

Chariho School Committee – Omnibus Meeting
January 17, 2024 Minutes

Present were:

Chariho School Committee Members: Chair Catherine Giusti, Vice Chair Karen Reynolds, Donna Chambers, Tyler Champlin, Kathryn Colasante, Polly Hopkins, Craig Louzon, Linda Lyall, Larry Phelps, Patricia Pouliot and Jessica Purcell. **Chariho Administrators:** Superintendent Gina Picard, Assistant Superintendent Michael Comella, Director of Administration and Finance Ned Draper, Assistant Director of Administration and Finance Lynn Gouvin, Systems Administrator Eric O'Brien and School Committee Clerk Donna Sieczkiewicz.

Charlestown Town Council: President Deborah Carney and Stephen Stokes. Also in attendance was Town Administrator Jeff Allen.

Richmond Town Council: President Mark Trimmer, Vice President Rich Nassaney, Michael Colasante, Helen Sheehan and Samantha Wilcox. Also in attendance was Finance Director Laura Kenyon.

Hopkinton Town Council: President Michael Geary, Vice President Scott Bill Hirst, Robert Burns, Sharon Davis and Stephen Moffitt. Also in attendance were Town Manager Brian Rosso, Finance Director Elizabeth Monty and Chariho Finance Committee Member Sylvia Thompson.

Legislators: Senator Victoria Gu, Senator Elaine Morgan (exited at @ 8:00 PM), Representative Megan Cotter and Representative Tina Spears. Representative Cotter informed all that Representative Kennedy had surgery scheduled for the morning so he is unable to attend.

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

Chair Catherine Giusti introduced herself and called the Chariho School Committee Omnibus Meeting with the Town Councils, held in the Chariho High School Library, to order at 7:00 PM. The Pledge of Allegiance was followed by a moment of silence. She then asked all at the table to please introduce themselves. She noted that the Superintendent will present first and she will then open it up to questions/comments. If you plan to speak, please use the microphone. Those in the public planning to speak were asked to please go to the podium, state their name and town of residence and please use the microphone as well.

II. FY25 Budget Presentation

Superintendent Picard welcomed all the member Town Councils, Senators, Representatives and members of the public. As always, she wanted to thank the entire Chariho team for all their efforts to collaborate to ensure they present a budget that serves the needs of our students, families, educators and staff. Tonight she is presenting a budget that continues to ensure that Chariho stays on track to provide a high-quality education to all students. Budgeting time is never easy. However, it is a significant opportunity to share with everyone the return on investment for the tax dollars spent every year in our District and the budgetary needs to ensure continued success for our students. It is not lost on many of us that just two years ago, some individuals implied that our school data during COVID was not what our District had been accustomed to and questioned what their tax dollars were paying for. While the data across the State and our District a couple of years ago showed a drop during COVID, we made a commitment to our families in Chariho and our taxpayers that Chariho educators, administrators, staff and students were up for the challenge of coming out of the pandemic stronger than ever. We designed Vision 2026 and implemented strong School Improvement Plans while increasing parent and student voice on our School and District Improvement teams. That work led her to highlight some of our successes this evening. The budget remains centered around the investments we make every day to ensure our students have a high-quality and rigorous public education. We are proud of the continued growth we see each year and we have only just begun. Our schools continue to make substantial progress and, as a result, Chariho has received several recognitions we should all be proud of. We have three Blue Ribbon Elementary Schools, US News and World Report notes Chariho High School is ranked 7th among all Rhode Island High Schools, all of our elementary schools

