

Chariho School Committee – Omnibus Meeting
January 18, 2023 Minutes

Present were:

Chariho School Committee Members: Chair Catherine Giusti, Donna Chambers, Tyler Champlin, Kathryn Colasante, Polly Hopkins, Craig Louzon, Linda Lyall, Andrew McQuaide, Larry Phelps, Patricia Pouliot and Karen Reynolds. **Chariho Administrators:** Superintendent Gina Picard, Assistant Superintendent Michael Comella and Director of Administration and Finance Ned Draper. Also Present: School Committee Clerk Donna Sieczkiewicz.

Charlestown Town Council: President Deborah Carney, Susan Cooper and Stephen Stokes. Also in attendance were Town Administrator Mark Stankiewicz and Town Treasurer Irina Gorman.

Richmond Town Council: President Mark Trimmer, Vice President Rich Nassaney, Michael Colasante, Helen Sheehan and Samantha Wilcox. Also in attendance were Town Administrator Karen Pinch and 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 and Finance Director Elizabeth Monty.

Legislators: Senator Victoria Gu, Senator Elaine Morgan, Representative Megan Cotter, Representative Brian Kennedy and Representative Tina Spears.

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 Career and Technical Center (Rooms 105/107) to order at 7:02 PM. The Pledge of Allegiance was followed by a moment of silence.

II. FY23 Budget Presentation

Superintendent Picard welcomed all and thanked the Chariho team for all their efforts to ensure the District presents a budget that serves the needs of our students, families, educators and staff. She stated that the budget she is presenting tonight is what it will cost the District to maintain all current programs and services that are currently in place in our District. Chariho has worked very hard to ensure a high quality education is available to all students that is focused on opportunities for college or career and this budget represents the Chariho experience our families have come to expect and one which they value. She walked through the Budget presentation and shared highlights and information in the budget for FY24. Gina began with highlights of success, review of the budget process timeline, staffing costs, fixed costs, additional costs and new costs. Items with significant increases included fuel/electricity, healthcare, out-of-district transportation and supply costs. An overview of the impact of ESSER funds was provided and how these funds have been applied, along with funding received from additional grant opportunities. The budget includes State Aid of \$15,469,992, estimated to include full Transportation Categorical Aid and same Town allocations per enacted Rhode Island state budget for FY23. She noted that these numbers are anticipated to change in FY24. The Governor's budget is expected to be released tomorrow and if the allocation is larger than last year, we will see decreases to this preliminary budget. If the allocation is less than FY23, we will have a much more difficult road ahead. She then reviewed other revenue sources such as CTC tuitions and increased investment income with higher interest rates. Enrollment shifts by town was discussed and the Superintendent stated that the District currently has 200 students who are home schooled. Overall the FY24 preliminary budget shows an increase of 6% if the District makes no changes to programs or services. Annual inflation for the New England region consumer price index was 3.6% for 2021 and through November of 2022 annual inflation was at 6.4%. The FY23 budget was adjusted to a zero percent increase last year. The impact to towns is as follows: Charlestown – 3.87%; Richmond – 6.42% and Hopkinton – 7.0%. Fund balance information was shared (this is the lowest fund balance we have seen) and the Unassigned Fund Balance Policy was reviewed. The Superintendent informed

all that in an effort to assist in budget transparency, they have created a Budget Frequently Asked Questions document which can be found on the Chariho website on the main page located under "Headlines". The community also has the opportunity to submit questions that may not have been asked by utilizing the link that is included in this document. She thanked all local and state elected officials for attending this evening.

