

Chariho School Committee Budget Workshop
January 5, 2023

In attendance: Chair Catherine Giusti, Donna Chambers, Kathryn Colasante, Polly Hopkins, Craig Louzon, Linda Lyall, Andrew McQuaide, Larry Phelps, Patricia Pouliot and Karen Reynolds. Absent: Tyler Champlin. Resigned: Vice Chair Gary Liguori.

Also in attendance: Superintendent Gina Picard, Assistant Superintendent Michael Comella, Administrative Assistant to the Assistant Superintendent Nancy Pirnie, Charlestown Town Council President Deb Carney and District Clerk Donna Sieczkiewicz.

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

Chair Giusti called the Chariho School Committee Budget Workshop, held in the High School Library, to order at 6:00 PM. The Pledge of Allegiance was followed by a moment of silence.

II. Budget Workshop

Chair Giusti welcomed all to the second Budget Workshop and added that she is hopeful that everyone had an opportunity to go through the budget. Karen asked for the number of certified staff that plan to retire. Gina replied there are two that we know of. Karen then asked about support staff to which Gina noted that there is a possibility of one right now. Pat questioned the process; do department heads submit their own budget? Gina reviewed the process which begins with department heads and teams meeting. They go line by line and submit their proposed needs to their administrators who then review the data. The school administrators then meet with District administrators and each line item is reviewed again. Cuts are made to what is proposed and the current budget in front of you is based on current operations which includes state and federal requirements. We do not have the Governor's budget or our audit yet. We look at enrollment shifts and cuts were made to a Grade 6 teacher, a Charlestown School teacher and a Richmond grade 1 teacher but this will be moved to another grade due to enrollment. Pat then asked how purchases are made and the process was detailed by Ned. The budget process starts in October and we try to capture our best thinking at that point in time. All departments are responsible for the non-wage side. We start from zero and they tell us what they need. Gina added that, as for purchases, we have a Purchasing Policy we have to abide by. Craig noted that, at the elementary schools, each teacher is given an allotment and must buy from the vendor that is selected yet there are times his wife can do better at Staples. Ned noted that if the District can beat an MPA price, then they consider it but we have to look at the needs of the entire District, not just a single classroom. Craig added that the teachers' allotment is the same as it was a decade ago. Donna asked if the burden of purchasing their own supplies is being placed on teachers to which Gina responded that she has told them this should not happen. Each principal gets a "per pupil" amount. No one should be purchasing core essentials. If there are extra things they want for their classroom, this might come from their own money. Andrew stated it is common practice in our District that educators are used to living in a resource-limited environment. We do not see this in other industries and he finds this appalling. It is common for teachers to spend hundreds of dollars of their own money. There is a conflict as we have a budget freeze but core supply needs (not wants) should be met. We can't quantify what the true cost is that educators pay for core supplies; it is a culture of teachers. Pat noted that in the private sector, the leader sets the budget and the employee lives within it. She finds this opposite in schools. Gina replied that it is a collaborative effort; including School Improvement Teams and the State. We have a responsibility to collaborate. If the Committee wants to hear from a particular teacher regarding a request they have made, she will invite the teacher to a meeting to explain the need. Pat asked where Adult Education revenue goes. Ned explained that we do not offer many Adult Education classes so what is left after the instructor and/or materials are paid for goes back to the process. Larry questioned the discrepancy in tuition from other schools. Ned noted that, if you look at the budget, there are account numbers issued by the State. The State takes this information and determines the cost per pupil. They tell each District what their cost per pupil will be. This is how tuition is determined. Gina stated that she can send the Committee a link to the dashboard on RIDE's website. This shows

