

Town of Marlborough

Board of Finance Members

Michael Nastri, Chairman
Karen Pakulis Paul, Vice Chairman
Jeffrey Plourde, Secretary
John (Jack) H Fidler
Will Guzman



Board of Finance Alternate Members

Christopher Barella
Sal Senna
Baird Welch-Collins

Board of Finance Special Meeting Agenda Amended Budget Workshop

Thursday, March 14, 2024

7:00 PM

Marlborough Elementary School Media Center and Zoom

All minutes are considered 'DRAFT MINUTES' until approved at the next meeting.

1. Call to Order, Alternate Appointment

Present at the meeting were Michael Nastri, Karen Pakulis Paul, Jeffrey Plourde, Jack Fidler, Will Guzman, Christopher Barella, Baird Welch-Collins, Sal Sena.

Michael Nastri called the meeting to order at 7:01 PM.

2. Public Comment

David Porter – Town Manager

Outlined the Consumer Price Index (CPI) numbers with the inflation rates between 2019-2025. If the mill rate was taken from the 2019-2020 FY, 37.25 and adjust it with the CPI, maintaining purchasing power parity, the mill rate this year would be 44.63. This would not only be higher than the currently proposed mill rate, but significantly higher than years that had proposed cuts in the past. In the course of the last several years, the town and the school have used federal pandemic aid dollars to cushion the impact of inflation on residents. As those federal dollars dry up, unlikely to be replaced, we have to grow accustomed to paying for the things that we want, ourselves. Whether we set the mill rate at 37.94, what it would be with zero cuts, or something lower, the emphasis on the discussion tonight should be on how the three boards should work together to tell the same narrative and educate our public about the services we provide and their value. Keeping taxes at an artificially low rate would do a disservice to the residents that live here, wanting the services currently offered.

It is the BOF's responsibility to set a mill rate they are comfortable with. Let the residents decide whether they are okay with a mill rate higher than once comfortable with and getting the feedback from residents. Take a budget to referendum and have the residents vote on it. Then, it can be quickly adapted and adjusted. Over the course of the pandemic, gave people a small, nominal tax cut, but looking at inflation as well it was a massive tax cut. Educate our constituents on what happened, why it happened and why it might be reasonable in our minds to take the mill rate back up to where it would be had we followed the CPI.

Also like to propose an initiative to promote much closer collaboration between the three boards – BOF, BOS, BOE. The constituents need the boards to work more closely together. Proposal for everyone read “The Magic of Dialogue.” Suggested a three-board retreat – discuss and design a better budget process. At the next BOF meeting, vote to accept the Town Manager’s plan and participate in this idea.

Holly Hageman, Superintendent.

Expressed appreciation of the vision for cooperation in the future.

Last BOF where the \$450,000 amount was discussed, BOE was not on the agenda or in attendance. In watching the video, things that were said should be discussed.

- BOE budget increase is below the rate of inflation and is one of the lowest in the state – both in percentage and dollar amount. It is also the lowest in the district’s recent 4 years and is needed for the school’s positive trajectory.
- The school system’s Operating Budget is a zero-base budget, based on historical expenditures and actual figures. There is no fluff in the BOE budget. For example, nothing in the budget for an electric car charging station. BOE is working with the town for grant funds. As a superintendent, supporting a cut into the operating budget would support the assumption that there’s fluff, each cut would affect something directly.
- Contrary to expressed, MES is comparatively lean in staffing. Spoken to it factually in board meetings. Rationale has been provided in the organizational chart.
- Two full-time building administrators: MES has had two FT administrators since 1981. Maintaining two FT administrators still makes sense.
- Discussion around student enrollment: Decline that has existed in enrollment, which has occurred all across CT, has stabilized since the decline started. Projected to increase in next 10 years by 90+ students. The administrative and operational staffing in the budget is necessary now and will be in the position to absorb potential enrollment growth in future years.

The following Marlborough residents spoke or sent letters that were read during public comments in support of the BOE budget:

Kerry Barella

Speaking as individual: Communication to BOF after special meeting regarding the request to reduce BOE budget.

BOE made a unanimous vote to not reduce budget – email of formal letter sent to BOF.

Grateful for the volunteers on the board for their time and energy into meetings. However, we’re all required to uphold Robert’s Rule of Order – parliamentary – Agenda based meetings. Promoting courtesy, justice and impartiality. Disappointed in other boards present. Allowing discussion of BOE topics without proper representation, publicly reprimanding board members that disagree, is unacceptable. Looking to turn a new leaf with collaboration. Everyone in town lives here for the education/school systems. Investing in education is a good investment. Encouraging to not make drastic cuts.

Sue Stolfi

Stress that BOE consists of citizens with expertise. Merely insulting when BOS members insult the intelligence or diligence of the Board and inaccurately gaslighting parts of the budget that members do not agree with. The world of schooling has drastically changed and the BOE and Superintendent are the experts on current education needs.