substantially grew; they are in the Top Ten related to State proficiency data. Our current State data shows that we are showing growth in English Language Arts and Mathematics at all of our schools and we are outperforming Massachusetts schools and the Rhode Island State proficiency data. We offer over 20 Career and Tech programs, over 20 Advanced Placement (AP) courses and Chariho High School is outperforming its peers in several areas in the State and globally. We received Rhode Island recognition for our commitment to Advanced Placement coursework. Richmond Elementary School Teacher Paige Leddy was selected in October as the 2023 Rhode Island Elementary Milken Award Winner ("The Oscars of Teaching"). Chariho Middle School Teacher Michelle Conary Brittain was named the 2023 Middle School STEAM Educator of the Year and Chariho Alternative Learning Academy Teacher Adrienne Buckley was named the 2023 Environmental Education Teacher of the Year. The Department of Education recognized Richmond Elementary School as a RICAS rock star for achieving a 17% increase in their proficiency scores in English Language Arts and having 69% of their students achieve high growth in Mathematics. Ashaway saw a 16% increase in Mathematics proficiency and Charlestown saw a 7% increase in Mathematics, placing all three elementary schools back to their pre-pandemic proficiency rates. Hope Valley saw a 9% point increase in grade 3 writing. New accountability ratings were released this past Friday, three of our elementary schools were given 4 out of 5 stars and one earned 5 out of 5 stars, placing our elementary schools among the strongest in the State. Our High School SAT scores saw a 5% increase in Mathematics and English Language Arts, our Graduation rate has increased to 94% and our student post-secondary success is among the highest in the State, achieving 3 out of 3 Success points based on State accountability criteria. While our Middle School is in the top 20% of middle schools in the State based on current accountability data, our students in 7th grade showed a 12% increase in Mathematics. We recognize that we must continue to improve with a strong focus on our Middle School. The Middle School team has been working on revising student instructional experiences to ensure we are meeting students' needs and we are focused on growth overall. As you can see, two years ago we were challenged by some based on State Accountability data and she is proud to be here tonight to share the amazing work of our teachers, students and staff that led to this significant growth. And to be clear, we have only just begun. She then reviewed the Budget Process timeline noting that our current five-year proposed Capital Improvement Plan is approximately \$30 million. However, that does not include all of our facility needs over the next five years. They have moved \$750,000 from the Capital Improvement Plan for the FY25 budget with the hope that they will move forward with a bond. The first budget presentation to the School Committee was held on January 11th and typically occurs within the first two weeks of January. There will be additional opportunities for input and feedback for the School Committee and community during all regularly-scheduled School Committee meetings on February 13, March 5 and March 12, leading up to the budget vote on April 9th. The Finance Committee met earlier this evening with this meeting open to the public. Just to reiterate, changes to the budget can still be made until March 12th when the School Committee will adopt a final budget to present to the voters in each town. The purpose of tonight's meeting is to present the FY25 budget to our Town Councils, State elected officials, School Committee members and community members. Along with all budget documents on our website, you will also find our Frequently Asked Questions document (FAQ) and a Google form to submit questions you may have that are not noted on the FAQ document. Our educators and staff are our most significant investment as these are essential individuals who provide the instruction and support to ensure the overall needs of our students are met. Much of our operating budget is allocated to staff but, you will note, there have been slight reductions in staff each year. You will also see that the cuts to Healthcare made last year during the FY24 budget process proved to be too aggressive and, as a result, have impacted our FY25 budget. Gina then reviewed costs required by either Federal/State legislation/statutes that are needed for us to operate. We continue to ask our state legislatures to support us by asking that the State provide full funding for transportation. Our Senators and Representatives have been incredible partners in working with the legislators to ensure we continue to receive full funding for our Categorical Transportation along with other initiatives. Over the last three years the School Committee has approved a Resolution supporting this funding in the State budget and this have been forwarded to all Town Councils, State Representatives and regional districts to request that they pass a similar resolution of support. She then moved to a slide on revenue which showed the District's overall

money received from the State, Federal and local government across six fiscal years. There are additional charts on the RIDE Financial Website that can also show how Chariho compares to all districts across the State regarding finances, budget and spending. You will note that the red arrow shows that from 2016-2022 there has been a 4% decrease in revenue to the District from local taxes. She pointed out areas where there have been some questions about cost. It is also important to note that she has already made reductions totaling approximately \$1.2 million throughout the budget process. The cuts were necessary to bring the budget down to the preliminary 2.2% increase that is being presented to you this evening. The cuts included an overall reduction of certified staff in grades K, grade 4 and in the High School as well as reductions in non-certified positions. We also cut \$750,000 from the FY25 Capital Improvement Plan with the anticipation that we will move these projects to a bond. As a reminder, the District will need to go out to bond whether we build new elementary schools or decide just to maintain our aging elementary facilities. The Governor's office has stated that the State's FY25 budget should be made public tomorrow; therefore, we want to remind all of you that our budget remains preliminary. She then provided a review of budget items with increases which included the following: salaries and benefits per the newly-negotiated contracts for certified and non-certified staff; healthcare adjustments to the FY24 shortfall; curriculum, materials, tutoring and professional development are being placed back in the budget; building and grounds supplies adjustment to the shortfall in FY24; out-of-district transportation; DCYF tuitions which she was just notified have risen from \$75,000 to \$93,000 for each student (we currently have six); capital projects (CTC roof, CMS skylight, safety enhancements to doors, windows and cameras). ESSER funding, which stands for Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief Fund, sunsets September 2024. She reviewed how the District utilized these funds. We continue to work diligently to find other funding sources by applying for grants. Our grants Development Officer Katie Kirakosian continues to work tirelessly with our administrators and staff to seek out these opportunities. In 2023 we have received a total of \$2,029,598 in grants and she reviewed the grants that were awarded to the District. We currently have an additional \$100,000 submitted and under review. Additional revenue, which includes State Aid, CTC tuitions and increased investment income with higher interest rates were discussed. Current enrollment shifts by town have resulted in Charlestown at 24.05% or -1.03%; Richmond at 37.68% or -0.84% and Hopkinton at 38.26% or +1.49%. The amount paid to the District by each town is determined by that town's share or percentage of enrolled students. This is detailed in the budget in Section 7. She noted there has been many questions regarding how much each town pays per pupil. She shared a chart that shows what each town pays prior to their allocation of State Aid – Charlestown is \$19,736 per student; Richmond is \$19,606 per student and Hopkinton is \$19,159 per student. After State Aid is applied, Charlestown pays \$17,792; Richmond pays \$14,389 and Hopkinton pays \$13,513. The fiscal impact on Member Towns with debt service after reallocation of the fund balance is +2.22% with the impact as follows: Hopkinton +3.76%; Richmond +1.35%; Charlestown +1.18%. Annual inflation for the New England region consumer price index (CPI) was between 3-5% in FY23 with levels as high as 8% in 2022. Gina then shared an inflation slide which included a table of % increase (+,-) for overall student enrollment, Chariho budget increase or decrease, and the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for New England as of November 2023. Enrollment has only shifted approximately 1.33% and even with the budget preliminarily set at 2.2% before the Governor's proposed budget is released and the School Committee takes additional actions, we have averaged 1.06% in comparison to an increase in inflation which has averaged 3%. In FY23, we were level-funded and saw a 0% increase while inflation was at 8%. So when the question arises as to why this slide is important, she wants to be clear that this helps to show how the District continues to operate as efficiently as possible. Even when inflation is high, we can show our taxpayers that our data supports that historically our budget is less than inflation. That is no easy task as each and every one of you know. FY23 Audit results are finalized and for the District to retain a preliminary 2.25% fund balance reserve, aligned to the School Committee Unassigned Fund Balance Policy, results in \$1,261,273 being available for general fund use in FY25. Per the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA), Chariho's estimated fund balance for the District overall is recommended to be two months of expenditures (Chariho's current monthly average of expenditures is \$10-\$11 million). The recommendation from our auditors as discussed at the December 12, 2023 meeting is 5-7%, which is over \$3 million. She is proud of the District's

