

Chariho School Committee
Omnibus Meeting Minutes - January 13, 2021

Present were:

Chariho School Committee Members: Chair Linda Lyall, Vice Chair Catherine Giusti, George Abbott, Ryan Callahan, Donna Chambers, Sheila Grover, Gary Liguori, Craig Louzon and Linda McAllister. (Absent: William Day, Lisa Macaruso and David Stall). **Chariho Administrators:** Superintendent Gina Picard, Assistant Superintendent Jane Daly, Director of Administration and Finance Ned Draper, Retired Director of Administration and Finance Susan Rogers and Assistant Director of Administration and Finance Gail Wilcox. Also Present: NEA ESP President Tom Pirnie, Barbara Capalbo, Joe Reddish, Robin Woodmansee, Kristin Haxton, Elisa Campbell, School Committee Clerk Donna Sieczkiewicz and Westerly Sun Reporter Cynthia Drummond.

Charlestown Town Council: President Deborah Carney and Grace Klinger. Also in attendance was Town Administrator Mark Stankiewicz.

Richmond Town Council: President Nell Carpenter, Vice President Jim Palmisciano, Lauren Cacciola, Rich Nassaney and Ron Newman. Also in attendance were Town Administrator Karen Pinch and Finance Director Laura Kenyon.

Hopkinton Town Council: President Stephen Moffitt, Vice President Sharon Davis, Scott Bill Hirst and Robert Marvel. Also in attendance was Finance Director Brian Rosso.

Legislators: Senator Dennis Algiere, Representatives Blake Filippi and Brian Kennedy.

I. Meeting Call to Order/Pledge of Allegiance/Silent Meditation

Chair Lyall introduced herself and called the Chariho School Committee Virtual Omnibus Meeting with the Town Councils to order at 7:00 PM. The Pledge of Allegiance was followed by a moment of silence. She thanked all for coming and asked fellow School Committee members to please introduce themselves. She noted that Superintendent Picard will begin with her budget presentation and after she is finished, there will be time for comments. If you wish to speak, please raise your hand and you will be unmuted. She asked those wishing to speak to please introduce themselves and the town where they reside. If you have a question about the budget, please provide the line item with your question. Responses will be provided in a timely fashion. Superintendent Picard then reviewed the different ways in which one could raise their hand.

II. FY21 Budget Presentation

Superintendent Picard welcomed all and thanked her team, especially Susan Rogers, who came back to assist with the budget process as this was the first time that both she and Ned had done one for Chariho. The staff has worked hard to leave no stone unturned and they continue to actively seek alternative funding sources. She reviewed the grants the District has received which has saved the District having to take this money from the budget. She noted that the Development Officer position has been critical in getting these grants; many with very little turnaround time. We have received a "Take-it-Outside" Grant for technology in the amount of \$55,000; a RIDE Grant for substitute teachers (reimbursement of \$100 per day per sub through December); 300 hepa filters from RIDE (a savings to the District of \$100,000); new bussing guidelines which alleviated the need to put on two more buses at a cost of \$170,000. She noted that it will not be an easy comparison between this year's budget to last year's because of COVID. The substitute teacher line item had a considerable savings last year as we closed in March so subs were not needed. Changes in this budget, as a result of COVID, will see an increase in cleaning supplies, hepa filters will need to be purchased (an ongoing cost of \$12,000) and engineer fees to make sure we could safely get through winter with in-person learning and closing of windows. That was about \$30,000. There is an increase in tech leases and platforms (e-registration, transportation, special education documentation, etc.). All of this will be available online so it will allow us to work from home if required. We also implemented an employee assistance program due to the increased anxiety and stress that is associated with concurrent learning. The technology department is

