

Chariho District Financial Meeting/Public Budget Hearing
March 7, 2023

Committee Members Present: Chair Catherine Giusti, Donna Chambers, Tyler Champlin, Kathryn Colasante, Polly Hopkins, Clay Johnson, Craig Louzon, Linda Lyall, Andrew McQuaide, Larry Phelps, Patricia Pouliot and Karen Reynolds.

Administrators Present: Superintendent Gina Picard, Assistant Superintendent Michael Comella, Director of Administration and Finance Ned Draper, Administrative Assistant to the Director of Administration and Finance Kathy Koziol and Systems Administrator Eric O'Brien. Also in attendance: School Committee Clerk Donna Sieczkiewicz.

Richmond Moderator Mark Reynolds called the Chariho District Financial Meeting/Public Budget Hearing, which was held in the Chariho Middle School auditorium, to order at 7:33 PM. He introduced himself and welcomed all to the Chariho Budget Hearing. He then asked all to please stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and a moment of silent meditation. He pointed out the exits in the event of an emergency evacuation and noted there was a quorum in each town (Richmond had 55; Charlestown and Hopkinton had more than 25 and stopped counting once they reached the required quorum). He then reviewed the rules of the meeting asking that speakers be treated with respect and courtesy. We can disagree without being disagreeable. Anyone wishing to speak must approach the microphone and publicly announce their name and town of residence for the record. He would like speakers to keep their comments to three minutes or less. He will go around the room once and then circle back around again. This will give everyone the opportunity to speak. As this is a Public Hearing, the School Committee will take comments made by the public regarding the budget into consideration. There will be no votes taken this evening. The budget will be voted on at the All-Day Referendum scheduled for April 4. He asked if there was a motion to waive the reading of the Warrant. Craig Louzon made a motion, which was seconded by Andrew McQuaide to waive the reading of the Warrant. The vote was unanimous. Moderator Reynolds asked for a motion to waive the reading of last year's minutes. A motion was made by Scott Bill Hirst and seconded by Craig Louzon to waive the reading of Minutes of March 1, 2022. The vote was unanimous. Moderator Reynolds then introduced School Committee Chair Catherine Giusti who recognized fellow School Committee members and Administrators on stage. She thanked all for attending the meeting and noted the School Committee approved the FY2024 budget in the amount of \$57,010,055. Member Towns' Contribution with Debt Service and anticipated State Aid is an increase of 1.43% to Charlestown; 1.17% increase to Richmond; 1.76% increase to Hopkinton for an overall increase of 1.45%.

Moderator Reynolds stated he will go section by section for speakers. Sharon Davis from Hopkinton commended the School Committee this year for their cooperation and trying to respond to Town Council and community requests. She feels they can take the fund balance to 2% and look at the benefits and healthcare line item. Barbara Capalbo from Hopkinton stated she hasn't missed coming to meetings and agreed with most of the budget. She, too, would like to see the fund balance at 2%. She has never argued a budget in regards to teachers' salaries but would argue about administration, supplies and utilities. However, she does not believe there should be any cuts to utilities because the money will be needed there. She appreciates the work of the District and School Committee. When Barry Ricci was here, he had foresight and we had computers before other Districts. Westerly did not and had to get 800 computers to get through the pandemic. She urged all to have foresight. Chris Caldarone from Charlestown asked that the Committee consider reinstating the TA and maintenance workers that were cut. He is President of the ESP Union and both positions are needed to maintain the level of excellence we have. Former School Committee member and resident of Charlestown Ron Areglado noted his appreciation to the School Committee and administration for bringing forward this proposed budget. Contrary to what people say, we are not the highest in the State for teacher salaries or per pupil spending. Our excellent schools are a value, just ask any real estate agent. Diminishing resources will lead to diminishing results which will affect the value of homes in our community. Out CTC is highly regarded and Barry went to the mat over non-