Chair Giusti opened the floor for questions and asked all to please make sure all questions and comments are pertinent to the budget. Scott Bill Hirst asked how many line item transfers have been done by the School Committee this year. Ned replied there were quite a few but we do transfers in pieces. He explained that the top five needs for money to be transferred are oil, special education services and transportations (we never know when a new student will move into District, therefore, they are not budgeted for), replacement of the Ashaway School boiler, Richmond and High School paving projects and custodial and grounds. Scott Bill requested that an outside management study be done; no local people, to look at how the school district works and administrative costs to the District. Rep. Kennedy stated that they have not yet seen the Governor's budget but were told that it would be released tomorrow. He had a conversation with the Governor last week and the Governor is aware of Brian's concerns regarding transportation categorical aid. Last year was the first time it was fully funded. The monies are there as the State is looking at a surplus this year. Rep. Kennedy remains confident that the Governor will work with Chariho on this. Rep. Cotter added that the Governor did say that he has \$67 million in school funding. Senator Pearson is looking to provide a new funding formula and she believes the Senate will push this. She is not confident that much of the money the Governor is proposing for education will come to Chariho. She feels most of it will go to "distressed" communities. Michael Colasante wanted to talk about mandates. He feels when the State puts forth a mandate, the State should pay for it. They are covering Providence and Central Falls now. If the State covers mandates, he won't hear the School Committee say they can't help it, it is a mandate. If the State doesn't fund them, we don't abide by them. Sharon Davis distributed copies of cuts she is recommending totaling \$1,714,000. She feels a 2% fund balance is enough. She reviewed the other cuts she is recommending which included tuition to CCRI. Brian questioned the excess revenue to which Tyler Champlin noted it was around \$368,000. Brian commented on the additional state aid to education that was received. Where did this go? Ned explained that we were not fully funded. The excess revenue covered items such as transportation and fuel – we were over \$200,000 in that line item alone. Special education costs went through the roof and we anticipate this will happen again this year. The additional state aid of \$510,000 he hopes that most of this will help recharge the fund balance. Brian then asked about ESSER funds and the structural deficit that these will cause when they sunset in FY24. Gina noted that this will definitely impact the budget. The District is looking to phase out MacBooks and go with Chromebooks to save money. Brian asked if the five-year enrollment average was still being considered to which Gina replied that more conversation is needed on this. State allocations would need to be looked at. She hopes the community can put their heads together and come up with a solution to this. Again this is a preliminary budget; she hopes the picture is not bleaker than expected. Scott Bill requested information on the state of the local buildings as they are owned by the towns but the Chariho Act states the District has to maintain them. He would also like to know the monthly income and expenses and how close are they. Ned stated that the cash flow analysis is around \$5 million a month with more money going out in the summer than coming in. We have bond payments so this amount varies. Gina noted that the District is required to have a five-year capital plan which is reviewed by the State. The elementary schools are old (some 80 years old). We currently receive 60¢ on the dollar for repairs but if we go with newer buildings, we could receive 80¢ on the dollar. Ned added that the District is required to show investment in the buildings each year and it has to be 3% or more per State law. We are well above the threshold so we can prove we are maintaining these buildings. Helen Sheehan questioned the rate the District pays if students go to other schools to which Gina explained that the State determines the rate and every district is different. Helen asked if there was any way to control this. Gina explained that if we don't pay, the State takes it out of our State aid. Ned noted, however, that we do receive more students from outside districts than other schools. We bring in more funds which alleviates the cost to taxpayers. Questions regarding competing programs arose to which Gina stated that if