finance team. This year the School Committee selected a new auditor. The audit findings were presented at the December 12, 2023 School Committee meeting and the auditors stated that our elected officials and community can be very pleased that the information coming from our finance office is accurate and well done. They had no recommendations or concerns which they said was unheard of when they typically work with a new client. The Superintendent reviewed the five-year Capital Improvement Plan required by law. Over the last 20 years, the District made several attempts to address our aging elementary schools. She reviewed proposals offered by Superintendents John Pini and Barry Ricci that were offered in an effort to update our elementary schools. In 2005, Superintendent Ricci tried to put forth a project, with a completion date of 2008, that would have moved the District to having three elementary schools, one in each town, and return Hope Valley to Hopkinton. The projected cost was approximately \$100 million at a reimbursement rate of 56%. This plan was defeated by voters. However, the campus and CALA projects were both approved. For the past 24 years, the District directed annual capital expenditures to elementary school repairs and capital projects, but with Richmond and Hope Valley reaching 90 years old and our other two elementary schools at 70+ years old, the time is upon us to share with our community that the District must determine a path forward to address our aging elementary schools. Our school facilities are not at that point, nor would we ever want them to get to that point of failing, but they do need significant improvements that are part of the 5-year Capital Improvement Plan. We have the unique opportunity access a bond that would be approximately \$150 million but only cost our towns \$28 million for three new elementary schools as well as capital improvements on the main campus. We believe it is fiscally responsible to ensure our families are made aware of this opportunity to finally make an investment to modernize our elementary learning environments to ensure they meet the 21st century standards. The alternative will cost more at approximately \$30 million over the next 5 years which focuses on maintaining our aging elementary school facilities. So for just about the same amount of money we can get three new schools. To reiterate, regardless of the path forward that is selected by the voters, the taxpayers will be paying each year the same cost to fix aging facilities as they would for three new elementary schools. She also wanted to note that there has been confusion regarding the recommendation of the Hope Valley phase-out being part of the new construction plan. That is inaccurate and untrue. We were asked last year to present cuts that included phasing out Hope Valley Elementary School as the level-funded budget in FY23 caused financial hardships for the District and it was quite apparent that a potential second year of level-funding would only create a more dismal picture. When the Chariho budget passed last April in all three towns, we paused on the Hope Valley phase-out knowing that, based on the budget outlook for FY25, we would have a better sense of how fast the phase-out of Hope Valley would need to move. These decisions are not easy nor does anyone want to ever have to make these decisions. Our schools are second homes to many and there are emotional ties and memories attached to them. She also understands that often times when there is a decision that some do not agree with, there may be a tendency to look for someone to blame. With that being said, we have just over 3,000 students in Chariho and we are responsible for advocating for all of them. We know every parent is expected and should advocate for their own children; she would expect nothing less. As a Mom, she would do the same thing for her children. However, when planning this year's budget and reviewing the savings for a phase-out of Hope Valley, the decision was made that to be fiscally responsible, the phase-out had to be recommended to begin in FY25. It is important to note that in order to get our budget not to exceed a 2.2% overall increase and remember this is a preliminary budget until the Governor's budget is released, we would need to stop enrolling K students at Hope Valley School beginning FY25 as it is a savings of conservatively almost \$450,000. It is also important to note that large capital improvement projects for the elementary schools were also removed from the preliminary budget and moved into the potential bond request; this was a cut of approximately \$750,000. As we continue to work on the Stage II application, we were able to follow up with Hilltop Securities today to get some financial information that we believe is important to share. As this slide shows, the District is recommending Option 1 – with a yes vote – at a cost to the three towns of approximately \$28 million. Chariho will build three new elementary schools (one in each town) and complete main campus capital improvements with planning to begin in spring 2024. Option 2 – with a no vote – at a cost to the three towns of \$30 million over 5 years, Chariho will maintain our aging elementary

