

Amherst School District Ways and Means Committee Meeting

January 5, 2021, 6:00pm (via Zoom)

In Attendance

From the Ways and Means Committee: Victoria Parisi (Chair), Christine Grayson (Secretary), Kelly Schmidt, Jeff Candito, Samantha Linton, and Marilyn Gibson.

From the Amherst School Board: None present

From the SAU 39 Administration: None present

Ms. Parisi read the following overview of the process thus far:

All ways and means members had access to the entire ASD budget for FY22. Members of the committee reviewed the budget, submitting questions for all areas.

Further, Ways and Means reviewed the budget by breaking the budget into 11 categories and meeting with members of the SAU staff, ASB, and WM. Meeting recaps were then shared with the entire WM group for each category of the budget and discussion followed at our WM meetings. ASB members and Business Administrator Michele Croteau attended the majority of these meetings. Any follow up questions were sent through the question submission tab on the budget document or through Michele.

All questions were answered sufficiently, and there are currently no outstanding questions. One question regarding the use of default funds for non-CBA raises was difficult to come by, but, ultimately, the school district did provide the information in question.

At the December ASB meeting, I presented the Ways and Means review of the FY22 budget. This review suggested that the numbers already identified be removed from the budget. They included miscalculations, healthcare adjustments, and the removal of the UV robots for a total of \$635,252. The new budget with those adoptions would be \$30,723,008 (5.99% increase). Today's budget that the ASB has voted to put on the ballot is \$30,579,864 (5.5% increase).

Ways and Means advice given included the following:

- 1) Concern about the overall tax impact of the combined operating budget and warrant articles
- 2) Identifying one top priority
- 3) Aiming to get proposed closer to default
- 4) We gave preliminary support for a facilities warrant article as presented at 10/29 Board meeting while lowering the proposed close to or under default.

Operating Budget:

From FY21 to FY22 Default of 30,129,704.00: 3.94% increase

From FY22 Default to FY22 Proposed: \$450,160: 1.47% increase

From FY21 to FY22 Proposed Operating Budget of \$30,579,864: 5.5% increase

General Discussion

Ways and Means needs to have the final numbers and wording of all the warrants in order to take an official vote. (Note: During this meeting Ms. Parisi did receive confirmation from Ms.

Croteau regarding the operating budget numbers and % increases.) The committee will have to meet again to vote officially after the ASD Public Hearing.

Ms. Parisi spoke to ASB Chair Beth Kuzsma to ensure that W&M was seeing all the changes to the budget, and there weren't any additional documents prior to the ASB meeting on Monday, January 4th.

Information on ASD Public Hearing and Deliberative Session

The public hearing will be held on Wednesday, January 13th at 7:00pm. The public hearing on the proposed issuance of bonds will start at 7:00pm, and the public hearing on the budget will immediately follow. The deliberative session will be held on Tuesday, February 2nd at 7:00pm. This session will be held both in-person (observing social distancing and all necessary precautions) and via Zoom. In order to actively participate in the meeting, one must be physically present at the meeting. Details and links can be found on the SAU39 website.

Capital Reserve Fund Warrant Discussion

The CRF will ensure funding repairs are made for the short term while facilities are being addressed. Students and staff will be in those buildings and need to be safe and healthy. It is important to hold ASB accountable to spend the CRF on facilities as needed, without spending money in vain. but while still maintaining safe facilities. Some questions included: Can the CRF go to the new building? Is the funding going to be from unassigned fund balance at the end of the year (FY21) or from raising new funds?

Operating Budget Discussion

The ASB is in a difficult position, as Superintendent Steel gave drastic options opposed to middle ground. Those options included reducing the number of classroom teachers, removing all kindergarten paraprofessionals, or removing middle school athletics. This seemed to leave ASB to make the call on their own vs. with balanced input from Superintendent Steel. ASB chose not to adopt the suggestions of the Superintendent. ASB is commended for finding thousands of dollars to lower the budget.

There is support of the addition of classroom teachers. It is important to work toward the Board's goal of lowering class sizes. There is support for the middle school teacher, as that class in 5th grade has always had large class sizes. Discussion ensued that the cohort moving into 5th grade has not been the cohort with the largest class sizes; this was the cohort that had the additional teacher added previously to bring it to 7 classroom teachers per grade, rather than 6 classroom teachers. The cohort in 5th grade in FY22 will be close to the size of the FY22 7th and 8th grade cohorts when they were in 5th grade.