there is a substantially similar program, which is determined by their boards' review, we don't have to pay. Many noted their annoyance to which Chair Giusti commented that we all should be annoyed by this but it is State legislated. Rep. Spears stated that about 80% of the budget is personnel. She would love to work with the School Committee to advocate at the State level. Senator Gu agreed and referenced the increase in special education costs. Gina explained that the District has no control over this. We have students who move here or are newly-identified and are not budgeted for. DCYF has a high level of placements as well as a higher number of McKinney-Vento cases. Michael Geary questioned how many students does the District receive from the outside to which Ned responded about 160 which has been consistent over the years. We do have some students who have left Chariho and are attending other schools' CTC programs. We do not offer plumbing so if a student is interested in this, they can transfer to another high school that offers it. Polly asked about a meeting last Friday for the CTE Board to which Gina noted that she attends these meetings. We received a smaller amount of funding than other districts. It depends on the grant. Mark Trimmer suggested the District look at leveraging suppliers for CTC (i.e. ask auto manufacturers like Toyota to help out the Automotive Program). This is done in Blackstone (Massachusetts). They had a net positive budget. It is a real money-maker. The District should consider corporate sponsorships. Gina stated that we have over 700 students in a pathway so they are always looking at opportunities for sponsors. Mark Trimmer then suggested the District look at field trips that are free. Gina explained that the District has a policy on required field trips. Dr. Comella can certainly look at other places that align with our curricula. She appreciates the suggestions. Elizabeth Dalton asked the Superintendent to explain what ESSER funds are. Gina provided an explanation. We are continually seeking grant opportunities to assist us as ESSER funds will go away. Michael Colasante felt they were beating a horse over ESSER funds; what is mandated, what is not. Gina noted that curricula resources (ELA and Math now and Science in 2026) are mandated by the State to which Mr. Colasante commented that just to pay for what is covered by ESSER is a 1 ½% increase overall even before looking at other costs. Who is going to fund these? The School Committee washes its hands. They should be going to the State House and lobbying – he has never seen any School Committee member do that. Chair Giusti refuted Mr. Colasante's comments. The School Committee has gone to the State House and lobbied. Mr. Colasante suggested they join forces and work together; we have to put forth a strong effort. He then commented on School Committee members who have spouses working for the District. Andrew McQuaide, in response to Mr. Colasante's remarks, noted that Mr. Colasante wants to create a culture where we work together. He would suggest that if Mr. Colasante wants to work together, he needs to be mindful of the language he is using towards others. The School Committee has not washed its hands; they are committed to working on mandates and lobbying the State for funds we are supposed to receive. He is one of those members whose wife is an educator and he is one of the strongest advocates for the District. Every opportunity he gets he is advocating for the District. Mr. Colasante noted that he would love to get together with Andrew. Andrew stated that outside of Omnibus, it is well worth all of our efforts to increase our collaboration. Stephen Stokes stated that he is proud to say he is a graduate of Chariho and went to the CTC. He questioned how the District will maintain or increase enrollment in CTC with the rise of CTC systems across the State that we never had. Mark Trimmer had a great suggestion to go with sponsorships if we can. He is not sure if this is a legislative question. Gina replied that Chariho has to make sure its programs are top notch. We always encourage anyone who is interested in a tour of our facilities to please reach out. There is conversation at legislation already happening regarding industry standards, allocation of funding, and the pros and cons on the level of compensation. There is lots of legislation that does not mirror each other. Rep. Kennedy stated that the only school the State recognizes is Davies Vocational; they fully fund them. The program at Chariho became an orphan and the other CTC's are having the same problem – the State has abandoned them and is concentrating only on Davies. Rep. Spears stated that we are going to be strong advocates for Chariho. The past is the past. Rep. Cotter agreed. That is why they are here so they can advocate for Chariho at the State House. Craig Louzon noted that Davies has always been a pet peeve of his. They still have State employees who work there. He asked if the State subsidizes them to which Rep. Kennedy replied that they are an entity amongst communities and he does not know how this happened. Arguments have fallen on deaf ears.

Sen. Morgan stated that Davies is their baby. The State is looking at revitalizing Providence and that area – it is a big money hole. Deb Carney noted that about twenty years ago there was a group of School Committee members and Town Councilors who were very active and she is excited going forward. Goldie Williams questioned Special Education services students did not receive during COVID to which Gina explained that the District is required to provide compensatory services if a student is not given all that is stated in the IEP. Goldie then questioned the cost for plowing. Ned stated that the District was informed, well after last year's budget was complete, that the towns of Richmond and Hopkinton were no longer going to plow their elementary schools. We went out to bid and the cost we will be required to pay was from the lowest responsive bidder (\$125 an hour). Louise Dinsmore stated that a culture of collaboration is very difficult when the School Committee proposes a 6% budget out of the gate. This does not foster a culture of collaboration. The Chariho Act allows the District three shots at the budget. Who has ever heard of such a thing? Change the Act and bring one budget to the taxpayers. This is a big bone of contention. Chair Giusti commented that she has mentioned in previous budget workshops that she asked the Superintendent to present a budget on the way the school district is currently running. She wanted it to be transparent and honest. There was never any intent to ask taxpayers to go to 6%. This budget shows the community what we need to maintain the District as it is running now. Louise stated the District had a \$3.2 million surplus and you come back every year for more money. This is not a culture of collaboration. 94% of people in Richmond are property owners who are getting taxed out. She is an advocate for the taxpayers. For ten years there has been no push back. Taxpayers didn't have a voice. Chair Giusti noted her appreciation for Ms. Dinsmore's advocacy but they have had a voice. This speaks to a tax base that wanted to pass a budget. Amanda Blau questioned how many contracts are being negotiated and how does this affect the budget. Gina replied that there is one contract in negotiation and money is included in this budget. Anything that has been discussed has been allocated in this budget. Amanda then asked if there was anything in the Chariho Act regarding plowing as this affects all three towns. Ned responded that, according to the lease agreements, maintenance is left to the school district. He doesn't know when plowing began as he doesn't have the history. Gina noted that the two towns claim they do not have the manpower or equipment to continue. Amanda suggested they look at purchasing consolidation amongst the District and the towns. Are there any current efforts to which Ned replied that Chariho has a Purchasing Policy which requires us to look at the MPA (Master Price Agreement). These are consortium prices which is captured in our Audit. We switched to a digital platform which allows us to solicit bids more aggressively. We do reach out to all states and do inform the towns if there is a "piggyback" opportunity for them. Amanda then asked about State funds or initiatives around energy updates – push for green energy. Ned noted that we are the beneficiary of an agreement with a solar farm. We paid 2/3 of the cost to put in the farm and we keep 1/3. We have a favorable electric rating that will conclude the end of this fiscal year. We recently completed \$1 million in lighting projects (LED – controlled by occupancy) and boiler upgrades. Gina added that the District is in the process of pursuing a half million dollar energy grant that will be in front of the School Committee in February. Amanda asked about CCRI tuition. Gina explained this is two-fold; Running Start and dual enrollment. The concern is the District pays for students enrolled in these programs yet if the student graduates High School, enrollment in CCRI is free for two years. Amanda suggested that State reps look at the funding. It would make more sense to pay for a student while the student is still in High School; more bang for your buck. We have a high performing District yet we are required to pay for students to go to a school that is not high performing. Often students return and the District has to pay for remediation for the student to be able to get back on track. There used to be a financial benefit for a district to regionalize and that was taken away. Regionalization results in higher transportation costs which is money that belongs to us and we have to fight for every year. We have been doing a lot of things right here for many years so we need the State reps to advocate for us. Chris Fee noted that the biggest item is what the District is required to pay to Charter Schools. Why do we have to pay for students to go there? Gina noted that Charter Schools are public schools. Rep. Kennedy stated that he never supported a Charter School bill. Chariho is a high performing school. Chariho has to take in all students; Charter Schools can hand-pick their students. Is there any chance of something happening – no – as the Governor has made it clear this is hands off. There is more indication