all the data. Ned added there are two different rates; one for disadvantaged students (the cost is more) and the other for general education students. Larry commented that the District has 14 vehicles in its fleet (which includes CTC and CALA vans). You have two maintenance trucks not being used. One is rotted out but still has tags on it. Why are we paying insurance on this? Ned explained that we carry insurance through The Trust. We did a communication to get rid of vehicles to which Larry suggested we take the truck to Exeter Scrap. Gina noted that we have to follow the Policy. Ned added that we have to post the item on Craigslist and try to get the most money we can for it. If not, we can then scrap it. Chair Giusti stated that the questions are good but to keep in mind that the budget here is different than the way you budget at home or in business. There are policies and mandates we have to follow. Gina informed all that last year they started a live FAQ and we will have that going soon. Next week it should be public. We collect all the questions and use that as a venue. Andrew stated, in terms of the FAQ, it is helpful to understand the impact of the funding formula (pre and post funding formula). The State overall does not fund education at the same level as other states. What are the State-level things we can work on, not for this year but maybe next. Gina added the Superintendents are pushing funding formulas concerns (i.e. Special education, out-of-district tuition, DCYF, etc). Pat asked how often computers get upgraded to which it was noted that elementary students keep theirs all through elementary school and receive a new one in Middle School that they keep for grades 5-8. When they enter the High School (grades 9-12) another one is issued. We are currently reviewing this and we may switch to Chromebooks for all grades. So, in essence, every 4-5 years there is a roll-over for students. Pat questioned what happens to old ones to which Gina responded they are repurposed, used for parts or sold. Craig noted his thanks to Ned and stated that when all is said and done, he wants everyone to know that Charlestown pays around \$3,000 more per student, after State Aid is applied, than Richmond and Hopkinton; they get at least four times more State Aid than Charlestown. Kathryn Colasante stated that Gina mentioned the District is paying \$1,000 per day for transportation for one student. Have you reached out to the family to see if they would be interested in driving the student and getting paid to do so? Gina responded that the District does pay mileage to families who are able to drive a student out of district. Ned added that the District encourages this and we do have families who do this. Gina noted that the mileage reimbursement rate is 62.5¢ per mile. Kathryn suggested the District make it way more attractive for families to which Ned replied the District can't do that. At \$180,000 a year for one student, why wouldn't we just buy three vehicles and drive our own? We have to use Statewide to transport DCYF students back and forth to group homes. Their family is no longer involved. We have to be careful not to put the student at risk. We try to use what we can through Ocean State Transit but there are times when we have to contract with Statewide. Kathryn suggested they reach out to legislators as the nuance in this law is tying our hands to which Gina added that Statewide has been a problem for years. We are trying to get around this and have reached out to legislators. We need to push harder to get Statewide transportation fully funded as it is impacting every district in the State. Ned noted they are working on that now. Legislation does not allow for us to provide private transportation on our own and receive State Aid. We believe this is a portion we could do for \$300,000; State Aid is about \$300,000 so it would be a net cost of zero to the District. This is a law. Andrew wholeheartedly agreed with Kathryn. Keep a tally of these topics so we can discuss them at our School Committee meetings. There are things that sometimes cause us friction amongst the communities. When we do Resolutions, we should share them with Town Councils and the General Assembly. You are 100% right. Chair Giusti stated that it would be helpful to those who can connect with legislators. Brian Patrick Kennedy and Dennis Algiere have worked tirelessly on Transportation Categorical Aid. Dennis is retired but we should reach out to Senator Morgan, Senator Cotter and Representative Spears. Andrew commented that Representative Spears is deeply committed to Chariho. We can ask them to work in a more coordinated way. Craig asked all to remember that Chariho does not have a lot of political juice at the State House. We have been fighting this a long time. Craig questioned Section 3, page 7 of 8, line #6159 – High School Library. He is not saying let's cut it, please hear him out. This was dropped to \$5,000 when e-books are prevalent. It looks like the shelves are full. Are we losing books, are they disappearing so we need to purchase more? Gina responded that sometimes books are outdated but she feels they could go a year without renewing this. Craig stated he hoped that people weren't stealing the books to which Gina replied they have an inventory list. Larry questioned oil – do we call on a daily basis to see what the price will be or is it automatic? Ned explained that they do keep an eye on the

