

Amherst School District Ways and Means Committee Meeting

January 20, 2021, 7:00pm (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: Tom Gauthier

From the SAU 39 Administration: None present

The Committee discussed the January 19th ASB meeting. The board decided to remove the bond warrant from the ballot and made no changes on the operating budget or other warrant articles. That came as a surprise to members of the W&M Committee.

Operating Budget Vote: 1-5

The W&M Committee vote is split on this warrant article.

The Committee would like to see more fiscal restraint in this area. The district is doing a wonderful job, and it is believed that they can continue this into the next fiscal year with the default budget. During the ASB meeting, Chair Beth Kuzsma said that W&M did not tell them where to make further cuts in the budget. It is not the W&M Committee's belief that the committee charge is to make specific recommendations on where budget cuts should be made. It was noted that areas that ASB removed would have been specific lines of WM suggestions, leading that the two groups are thinking similarly about necessities at some level. It was noted that budget increases become part of the next year's default. Opinion was shared to not increase that default while funding a facility project (bond). The Committee would have liked to have seen more middle-of-the-road recommendations from administration to the board, rather than the drastic cuts that had been suggested by Superintendent Steel at a previous meeting. Pushback from the board when presented with the drastic options may have resulted in working out a better solution. The proposed increase is going to be a burden on taxpayers. It was noted that ASB has some great ideas but needs to consider different ways of funding them (instead of continually raising taxes, make cuts to other areas). An analogy was made to a budget at one's home – if one decides to spend money on a big ticket item, there's not an option to ask for more money; cuts need to be made to current expenses. Some ideas discussed included early buy-outs of staff on the higher end of the pay scale, and more fees for programs requested from users (for example, higher sports fees for students that engage in sports). In the latter, the full expenditure amount would still have to be budgeted even if there will be revenue to offset it; however, it is worth a discussion. Mr. Gauthier cautioned that there could be accusations of ageism if buy-outs were presented. Ms. Parisi mentioned that the district has a program for a limited number of retirees at times. Perhaps that program could be expanded to lessen the payroll expenditures (presuming the district hired replacements at a lower rate). The Committee commended ASB Member Josh Conklin for asking for discussion on areas to cut the budget (the technology plan and bussing) at the last meeting. Although the board did not ultimately engage in a meaningful discussion on it at this meeting, the groundwork has been laid for these conversations in future budget cycles.

Capital Reserve Fund Vote: 6-0

The W&M Committee fully supports this warrant article.

Brick School Contract Vote: 6-0

The Ways & Means Committee fully supports this warrant article.

Mont Vernon Tuition Contact Vote: 6-0

The W&M Committee fully supports this warrant article.

Next Meetings

The next Ways and Means Committee Meeting will be scheduled once it is known if changes are made at the Deliberative Session, which would require the committee to re-vote.

The Amherst School Board Deliberative Session will be held on February 2nd, in-person, and via Zoom. In order to participate in the session, one must attend in-person. Safety protocols will be followed.

Respectfully submitted,

Christine Grayson