all who are involved for continuing to have open and sometimes tough conversations between the School Board and City Council.

Discussion continued regarding the amount of thought and research that went into the School Board making the tough decision to cut positions within the School Department and the shared worry about the future of teaching positions being cut due to more State revenue cuts.

Mayor Hilliard commented that the tax rate in the City has been lower than it has been in decades with all of the current projects and developers coming in or showing interest.

School Board Chair, Maggie Larson, commented that it is evident that the members in attendance all care about the City as a whole and appreciates everyone for being involved.

The meeting adjourned at 6:55 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Kristen LaPanne, City Clerk