facilities and the main campus, which includes phasing out Hope Valley. That work is ongoing and will continue to grow. The impact to taxpayers if Option 1 is selected is based on the latest census information which notes there are 9,575 households in the three communities. The District is focusing on receiving bonuses to achieve up to 81% reimbursement but not less than 76% reimbursement. The School Committee requested that language be included in the bond that the District would not move forward unless we are guaranteed a minimum of 76% reimbursement. The average net debt service at 81% reimbursement is \$1.9 million per year or \$196 per year (\$16 per month) per household. On a per-person basis, it comes out to \$6.36 a month. Just to be clear, this is a conservative number and will likely be lower. If we factor in the debt that is ending in 2027 and 2031, the annual impact is even lower as we will no longer need to pay for the CALA and Campus 2010 bonds; they will be paid off. The most significant point to reiterate to our families, voters and taxpayers regarding the Capital Improvement Bond will be that regardless of the selected plan, taxpayers will be paying the same amount of money whether we construct three new elementary schools in each town or if we continue to maintain the current facilities which would no longer include Hope Valley School after the phase out. We have the opportunity to create facilities to sustain a successful school district for the next 75+ years and to ensure the sustainability and success of the school district and the member towns. Last night, during the Richmond Town Council meeting, they were reminded that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Our goal is to ensure that we don't just keep doing the same thing over and over again. That would be to continue to band-aid our elementary facilities like we have been doing and truly that is not fiscally responsible. We have a responsibility to ensure our families are well-informed on the needs of the schools, they get the accurate information and our requirement by law to maintain them. If we all were to watch the clip of the Rhode Island Education Commissioner discussing the potential 'Fiscal Cliff', she specifically notes it is due to the State losing 7,000 students and loss of ESSER funds. We have worked diligently to ensure we do not hit that cliff which is why we have presented a budget without ESSER as well as phasing out Hope Valley School to account for declining enrollment. Please note that the District and School Committee continue to promote budget transparency and we now have a Budget Subcommittee that started in 2023. Those Subcommittee meetings are open to the public and they will continue to meet to discuss the current FY24 budget as well as budget projections for FY25. If you subscribe to the budget page, you can receive updates and notifications as revisions and information is added. At the beginning of the presentation, she highlighted many of the District's successes so we could celebrate some of the important returns on investments. She shared a brief clip that shows highlights of what the District does every day so that everyone can see it in action. After the clip finished, she thanked all who came out this evening to join in the discussing the future of education in Chariho.

Chair Giusti asked those at the table if they had any questions or comments to please raise your hand. Sylvia Thompson questioned the 2-4% that is required for the District to retain in its fund balance. If you look into past audits, can you tell her if the District has ever accessed all that money? She remembers when there was an emergency at Hope Valley School and the bricks needed repointing, the cost was over a million dollars. The money was not budgeted; it came from the fund balance. Her suggestion is that the amount that is being kept is not necessary. She feels the District should just keep 1%. Things are different in Chariho. The towns get all their money from taxes and taxes don't all come in to them in July so they need to carry three months' worth in their fund balance. Please look to see if you need this surplus. If not, please return it to the towns. Scott Bill Hirst stated that he is a little disappointed in Chariho Administration and the School Committee. He has wanted a management study done and he sees there is no interest with the School Committee to move on this. The Town of Hopkinton is conservative and at least 79% of their money goes to Chariho. Hopkinton needs to stay within the 4% cap. Family budgets are impacted. He wanted to know what the District was doing about the 83% of fixed costs. How many members of the School Committee would entertain an outside management study? Any savings could be applied to students. He feels it will be a tough sell for the building proposal. Chariho has to understand the needs that the town government has to fill. You could have done a management study. You need to take into consideration the problems the towns have. There needs to be some sensitivity from the School Committee. Michael Colasante wanted to mention,