Ways and Means observations by individual members during the meeting: -No one wants ASB to have to have longer or additional meetings, but W&M feels that more time could have been spent to creatively come up with budget options.

-The expectation was that the administration would give more guidance regarding cuts to the budget.

-It seems that money is being pushed to be used with the CRF rather than truly bringing the

budget number down. There is a need to make other cuts.

-There are professional development opportunities that target to support teachers in classrooms of 24-28 students. True teachers would be willing to do the extra work and not only be there for the high pay that Amherst gives.

-It seems that class size is a high ranking goal of ASB. Supporting the facility project is in support of this goal as it allows for redistribution of teachers into proper physical classrooms. It seems that ASB needs to remember that their facility project does support their class size goal. The major difference is looking at achieving the goal incrementally versus over time. -ASB is asking for too much at once (more teachers and facilities).

-The increase of 5.5% from FY21 to FY22 is drastic. The increase year over year is unacceptable and taxpayers should be given the decision regarding funding increases. Ways and Means acknowledges that they are asking hard questions. ASB has good vision, but may not be taking the seriousness of the operating budget increases into account. -Labor costs will always be the largest portion of the budget. Teacher contracts were put onto the ballot by ASB, so ASB is responsible for those increases that are increasing year over year. Something needs to be done to mitigate this increase. With the contract being negotiated in Fall 2021, Ways and Means would like the ASB to keep taxpayer impact in the forefront of their minds.

Facilities Project (Bond Warrant Article) Discussion

Discussion is based on the numbers presented to the SAU Board on 10/29. The high number on the facility project bond is hard to swallow. The need for the building projects is still present after the last two years of the ASB warrant articles to get support. There are currently low interest rates. From a long-term financial perspective, it is wise to support this bond in the current year and get started as soon as possible. Discussion was had regarding the decision to put the bond for Clark-Wilkins and AMS on the same warrant article. From the ASB meeting discussion, it seems that they have been given the go-ahead to do so because the cost and timing of each project are dependent on both projects occurring. Discussion was had regarding the SAU Joint Facility Advisory Committee's (JFAC) decision to recommend a new build at Wilkins site rather than adding to the existing Wilkins building. If adding to the existing building was the course chosen, there would have been the need to continue to maintain aging systems and the difference in cost was not fiscally responsible. Clark building was discussed and it was shared that the JFAC determined that the building will be used to teach students through construction, which is expected, at minimum, to be 4-5 years. JFAC has previously noted that the Clark conversation will be forthcoming but isn't the priority at this moment due to the need to have facility construction support first.

The facilities are not only an educational space issue, but also a health issue. In other towns with new builds, the health issues of students and staff were reduced when the new systems/buildings were in place. The plan recommended by JFAC is best for educational and health outcomes in the long run.

The Ways and Means Committee supports the ASB class size goal by supporting the bond as there is only so much space within the current configurations of the buildings.

It was noted that all members were offering their varying opinions and the respectful discussion of ideas was appreciated by all.

Other Discussion

The discussion of the Brick School Contract and Mont Vernon Tuition Contract were not highlighted tonight as they were less controversial among the members. All members have been apprised of the information that was shared about these contracts at the December Ways and Means meeting by the ASB presenters.

Ways & Means Vote

Ms. Parisi will not be asking for a formal vote tonight on two accounts. First, it is important to note that any of the articles (operating budget or warrant articles) may change after the public hearing. The vote reported in the Voter's Guide along with the Ways and Means narrative will not be complete until that time. Second, Ways and Means has not seen drafts of each article as will be presented on the ballot. This includes final financial numbers until the middle of this meeting. While the committee believes wholeheartedly that the numbers are correct that they are discussing, it would be poor practice to not ask for the articles in writing prior to official vote.

Ways and Means conducted a preliminary vote throughout the meeting as portions of the budget were discussed. The results are as follows. Please note that where the vote is of 5 members, the vote was taken later in the evening and one member had left.

Mont Vernon Tuition Contract: 5-0

Brick School Contract: 5-0

Capital Reserve Fund:

 If written as only unassigned fund balance to be used for this purpose: 5-0

 If written as will raise new funds: 0-5

Operating Budget: 1-5

Facilities Bond: 6-0