that Charter Schools are not accomplishing what they need to. Rep. Spears asked if there is any way for them to get a breakdown of the specific dollars going out to Charter Schools to which Gina responded we pay \$1 million. Rep. Spears noted that middle income families are being taxed out of their homes mostly due to school funding. Rep. Cotter added that they need to incentivize regional schools. We do not get the funding we should be getting. Our responsibility is to maintain our schools and she promised she would advocate for this District. Sen. Kennedy stated that there was an incentive for districts to regionalize and that went away and was replaced with Transportation Categorical Aid. This has failed to be fully funded to the regional schools. Michael Colasante commented that he would like to have a positive resolve. Richmond Town Council will be drafting a Resolution on funding. He asked that one member from each Town Council and one member from each town representing the School Committee along with State reps work on resolving the tax burden of these mandates. We need a bill that can be proposed. Any new mandates have to be funded by the State and then we can start working backwards. Elizabeth Dalton wondered if there had been any discussion about collaborating with higher ed institutions to which Gina replied that the District does collaborate with URI, Johnson & Wales, RIC and CCRI. Phil Prince, a new resident of Hopkinton, noted that this is his first meeting so he has no idea of who anyone is. He suggested that introductions take place or make bigger signs for the table. Chair Giusti apologized and stated she will have everyone introduce themselves at the end. Sen. Morgan stated that most successful businesses have an outside fiscal management study done and wondered what the apprehension was with having one done for Chariho. It is worth it if we could save money. Chair Giusti noted that there is no line item in the budget for this. She would be happy to look at this at a later date but there is no funding for it this year. Andrew McQuaide noted, for the record, that this item is worthy of conversation but we have a new Superintendent, a new Assistant Superintendent and a new Director of Administration and Finance. This has provided an opportunity for a fresh set of eyes to review our practices. Sen. Morgan disagreed. She feels a fresh set of eyes are from "outside the box". There are inefficiencies. This could be paid for by all three towns to which Andrew responded that all three are from outside the district. Stephen Stokes noted there is a lot of concern around mandates. In his opinion, it would be important to have incentives. He is concerned when there are mandates passed on them and he hopes their delegates can push for incentives and not mandates. He looks forward to working with them. Michael Geary agreed. It will be good to get together if Deb Carney is willing. Deb noted that she has already agreed to this. Steve Moffitt stated, in reference to Sen. Morgan's request, that 80% of the budget goes to staff so is 20% going to save the District millions? Sen. Morgan can't even name one inefficiency.

As there were no more comments or questions, Chair Giusti asked all sitting at the table to please introduce themselves. She then thanked all for coming and stated that she loves the willingness of everyone to work together.

III. Adjourn

Tyler Champlin made a motion, seconded by Andrew McQuaide and it was VOTED: To adjourn at 9:10 PM. In favor: Unanimous.

Donna J. Sieczkiewicz, Clerk