before everyone talks of cuts, they have to look where our experts are telling us to look. The RIPEC report just came out. He doesn't see people using this. Trust the experts; they have not been proven wrong. The Commissioner said we have to tighten our belts. Maybe she is wrong. We don't live in a bubble here as far as inflation goes. We are not immune to what is going on outside of Chariho. The State budget ballooned and our Superintendent stated that everything is fine here. If we don't plan ahead, we are going to hit the skids. Please everyone, don't think we are in a bubble. Don't ignore all the information we have at our fingertips. Everything is a moving target. It doesn't look good. He asked the Senators and Representatives to please tell him if he is wrong. Representative Cotter thanked the Superintendent and all for putting together the budget. She doesn't know a superintendent who works as hard as Gina does. She came to the State House to talk on a bill – she was the only one who came. We don't thank her enough for her hard work. Funding for our schools will always be a challenge. She submitted a bill for full Categorical Transportation Aid. This is always a challenge. The State is encouraging other districts to regionalize. She appreciates the transparency. Deb Carney noted that less than 50% of Charlestown's budget goes to Chariho. She referenced slide 20 - \$30 million for capital improvements. Does this include the 61% reimbursement to which Ned explained that the 61% would be accrued over the life of this. Deb asked that he please explain it. How would it equate to the taxpayers? Ned noted that it would be about \$2 million per year for the taxpayers. RIDE requires that we resubmit a plan every five years. Rep. Cotter felt that preparing for the future was just as important. Gina added that ultimately it will cost more to maintain what we have. Our responsibility is to offer options to our taxpayers. We are being conservative; she feels the cost to build will come in even lower. Representative Cotter asked if there are any estimates on the impact of heating/lighting, etc. by going new? Ned replied that the District is waiting to hear from its architect, SLAM, to gather this information. Brian Rosso commented that a \$28 million bond over a 20-25 year window might be more advantageous to go with 20. Gina noted that they are also discussing phasing to which Brian stated that no one can predict the rates or the annual impact. Ned felt that a conservative amount is \$2.3 million to which Gina noted that is regardless of which option is chosen. Brian asked if they go with Option 2 that would be a 5-6 year bond. Gina responded 'yes' but they would then need to go out again. Brian wondered if they had considered a 'band' option to which Ned explained that they would have interest only for the first three years so the initial cost could be lower than \$2 million. The long-term obligation is about \$2.3 million. Gina added that their goal is to look at all the options. The new construction should have a minimal impact on the community as there are two bonds that will be sunsetting. Brian commented that he understands the challenge of budgets but the elephant in the room is that Hopkinton is looking at an increase of \$809,000 with a decrease in state aid. At the end of the day, they have to get a budget out to taxpayers that is palatable. We are all seeing costs go up. If there is room to move the budget, it is much needed by Hopkinton. Chair Giusti replied that this has been recognized by the School Committee. They have already asked the Superintendent to look at more cuts and that was requested by a Charlestown School Committee member. Sharon Davis stated that a pet peeve of hers is the awarding of trophies. You can cut this line item by \$285,000 and hand out certificates. Chair Giusti noted that she appreciates the time Sharon puts into this budget and the work she does. Rep. Tina Spears echoed Rep. Cotter. She thanked Gina for her hard work. It looks like they have sharpened pencils reviewing this budget and they will advocate for the District. Aren't all school districts looking at increases this year? Gina responded that Superintendents are advocating for bills that will provide relief. For example, a more efficient way to transport students. If our District was to provide out-of-district transportation ourselves, we would save money but the State then penalizes us. The State needs to find a more efficient way to transport them. Rep. Spears asked about the contract for teachers to which Gina noted that the contract is settled. Top-step (only) certified staff will received 1.75%; 2.25% and 2.5%. Rep. Spears stated that the only way to reduce funding is to reduce people and she is not advocating for any cuts to staff. We have a great school District. They are battling other towns but are advocating for Chariho. Mark Trimmer asked who the District purchases it's electricity from. Ned responded there are three pieces; we purchase from Kearsarge and on the open market to which Mark asked not just National Grid. Ned replied that is correct. Mark commented that kills one idea. He works in private industry and he pays half of his health insurance. What is the current percent that teachers pay? Ned explained that the District has a high deductible