requesting a PT IT person. This department has gone above and beyond and is in need of additional help. We had to move our PreK-four 1:1 faster than anticipated. High School staff laptops are in need of replacing this year and we had to purchase Zoom accounts in order to do the concurrent learning. We have seen an increase in unemployment and have had to increase our substitute teacher daily rate to \$140 so we could staff our buildings. She stated that she has only budgeted \$85 per day per substitute teacher for next year but will be asking the School Committee to consider an increase so we can maintain the pool of subs we have. She plans to do a comparison of surrounding districts but we need to remain competitive in order to keep our subs. The bus contract expires and bids were due yesterday. We are looking at a possible 2% increase but statewide transportation is planning to increase by 26%. We are looking to move statewide transportation in-house but we have to make sure this will not affect our categorical aid. If we are able to bring this in-house, we will save money there. They are in the process of preparing a new five-year Capital Plan for RIDE. In order to receive the 61% reimbursement in State Aid, we have to make sure all projects are included in the plan. We put aside \$1.5 million for COVID expenses last year. They are planning to take what is left of this money and apply it to capital projects. They will present more on the Capital Plan at next Thursday's workshop. The School Committee is reviewing options for newer/fewer schools. She provided some background to this concept. If they move with more efficient facilities, the reimbursement could go upwards of 80%. Projects need to commence by December 2022. Last February, the Necessity for School Construction Committee was put in place. Ryan Callahan was named Chair and Greg Zenion Vice Chair. Facility assessments were done as was an in-depth demographic report. She reviewed the information and noted that three of four of the elementary schools are around or over 80 years old with parts of Charlestown School over 50 years old. She then reviewed enrollment figures. Charlestown is at 24.61%; Richmond is at 37.76%; and Hopkinton is at 37.63%. Home Instruction has impacted enrollment as well. Students are allowed to take a class and if they do, we get their allocation. Superintendents across the State are pleading with RIDE to use last year's numbers due to the pandemic. She then reviewed the new Curriculum Bill which is being mandated by the State. The School Committee, at its meeting last night, approved the new ELA K-12 Curriculum at a cost of \$187,000 (\$20,000 will be reduced from the budget that was set aside for books and materials). CTC Grant money is also being reduced by the State. The budget timeline was reviewed and Superintendent Picard noted that they have already reduced this budget by over \$400,000 and the cuts made did not affect teaching and learning. Last week's budget presentation is online. There is one change to this presentation and that is the addition of \$46,000 in tuition revenue for CALA that was approved by the School Committee. The Public Budget Meeting, required by the Chariho Act, is scheduled for March 2nd (the Act requires it be held on the 1st Tuesday in March). The State is holding an election on the same day so we are reviewing how to proceed. Some major impacts to the bottom line of the budget are home-schooled students (planning on 50% or those who went out this year returning to school) and K students who were not enrolled this year because of COVID (this will mean more K students for next year if parents enroll them). Enrollment is expected to increase by 2% and we are expecting an increase in special education as well. The fund balance has been reduced to 2.5%. Categorical (transportation) aid is level-funded and we hope to see this remain if we decide to do statewide transportation in-house. The General Fund budget is at \$61,936,152.02 or a 3.04% increase. The General Fund with Capital is \$62,153,839.02; an increase of 2.60%. She thanked all for their time and welcomed feedback.

Scott Bill Hirst, a Hopkinton Town Councilor, commented on a perceived problem with the budget meeting and state election years ago. A Presidential Primary was scheduled on the same day as the Public Budget Hearing but both were pulled off so he knows it can be done. He would like to have an outside management study done to look at staff and other elements as Chariho's budget impacts the towns' budgets. He sent, as a courtesy, issues he wanted to discuss. He also wants the Omnibus Meeting to include any issues the three towns and the District want to discuss. He is concerned about this feature being taken away.

Nell Carpenter, Richmond Town Council President, thanked the Chair and Superintendent and asked if she could invite Richmond's Finance Director Laura Kenyon to speak on behalf of the town. Laura thanked the School Committee and staff for such a wonderful job on the budget.

Online recordings have helped her understand it. She has no major objection as it is being proposed but does have some recommendations for adjustments to get it down to 2% or at least a \$600,000 reduction. She provided a few suggestions which included cutting the fund balance to 25 (a \$270,000 cut) as she believes the District will have a surplus in the current fiscal year. The \$217,000 contribution for capital be brought to zero funding from the towns as the District has between \$1.2 million and \$1.4 million reserved for capital projects. Some projects may be postponed or go into newer/fewer. She was going to suggest the District postpone the cost of the ELA curriculum (\$187,000) or find the money someplace else as this was approved by the School Committee last night. These cuts would bring the budget to a 2% increase and Richmond would greatly appreciate it.

Representative Brian Kennedy stated that Governor Raimondo is leaving for Washington and has requested additional time to prepare the State budget as there will be a new Governor taking over. She is assuming the new Governor will ask for additional time as well. He does not foresee major changes and assumes the estimates given to Chariho at this time to be about the same. They may go into the summer months for meetings due to COVID. He asked if the District was looking to take over its bussing and purchase its own buses as he is the go-to person for transportation categorical aid. Gina commented that she has heard wonderful things about him and all he has done for the District. She clarified that the District is not looking to purchase buses but is looking to take over the statewide transportation contract and provide these services in-house. The contracts the State had with vendors have ended and they are looking at huge increases. If we take this over internally, we will see a savings. Brian noted that diesel prices have come way down but he realizes in order to keep social distance, the District will have to run extra busses. When they look at transportation categorical aid, they can address this at the State level.