prices. Larry noted that he had documents from Ginger's Oil (#463) and asked why there were two drops at the High Schools in a matter of a few days. Ned stated that he may have asked Sully to top it off because the price dropped and we want to get the best price. Larry asked if other oil companies are called to which Ned explained that we have a bid award to Ginger's. We pay a certain amount over their cost. Gina added that all these go out to bid. Larry asked if Ginger's services the equipment to which Ned replied that Summit does some. We focus on the MPA (Master Price Agreement) for equipment. Craig commented on the projected 8% increase in healthcare; when do we expect to hear on this? Ned responded mid to late February. Craig asked what happens if it drops. Ned noted that there is a line item in the budget for benefit reductions (if the price goes down or goes up). Larry asked how much the teachers pay out-of-pocket for healthcare. Ned replied there are three components to this question. For a family plan, which costs around \$18,000, the person has to come \$4,000 then it is roughly \$50 per month for the premium, or about \$600 for the year. Larry asked if they have been approached to pay more to which Ned explained that this is what is contractually obligated. When contracts are in place, we have to follow the contract. Larry asked when is the contract up to which Linda responded that we are in contract negotiations right now. Kathryn, in response to Pat's comments, noted that she understands collaboration is needed in times like this as many taxpayers are on fixed incomes. We can't take the taxpayer out of the equation. Gina again explained that the "pool" are money that teachers get is very small. It is not "free" money. She doesn't tell them what to purchase but they do know how much they have to spend. There is a per pupil amount and we look at trends over the years. We also look at grants. Kathryn asked how is the amount determined to which Ned explained that they sit down and adjust numbers based on historical spending to which Kathryn suggested they set it lower. Gina noted this is a lean budget and you are not purchasing materials for the curricula as ESSER is covering the cost this year. She does not know where they would be without it. There is no fat in this budget. The amount of dollars going into the classrooms is the lowest she has ever seen. Andrew again reiterated that the culture you articulated is the culture at Chariho. Our budgets historically are 1-2%. His experience is that our teams are used to being in a resource-scarce environment. That is the culture; the lengths that our leadership is going to as they navigate a challenging fiscal situation we have been in. Linda added that they have learned that @ 81% of the budget is fixed costs; we are talking about 18%. The next step we start cutting staff and she does not want to go there. We, as a Committee, need to be realistic. The only places we can cut are places we don't want to cut. Our community needs to know that. It could get ugly. Cassandra Charette, a Charlestown School teacher, commented that glue sticks are gone. A dollar per pupil is nothing. They pay a lot themselves and the PTO buys supplies as well. She does not think the Committee can cut supplies any more. Donna stated that as long as she has sat in budget workshops, she does not want to impact the quality of education we have worked so hard for over the years. If we start nickel and diming the budget, we will lose staff and morale. We won't be able to maintain the quality of education in Chariho. Craig added that last year, the zero budget resulted in the elimination of two teachers. This is not a Mom and Pop operation. Westerly has 4/5 the amount of students we have with the same budget we have. Towns have to step up to which Pat stated if they can't afford it, they can't afford it. Andrew agreed with Donna. For well over fifteen years he knows the work that the District has done. It didn't happen overnight. You are right to be concerned. He does not disagree with Pat's sentiment but she needs to identify where we need to cut. He is not being flippant; he means it sincerely. Linda is right to tee us up. We are not well-positioned as a School Committee. We are going to have to do the hard work and point out where reductions need to be made. Identify where cuts can be taken. Donna asked Ned if the impact of this budget and where it stands now with the zero budget they had last year, can you figure this out per town to help taxpayers understand what they are voting on? Ned responded that is a little complicated. We did do an analysis due to inflation and that is part of what we are running into. We could go with another zero budget and a town could go with a 4% increase to which Gina added that we had no increase last year yet some towns' taxes went up because town budgets increased. Ned stated, looking back – a 10-year generality, enrollment dropped roughly 1% and our budget went up roughly 1% but the CPI (general cost of goods) went up 2%. As for the 6% increase, there was zero increase last year; this year enrollment went down @ 1%, the budget went up @ 1.4% and the CPI climbed to 3%. You will have to be strategic when making cuts. If you don't have coastal attraction, you won't retain house value if your education quality goes down. Gina noted that