health plan (\$2000 individual/\$4000 family) and they also pay more when the rate goes up. They are not paying anywhere near 50%. Mark stated that teachers used to be grossly underpaid but are now paid better. His health insurance deductible is \$7,500. He stated they should see if the teachers will pay 25% or 30% of healthcare. Rep. Spears noted they just had a conversation with teachers. Their retirement package is grossly under budget. They will only get 40% of their retirement. She would suggest the District stay away from this. She is working to get high quality healthcare for all of Rhode Island teachers. Try not to look at this as a way to cut. Michael Colasante stated that he appreciates that the Representatives are here. The areas of spending with the most increases are education, health care and housing. We have declining enrollment across the State. There are policies State legislators have control over. The big one is mandates. It starts with you. Step to the plate and submit the bill. He can't do it. There are over \$10 million in mandates for Chariho and 40% of them are frivolous. The only people that can do it are the Representatives. Not one person submitted a bill to which Rep. Spears disagreed. Mike continued. When he went to school, they didn't have these mandates. He quoted Barry Ricci's comments from a newspaper "it is not about flashy buildings or state-of-the-art. If he could get one kid excited about coming to school, that would be it." Chair Giusti commented that the State Representatives understand where we are coming from. She did see a bill they tried to get through. Senator Morgan has been around the longest and Chair Giusti stated that she doesn't think she has seen anything come from her. Get Senator Morgan on board. Rich Nassaney stated that when APRA money came in, they had to have a plan – a timeframe. How far a timeline do you have to finish the buildings? Gina responded that once they receive approval from RIDE, they have 5 years. Based on current legislation, the bonuses were to end last year but the timeline for the bonuses was extended until February of this year. She has heard that legislators are looking to extend the timeline for completion (not the bonus money). Rich noted the District could hit stumbling blocks along the way. Gina replied that there is legislation that will be presented to extend the time frame. Kathryn Colasante stated that Mr. Nassaney made an excellent point. When Mario Carreno came to the School Committee meeting, he informed them that the District had to complete its project by June 30, 2029 if we wanted to get the bonus. Gina commented that the Stage II application requires a schedule. Sharon Davis stated that she wants an amendment to the bond that states the towns will each pay 1/3 the cost; Michael Geary seconded that. Stephen Stokes commented that there is no way the School Committee will ask for that. He would ask the School Committee to remove the amendment to require each town's approval as this does not adhere to the Chariho Act which states a majority vote across the District. They have to have a larger discussion on this. Chariho is an anomaly. We operate as a District. There are ways the towns could cooperate and save taxes for their towns. He personally does not have an issue with sharing the bond three ways (1/3, 1/3, 1/3) but again if they went with that, they should vote as a District and not by individual town. Deb Carney disagreed. They should adhere to the Chariho Act which states that towns' pay per enrollment. Over the years Charlestown has made multiple concessions. They agreed to fund 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 of the campus renovation project which is costing their taxpayers 9% more. The CALA bond had a 'hold harmless clause' which results in no town paying more than 1/3 the cost. Who is making up the additional 5% to cover CALA? Charlestown is. Charlestown is paying more than they should under the Chariho Act. Enrollment right now is Ashaway – 197; Richmond – 372; Hopkinton – 185 and Charlestown – 253. The building proposal has the new Hopkinton Elementary School's capacity at 420; Charlestown would hold 430 and Richmond 460. Charlestown only has 253 students so students will be bussed from possibly the other two districts to Charlestown. Let's be clear, the only reason they will be the same size is because students will be bussed. If not, Charlestown School would be built smaller. For 20 years or so, Charlestown has paid 100% of the cost for the SRO at the Middle School and we currently pay 24% for the Richmond officer at the High School. Hopkinton and Richmond decided, prior to last winter, that they would no longer plow their elementary schools. Charlestown still plows their elementary school's parking lot and is paying to plow the lots at Richmond, Hope Valley and Ashaway Schools. Charlestown has paid more over the years than what it was required to. She will personally oppose anything that costs Charlestown more. They have paid maintenance costs for two buildings in Hopkinton. Stephen Stokes noted that he is not in favor of changing the Chariho Act but would consider the equal split of the bond. Deb Carney calculated that Charlestown's share is 9% more (24% vs 33%). At 24% the cost is

approximately \$550,000; at 33% the cost would be approximately \$750,000. Hopkinton has approved big plans for Bushy Brook – that is coming down the pike. Charlestown has no big building plans approved. That will be a lot more students for Hopkinton. Sylvia Thompson thanked Charlestown and Deb for going out of its way to help. She also doesn't believe that Charlestown charged the Chariho District for any Building Permits to which Deb agreed they haven't. Sylvia stated that, for Option 2, it should be indicated that it won't cost \$30 million – it will be 61% less. When it comes to the way we pay, Charlestown has fewer students so they pay less to the District but they also get less state aid so they are paying more per student once state aid is figured in. While they pay more per student, their taxpayers are paying less. Charlestown's tax rate for the school is \$2.70, Richmond's is \$11.808 and Hopkinton is \$11.58. The concern is this is unsustainable. Bushy Brook could result in a large influx of students and this could affect the schools and Hopkinton's budget. How will the School Committee be able to cut the budget when a town can't go over 4%. The way it is funded in the Chariho Act is unsustainable. As far as renovation of the elementary schools, she would like the School Committee and Finance Committee to look into temporary borrowing of funds and pay back the following year when housing aid is received. If they need to, they can put the money in capital. If they temporarily borrow instead of asking taxpayers to fund, you know you will get 61% back for housing aid reimbursement. Only tax the 39%. Chair Giusti turned it over to any public who wanted to speak. Kedrick Swain from Hopkinton was doing napkin math over who is going to pay for what. He noticed a half million dollars for athletics and not much allocated for the arts. Take money from athletics and divide it for all students. He had a question about Option 1. Will RIDE require inspection of the new schools every five years to which Gina responded 'yes' because that is law. Kedrick felt there could be additional expenses with the new build. Gina replied there are warranties. Kedrick then asked if they did the building in phases, is there enough room to house all the students while building is ongoing. Gina replied "yes". Polly Hopkins asked if the \$28 million based on an 81% return – haven't they been told that 81% is not achievable? Gina responded "no, they haven't been told they could not achieve 81%. The Committee has noted that the minimum they want to achieve is 76%." Polly stated if they don't get 81%, we will pay more than \$30 million to which Gina noted that the \$30 million is a conservative number. Tyler Champlin asked that he be walked through the numbers – get him to \$28 million. Ned reviewed Option 1. If they go out to bond for \$150 million, the local share will be 19% based on the feedback we have been given that we should be eligible for 81% with the bonuses. They feel 81% could be achievable on three-quarters of the project and we are still working with SLAM on the other quarter. Tyler stated that he comes up with \$32.5 million. Option 2 – is the 61% already factored in or are they getting 61% back after they spend the \$30 million? If we get the 61% back, the total to the taxpayers is \$11.5 million. Ned noted the problem with Option 2 is that \$30 million bond is for five years. The District will need to go back out to bond for at least the same amount for five years and then again in another five years. These are old buildings so over the next 15 years, the bonds will be in excess of \$30 million after receipt of the 61% housing aid reimbursement and that is using today's cost for renovations. He doesn't want anyone to be surprised when, in five years, they need to renew the bond again. The new building plan along with the school campus rehab plan should be good for twenty years. Tyler questioned what happens if nothing happens to which Ned explained that we have \$7 million in projects we expect in capital. We will have the ability to do this and get 61% back. For example, the CTC Roof at \$2 million plus we will get 61% back but we have to have the \$2 million up front. We will start to get reimbursement money but pay-as-you-go will just cover emergencies. Gina added that if they use Hope Valley School as swing space, this is reimbursable for new building projects so any needs Hope Valley has, we will get reimbursed for (whatever is approved). Jessica Swain from Hopkinton stated she doesn't understand how this is expected to work – building three new schools in five years. Are you building them on the current school grounds? Hope Valley will be phased out – which is the school you will do first. Gina replied that the architects will provide a recommendation. Because Ashaway is the smallest school, they could move them to Hope Valley. Jessica Swain advised all that no kids can be in Ashaway when they take down the old building to which Gina explained that there won't be any kids there when the old school comes does as the Town is planning to do that this summer. Hope Valley has the largest level of need but it can still be used. Jessica Swain noted her confusion. How many schools will be built at the