Brian Rosso, Acting Town Manager and Finance Director of Hopkinton, took his hat off to Superintendent Picard and Finance Director Ned Draper. It is very challenging to predict the future. He supports Laura Kenyon's suggestions; take the fund balance to 2%, remove \$217,000 from capital and use the \$1.2 million to \$1.4 million for capital projects. It is important for everyone to know that there is \$4.2 million surplus in the operating budget. He sees that as a big number and would like to know where was that money allocated to – what line items? He shared a spreadsheet he put together. He is seeing underruns in many line items and the budget continues to grow. He feels there is room to cut; 2% is palatable for the towns, 3.5% is too much for Hopkinton. If you could provide more detail on the revenue side that would be important. Like, what was received in the previous fiscal year. He appreciates the hard work that has been done. Chair Lyall requested that he include his spreadsheet in an email to Ned and Ned will respond in written format. Brian stated that he would like an explanation on the \$4.2 million in surplus and how that was handled. Ned explained that when the District concluded last fiscal year, \$2.8 million went into fund balance. In FY20 when the buses stopped running, we had a contract with Ocean State. We had to negotiate and found we had \$1.5 million as a result of these negotiations. We moved this money to a committed fund for COVID as it was unclear how much state/federal money would be available also whether or not we would be in distance learning or in-person learning. We have extended \$500,000 which we hope to offset with grants and get all or most of it back. So the \$1.5 million is being moved forward to FY22 for purposes of capital improvements. We have at least \$2-3 million in obligations for capital needs for five years. This is how the money flowed. Brian asked if \$500,000 will be recouped in additional COVID funds, what does the District plan to do with those funds to which Ned responded that the District will be required to meet federal regulations; the window on what we can spend it on will be narrow. The plan is to focus on the digital aspect of the new curriculum. If federal restrictions are for infrastructure, we will have to reassess. They will have specific purposes we will have to follow.

Senator Dennis Algiere echoed Brian Kennedy's comments. He anticipates Senate meetings should start soon (remotely) and agreed that the Governor will request to move the schedule ahead. The State has a pretty significant deficit. He will make himself available to school districts. We have been successful in the past with transportation categorical aid so let us know if you see something that will hurt your budget.

Hopkinton Town Council Vice President Sharon Davis stated that she submitted recommendations/suggestions to the School Committee totaling \$618,000. She supports reducing the fund balance to 2% and would like to see an additional \$300,000 cut so in total she would be happy with a \$900,000 reduction. It is difficult to compare budgets from year to year but she feels there is room for savings. The Superintendent did ask for her rationale in the cuts she suggested but her feeling is if you haven't spent this amount in the past, you don't need to spend it now. Chair Lyall did note that they received Sharon's suggestions and she thanked her for them.

Nell Carpenter commented on another concern she had on page 25 of 40 under the 4th section – row -5840 – total tuition CCRI. She would like an explanation for that; is this for accelerated students who are obtaining college credit while attending high school? Gina responded that Nell was correct. It is for dual enrollment. The District is responsible to pay tuition which is free if a student has graduated high school but we incur the cost if a student is still in high school. Nell thought the RI Promise was free for students so communities are getting punished for having students enroll early. She does not think this is fair.

Barbara Capalbo from Hopkinton appreciated both Laura's and Brian's comments. She agrees that the budget needs to be under 2% so the towns can remain under the 4% cap. She is truly thankful to the many parents who have assisted their child(ren) during the day. Many did not choose the profession of teacher. They are unpaid associates and many have outside jobs as well. You need to keep this at the forefront and also remember those parents who have no job now. The District has done a great job going to online learning. As Laura and Brian mentioned, the District has done it in the past so she is sure it can be done again. She added that she is pleased with Chariho's safety records in regards to COVID. She then questioned CALA tuitions as she wants to make sure that the 8 or so who are out of district students are there because we have room.

Scott Bill Hirst noted, in response to Superintendent Picard's explanation for CCRI tuition, suggested that Districts consider going to legislators as new legislation is usually introduced in March. We need to have a unified front and take a stand. According to the RI State Constitution, the General Assembly should be promoting education.

Barbara Capalbo commented on the capital improvement plan. Everyone needs to remember that some of the projects take years of saving money before they are completed. So some of the money that is in this budget is not money that will be used this year but carried over to be used a year or two down the road. This is a better use and saves money. Hopkinton Town Council President Steve Moffitt reflected on comments made by Laura Kenyon and Brian Rosso and noted his complete support of their recommendations. The money comes from the towns and it will be a tough year for everyone. He would like to see no more than a 2% increase.

Ryan Callahan noted his thanks to all for their comments and added that the School Committee will work hard next week. Nell added her thanks to the School Committee, teachers and staff for the exceptional job all are doing and the services that are being provided to all children. It is very much appreciated. Ryan agreed with Nell's sentiments.

Chair Lyall thanked all for their participation. She hopes all staff heard the compliments. This was her first Omnibus Meeting and she thanked all for their patience and comments. As there were no more comments or questions, she stated she would entertain a motion to adjourn.

III. Adjourn

Ryan Callahan made a motion, seconded by Donna Chambers and it was VOTED: To adjourn at 8:23 PM. In favor: Unanimous.

Donna J. Sieczkiewicz, Clerk