inflation is increasing faster than enrollment is dropping. The schools are working with less because the costs have gone up. She read minutes before she came to this District and encouraged others to read them. Fund Balance has always been a concern. The Fund Balance is your savings account. You are not meeting the government standards on what a healthy budget should be. Both former superintendents said this would come to roost and it has. In your hands lies the future of the Chariho students and education. Kathryn questioned what the heat is kept on to which Andrew responded that this came before a School Committee meeting. Ned put forth a memo in which he made a recommendation to keep the heat at 65° during the school day. He had to make this recommendation but Andrew told the Superintendent if she approved this, she should spend a day in a 65° classroom. This is not conducive to learning. Kathryn noted that they will have a difference of opinion but she appreciates how everyone has been kind during this discussion. She asked what the daily temp is to which Ned noted it runs between 66° and 70° depending on healthcare issues in a classroom that a set requirement is needed. At night and on weekends thermostats are set at 60° but we do have a lot of community use on the weekend. Craig noted the increase is at 6.64%, State law is 4%; what should they get it down to for a buffer for the community? Ned replied that this year Hopkinton is on the high end; last year they were on the lower end. This is based on enrollment. He would say 3% which would give the community 1% to work with. Pat stated that things will not go as quickly as new members are in a learning curve. The CTC needs a new roof – how much do we do in-house? Gina noted that this will require an architect per the School Building Authority. Kids do not have the certification to do this to which Ned stated that if your child is up on the roof and your child falls off, we are liable. This requires an engineer and licensed contractors. Andrew added that it also has to be aligned to the curriculum. Where can we leverage; this hits up against what is doable. Linda noted, for clarification purposes, that the roof comes under capital and the District is not asking for any money for capital project – zero dollars. If we go to a 4% budget, that is about a \$1.3 million cut. This is not what she wants to see. Chair Giusti commented that going to taxpayers and asking for a 6% increase is not feasible. For the next meeting, which has been part of the process for a decade now, she is tasking administration, who are living and breathing this, to start to propose cuts that will bring us down to 4% which is more palatable. She does not want to talk about level funding the budget again. Jessica Purcell from Richmond asked what the impact of level funding was on this year's budget. Andrew felt it was right to ask Administration to consider lowering the budget but when the Superintendent presents where the 2% in cuts is going to come from, we will not collectively agree on them. Then accusations are thrown. You are more than encouraged to offer rationale as to the cuts the Superintendent may make but we question her ethic when we question her recommendations for cuts. He cannot see where she is going to find 2%. It is not a political strategy; it is a reality. We just approved the Support Staff contract which affects this budget. Gina added that in order to get cuts moving forward, it won't be supplies. If she goes further, it will impact student programs, class sizes, etc. Teacher morale will be affected and teachers can go anywhere else. There is no way to get over a million in cuts without cutting positions and increasing class size. She has been asked to cut Middle School athletics. Look around – there is nothing for our kids to do. We have met every day on this budget and the cuts will impact the way Chariho has done business. Ned explained that we would go from a million (5% increase to the general fund) down to 3% if adjustments were in place when we started this process. Hopkinton will be this highest. The taxpayer would see a little over 4%. Donna asked how he managed the impact to which Ned replied that one of things the School Committee received from him was a memo stating he was implementing a budget freeze very early in the school year. The budget is a plan. We have not gone into a deficit but we built the budget for oil at \$3.00 and it is now \$4.00. We are in a better position because of employee vacancies but we don't have enough custodians. Donna asked what if they can't afford enough custodians. Ned responded that we reduce our rentals and make facilities less available. Donna thanked all for their questions and comments; they are extremely appropriate. When she began as a School Committee member, she called staff in between meetings to learn about the process. It does take awhile to learn this. Pat noted there are tough decisions that no one wants to make but they have to be made. Louise Dinsmore from Richmond noted her appreciation for the feedback. She was one of the people who led the way for the level-funded budget. People had no voice so they were their voice. The taxpayers will not accept 6.64% out of the gate. This is insulting to taxpayers. She stood out in front of the Town Hall and more people came to her to say that they support schools but are