same time? Gina replied that they are only planning on one at a time to which Jessica stated her confusion lies in the fact that the District is planning on building three new schools in five years. Gina stated they asked SLAM to provide a schematic that can be easily built in Stage III. This is when the plan would be selected. A lot of the questions people have deal with Stage III. Jessica Swain commented that she still has a lot of questions that need to be answered to which Gina reminded all that is why they put the Google document on the FAQ page. This is the place where you can ask your questions. The District received maps today so they will review them. Chair Giusti told all that if they have any questions, you can also email them to the Superintendent. Ned spoke on the comments pertaining to hazardous materials and informed all that test borings are part of the process and put into the plan. Bob Burns from Hopkinton questioned the 1904 building to which Gina informed all that she was told the 1904 building was being handled by the Town because they have a grant. Brian Rosso explained that the Town got a fully funded grant for a half million dollars to take down the old building. It has nothing to do with the other building. It is coming down this summer when school is out. Michael Colasante felt Option 3 was an excellent option. The Town Councils will put this out there to give taxpayers an idea of what the school plans are. Jessica Purcell stated that the Budget Subcommittee spoke with Legislators based on the discussion from the last Omnibus Meeting regarding Categorical Transportation Aid and legislation on high quality curriculum mandates. There are not unfunded. We get about \$16 million from the State. The one thing is the recurring DCYF tuition rate and out-of-district transportation that continue to rise daily. If someone could provide insight as to how and why these numbers have gone up so much. Rep. Spears replied that she did follow-up with DCYF and the cost to sending Districts/towns. A District/town has the responsibility to educate their students. She is not sure if they can change the actual formula. Gina noted that there is a lawsuit because DCYF wants this high tuition rate even if a student doesn't have an IEP. We are withholding funds and only paying what we feel is the right amount. The tuition rate per DCYF student went from \$50,000 to \$75,000 and jumped again to \$93,000. This is per student. There are multipliers in their formula that no one can say what they are. We now have six tuitions or about \$600,000 and not all students have an IEP. Rep. Spears stated she will continue to follow this. She supports that all students have what they need but a District/town should not have to pay the higher cost if the student does not have an IEP. Sen. Gu felt building three schools over five years was a tight timeline. It seems arbitrary so they can try to work on that. Polly offered food for thought. Closing Hope Valley and disbursing kids will put an increase on class sizes. Do you think maximizing class size will help recoup the learning loss? You are considering disbursing kids between Ashaway and Richmond. Richmond will already be at the school's capacity and then you have Bushy Brook coming in. Look at Garden City Elementary School. They have had a hard time getting materials and their cost overrun is between 30-40%. Think of our kids and the need to catch up to which Gina replied they always think of the kids. All of our elementary schools are above pre-pandemic testing results which she mentioned earlier. We are not looking to maximize class size. Kindergarten will be at 19. She agrees there are only so many places they can go. Deeper cuts mean staff which results in larger classes. No one class at the elementary level is higher than 21. Look at the enrollment page in the budget. If we keep Hope Valley, we have to find an additional \$500,000 which means we will cut teachers in Richmond and the High School. There are no easy decisions here. Her recommendation is a phase-out of Hope Valley. She cannot predict what the final budget will look like. Kathryn Colasante had a clarifying question for Ned. When the School Committee was first presented the idea of incentivizing obviously it seemed sensible for an 81% reimbursement for new schools than to renovate at \$30 million. Can they temporarily borrow funds and pay this back if we get 61% reimbursed? Ned noted there is a 61% reimbursement for repairs/renovations. The reason they are going forward with three new schools is because they only have so much time. They do not have the time or money to explore both options to which Kathryn stated the taxpayers would only spend 39% of the cost for repairs. Ned reiterated what had already been discussed. You take out a bond for \$30 million which ends up costing the taxpayers \$11.5 million but in five years you will have to go back out to bond for more money. This cycle will continue every five years as the buildings are old so it will end up costing \$30 million. Kathryn felt this was misleading to say \$30 million instead of \$11.5 million. She looked at the facility assessment and asked someone at Ashaway School about repairs and they said Ashaway was fine. She has questions about the