Encouraging members to stay in their elected lane. Should be working together to work

for the betterment of the town.

Mark Merritt

Has grown up in Marlborough and has a child in the school system. Criticized Board of Selectmen members, the procedures, and their input in the BOE budget. Criticism of the financial decisions in the past, including a \$250,000 lawsuit payout, reduction in mill rate with Capital projects on the horizon, and the proposal in this year's BOS budget adding a \$500,000 culvert project. Question the BOS expensive options at the expense of the taxpayer. Encourages BOS to focus on reasonable quotes for projects and fiscal responsibility rather than attacking the school district's wants.

Liz Gorglione

Agenda states public comments: Roberts Rules limits public comment to 3 minutes. The Town Manager's speech was 16 minutes, not 3 minutes. There was no listed presentation for the Town Manager. Things are allowed during meetings that should not be allowed. The Board of Education did not have representation at the meeting, nor where they on the agenda. Disappointed because the conversations occur every year.

BOE contractual obligations occur every year. BOS are aware of budgets, 93% of BOE budget are contractual obligations that cannot be changed. Outside of salaries, benefits, negotiating contracts for fuel/busses, there is very little to nothing less. Encouraged those listening to breakdown the cost of the classroom: per child per classroom per grade, it is balanced. There is nowhere to cut the requested \$100,000. It was softly agreed upon that the BOE budget was acceptable, then the BOS came back and requested more money, leaving cuts to be made. The use of fear mongering – federal cuts, state cuts, there won't be money next year, is common. The people that take the hit are the school and the kids. A lean budget exists – schools of comparable size. We kick the can down the road every budget year and put aside bigger projects and think it will be fixed. Two admins, salary/etc. state obligations are in place. Look at the town that has put things off for years.

The following individuals wrote in to Chairman Nastri to be read at the meeting under Public Comments:

Patrick Kiernan

Wrote in strong support of the BOE budget that has been put forward. Parents of MES children are strong supporters of the school.

Heather Dierberger

Wrote in strong support of the BOE budget. The proposed school budget is extremely necessary. Making unnecessary budget cuts that could potentially cut a position of the paraprofessional would impact special education students. There is no room for school budget cuts.

Erin Bride

Wrote in support of the BOE budget. Strong belief that the proposed budget is appropriate and necessary. Superintendent was mindful in creating the budget and

every line item is a necessity.

Josh Bruhn

Wrote in support of the BOE budget. Reducing the budget would leave the schools unprepared for future enrollment increases. Cutting the budget could impact the community and families in Marlborough.

Erin Pitrone

Wrote to strongly advocate for the approval of the BOE budget. Reducing support staff would disproportionately affect the students who rely on these resources the most. As an educator, consider the long-term implications of any budget cuts would impact the future of our community and prioritize the needs of our children.

Brian Dierberger

Wrote in support of the proposed BOE budget.

Ken Hjulstrom

Wrote of the BOS members comments toward the BOE budget to be disrespectful of the Superintendent. Encouraged BOF should focus their attention on the Town Hall Operations and Capital budgets and leave the BOE budget to the elected members of the BOE. Posed concerns of the long history of large year-end surpluses for the Town Operations budgets. Stated it would be great to have a good working relationship between the Boards of Selectmen and Education, but disappointed in the BOS attitude. Encourage BOF to refrain from making arbitrary cuts to the BOE budget.

3. New Business

a. Budget Proposals/Responses due from BOS, BOE and Rham. Budget discussion by BOF.

There were no budget proposals for the discussion.

Board members discussed the pros and cons to putting the current proposed budget to referendum. If the budget does not pass as proposed, will look for insight on why the residents feel that way.

The Board has not yet received RHAM's response. Slight adjustment was anticipated.

Karen Pakulis Paul made a motion to go forward with the proposals as received, with the exception of receiving a revised budget from RHAM. Go to referendum with the BOE and BOS budgets. Jack Fidler seconded the motion. All in favor. Motion passed.

4. Public Comment

Joe Asklar

As the BOS, hired David to do the best job. BOE hired Holly to do the best job she could. During last week, everyone has done the best job they could do. Fortunate to have these folks steering the ship.

Kari Barella

Expressed appreciation for David's offer – will read David's suggested book.

Holly Hageman

Recommendation in context working together: given the narrative of the history of the mill rates and what is driving the increase, communication strategy is critical. Suggestion of a joint statement co-authored that shows a unified front. Draft communication for people to receive that message. Furthermore, continue that narrative.

Pam Farrington

Offered thanks to the BOF. Expressed the hope that the town boards can work together and set a good example for the town.

5. Adjournment

Michael Nastri adjourned the meeting at 8:10PM.

Respectfully Submitted,

Kathryn Overturf Nohelty
Board Clerk