getting priced out of Richmond. The last time people pushed back was in 2013. She met with Gina and Ned when the surplus was \$3.2 million and you were asking people for more money. Set the money aside for a rainy day; don't put it back into the next year's budget. The teacher contract is up. In light of this economy, you cannot negotiate a three-year contract. Taxpayers will not accept any more than a one-year contract with 83% of the budget fixed. Teachers get step increases. No one likes to have their wages evaluated – maybe make it a longer period of time between steps. Stand out in front of Town Halls and listen to the taxpayer. We want strong schools but taxpayers have not been in the center of this budget. Goldie Williams from Richmond suggested the District purchase Chromebooks instead of MacBooks. She also stated that students 18 and over can get services outside of the school district. Chair Giusti commented that she is not sure that everything that was said is accurate. Donna added that Ms. Dinsmore and others stood there for the school budget but have they looked at town budgets to which Ms. Dinsmore replied that 76% of the town's budget goes to schools. She wants to give taxpayers a voice. Donna suggested that she look at the budget and tell them where she would like to see cuts made. Louise stated that the Director of Athletics at URI could not support all of their sports' programs so they had to cut some. Donna noted that they will never please everyone. They will have to make the hard decisions. Deb Carney referenced pages 10 and 11 of 37, Section 4 – Substitute Salaries. Fiscal year-to-date spent is \$196,118.00 and the line item is at \$711,110.00; why such an increase when we are almost halfway through the year? Ned explained that this is line 703 and asked all to look back to FY22. Our spending went over and we see a higher need for subs in the spring than in the fall. Year-to-date tends to lag and there is some lag there. Sub rates will have to increase to close to what we paid during the pandemic. Gina added that the District paid \$120 per day and we increased it to \$140 during the pandemic. We all went back to our original rates but all the other surrounding districts have increased their rates so we are losing subs. We have to keep up with South County and our rates are not keeping up. Cassandra Charette noted that she was out with the stomach bug and called a sub who stated she was going to sub in North Kingstown because they pay more. Andrew advised all that they are coming up to 8:00 PM; the time they set as an end time. At this point in time they have asked the Superintendent to make recommendations for cuts and he wondered if anyone had any other questions. Kathryn asked what the effect was of level funding last year to which Gina informed all that any purchase to be made (i.e. furniture, etc.) we have held. Positions that are not filled we are holding. Ned added that page 11, line # 731 is another example – overtime line. Last year we reduced overtime. We have vacancies so we have had to offer overtime so we are over in that line item. We do have salary line items that will have more. Gina continued. We did not update Technology items (such as screens), we had a reduction in labor, she moved a Dean position into ESSER, she halted the Ashaway playground project and the floor at Charlestown School, reduced teacher assistant support at the Middle School, reduced sub costs, moved a Math Specialist into ESSER, removed the School Committee stipend, cut a Science teacher at the High School and removed two World Language teachers which meant a cut to the elementary World Language program. We can go through each line item but there were impacts. We just received notice that we will be getting a \$1.2 million grant for mental health which is not in this budget. FY25 curricula needs will go back into the operating budget so next year's budget will be even more difficult. As there were no other questions, the Chair called for a motion to adjourn.

Andrew McQuaide made a motion, seconded by Craig Louzon and it was
VOTED: To adjourn at 8:04 PM. In favor: Unanimous.

Donna J. Sieczkiewicz, Clerk