facility assessment. Gina reminded all that this week she had to close school because there were six flooded classrooms at Richmond. This is not going away. An opportunity exists to get new schools if that is what people want. If not, they won't get new buildings. Vestibules have to have double entry doors. We have no alarms on our doors. There is only so much we can provide. In the words of Michael Colasante, sometimes we just have to trust the experts. Kathryn stated the other caveat are risks associated with cost overruns. It has happened in many towns. There are risks; inflation, supply and labor shortages, a five year cap. Chair Giusti noted they are starting to lose people. If you have a new comment and you are not going to just reiterate something that has already been said, she will allow the conversation to proceed. Sylvia Thompson thanked past and present teachers for what they do and what they have done. She graduated in 1972. Her teachers mentored her and she has had a good, successful life. She wants them to know that students do appreciate what they do. Ned was asked to provide an overview of transportation costs. Ned explained that transportation is a large cost for the District. Special education (out-of-district) and private school bussing are part of a State mandate. The State requires us use their service. Their cost to run this is more expensive than what it would cost us to do it ourselves but if we do it ourselves, the State withholds funding. So it won't work for us to do it ourselves as the revenue is more than what we pay. Bob Burns commented that the District employees have a job to do and he does not want to try to understand all of these numbers. He sees where the District is going with three new elementary schools but personally he does not support it but again stated that he sees where the District is going and why. He suggested a second Omnibus meeting and asked the District, in an effort for more transparency, to list the \$11.5 million and explain that this is for five years at which time another bond will be needed for \$11.5 million and another 5 years. If you put that out there, the public would better understand that it will cost more to repair/renovate. Rep. Cotter reminded all that inflation will be there regardless. She noted that in 2017, she had a massive house fire (on February 3). They were back in their home eight months later on October 10th. Their home is 2200 sq. ft. and their heating bill was cut in half because of all the new energy savings. She believes they must think about the future; the cost to repair plus inflation. Michael Colasante noted that his job is to try to keep the tax rate stable in Richmond. He asked Ned to review the original amounts of the current bonds. Ned replied that there was one for \$10 million; one for just under \$5 million and one was refunded so he would have to see what the original amount was. Michael asked, going by the best rate, what would the payment be for this bond. Ned explained that it would depend on the duration but conservatively speaking, getting 81% back, the cost would be \$1.8 to \$1.9 million. Michael stated that if they go with Option 3, they would not see the \$815,000 go up. Ned reminded all that you have a roughly deferred maintenance cost of \$2 million. If you pay as you go (Option 3), you don't have a long-term plan. The way bonds work is it is interest only initially then it climbs up to \$2 million or so over 3-4 years. It actually ramps up over time. To get into that level of detail is too confusing. Gina again noted that regardless of the option chosen, you are still looking at \$2 million a year and if you don't go with Option 1, it will only be prioritized projects that get done. Sharon Davis stated that taxes in Hopkinton would go up \$263 if they do the bond to which Gina clarified that it would be \$196 per year or \$16 per month for the bond. Deb Carney made a motion to adjourn, which was seconded by Karen Reynolds. Tyler questioned who would vote to adjourn and it was explained that it would need to be the School Committee. All were reminded that the School Committee's policy requires a vote to go past 10:00 PM. Stephen Stokes noted that detailed discussion is needed about the bond so all towns are educated. Could they please have another one of these meetings? Chair Giusti replied that the District Annual Public Budget Meeting is coming up and the Superintendent is holding meetings in all three towns in an effort to educate people. All questions asked can be found on the FAQ page on the Chariho website. There is even a Google form you can complete if there is a question that is not answered on the site.

III. Adjourn

Polly Hopkins made a motion, seconded by Craig Louzon and it was
VOTED: To adjourn at 9:48 PM. In favor: Unanimous.

Donna J. Sieczkiewicz, Clerk