competition. He detailed all of the money that is spent on out-of-district tuitions and transportation costs. The increases in the budget are not a result of mismanagement by the administration but of unfunded mandates. Teachers spend a lot of their own money on supplies. Level funding is not fiscally responsible and cuts to staff will compel increased class size. The pandemic had a profound effect on all students. Vote to support our children. Richmond resident Bob Cardozo stated that he once sat with a lot of School Committee members. Looking at the budget, it is reasonable. Probably something to look at is State Aid. What is the balanced budget without State Aid? We cannot bank on what comes out of Providence. Bring the budget down by \$616,000. Level fund it. Jill Fontenault from Charlestown stated that she has served as a substitute teacher in Chariho. She had no idea how different it is to work in schools. Staff are being asked to do more with less. The budget failed last year and there are many who are trying to level fund it this year. That is mind-boggling. Cuts will cripple our children. You need to allow the budget to keep up with inflation. Do not support level funding the budget again. Joyce Flanagan from Richmond stated she supports public education. Learning and excellence make good citizens. She supports the staff who work at Chariho and applauds them for the job they are doing. Please pass this budget and give our students the future they deserve. Jim Sullivan from Charlestown was an educator for over 35 years. He feels there are three important goals: sovereignty, accountability and collaboration. Do you think our children's education is being controlled and mandated by politicians? You should not be a teacher if you believe in mandated curricula by politicians. Mr. Sullivan was asked to please stick to the topic of the budget. He asked all to be soldiers of God. Lora Fleischman from Charlestown stated that she is a parent, volunteer, PTO Board Member and spends as much time at Charlestown School that she can because it is the happiest place on Earth. She credits this to the educators and staff who guided us through a global pandemic. There is no indoctrination or sexuality being taught at Charlestown. She, too, was asked to please stick to the budget. She stated the buck stops with the adults. We need to educate our children. She wondered if people were trying to gut the Chariho Regional School District so that people won't move here. Support our future and don't listen to lies. Vote yes. Richmond resident Dana Scanapieco stated that she wasn't going to speak. She is a Speech Pathologist at Hope Valley School and she serves children; some of your children. Our special education budget requires so much for our children to thrive. She supports the budget as it is not fair to children to level fund it. She is sure when the children of some of those in attendance were in school, budgets were passed to educate them. She encouraged all to please support the budget. Kristen Chambers from Richmond has lived here for 33 years and both of her children attended Chariho. She is glad they graduated when they did. Nothing maintains its quality when underfunded. Vote yes for a fully-funded budget. Gary Stoner from Richmond spoke in support of the budget. Yes, he would like to see his taxes not go up but if it means children get a quality education, he will pay more. People who serve these children deserve our respect. This notion of a level-funded budget is a "head in the sand" notion. This increase barely does the job. He supports the budget. Scott Bill Hirst, Vice President of the Hopkinton Town Council, first stated that Council President Michael Geary was unable to attend this evening. Scott noted the budget should be about the children. He wanted an outside management study done for years by someone who knows what to look for. We have families/households of all sizes and funding. The School Committee has the authority to move money. He has a problem with a Committee that doesn't want an outside management study. The School Committee has the power to make changes. You should learn a lesson from last year's election defeat. He wants to thank Sharon Davis for her efforts. He asked all to take a stand on this budget. Have the guts – that is what leadership is about. His views are not the views of the Hopkinton Town Council or the Republican Party. Maureen Areglado from Charlestown has been in education for more years than some here have been alive. Leadership is putting all children first all the time. You have a fabulous school district. The School Committee is not a paid position. They work hard. She has seen the effects of the pandemic through her daughter who is a teacher and how much money they take from their own pockets. Schools are safe havens for our children. People talk about their home budgets; schools are just like a home for students. We need to get young parents out to fight for their kids. She doesn't know how teachers taught during the pandemic so please support our teachers as they are the backbone of our system. Our teachers and our students deserve the best. Hopkinton resident Jeremy Palmer is here to talk about money. Money is not important but time is. No matter how the economy fluctuates, the budget will

never go down. Do I have a right to my opinion; this is my money. I have the right to discuss my money. When it comes to integrity, teachers buy supplies because they love what they do. His concern with an increase, will that bring our integrity up? Everyone is making sacrifices. His problem is the budget never goes down. You have to look at what we can cut. We don't have options to cut elsewhere. We do have an option to say that money won't change anything in the school district because we have good intentions. Elaine Morgan from Hopkinton stated the average income for a person in Hopkinton is between \$40,000 and \$80,000. Teachers are excellent, we have the best school system in the State but enough is enough. We have to tighten our belts and we need to do it here at the school as well. Richmond resident Jeff Noble noted that we are talking about an investment in our future, a 1.7% increase is a start. You are telling us to do more with less and we need to have compromise. This budget is a good start. There are nations competing with us who support the education of their kids. We need to be able to compete. Jim McCabe from Charlestown thanked all for the job they are doing. He is not sure that he could do the tough job others do. He has watched the administration and School Committee go through the budget line by line. He volunteers and sees the tax dollars at work when he steps into the schools. He is surprised by the support of those who come to the meetings. There are mandates we have to meet but that is no reason to penalize our educators. Let's appeal to our legislators to get more aid. With the cuts that have been made, he does not see how we are going to meet the needs of our kids. Are we prepared to see what is going to happen with all these cuts? Before COVID, four of six Chariho Schools were in the top 10 and were high performing. He thanked the educators and Superintendent and supports this budget. When he hears people say let's run our schools like a business, it annoys him. He will not stand for this because it will leave out those who do not have as much as others. He will vote yes for this budget. Filipa Bryson from Richmond is a parent of three in Chariho, a taxpayer and a public school teacher in this district. We are responsible for the education of our students. If we level fund the budget again, parents will pull their students out and we will be paying more in tuition and transportation when they go elsewhere. She is concerned by the lack of support of some of the School Committee members. The cut of a teacher assistant hurts. Real estate values will go down if the school district goes down. Jennifer Silvia from Hopkinton commented that they are all experiencing budget issues. Her husband was laid off which has caused them to re-evaluate their spending. This is the mindset of the School Committee; they want it all. Last year only 41% of students met or exceeded standards which meant that 59% were below the standard. Kids should perform better. It is hard to remain in this district when the property re-evaluation rose so much. The teachers' contract – look at that and reassess the proposed budget. Cut out the "would be nice" expenditures. Hopkinton resident Ed Lowe noted that he has lived here since 1983 and paid taxes. For thirty years he and his wife were involved in Chariho. He spoke on numerous occasions and actually worked to restore \$1 million to the Chariho budget one year. He participates actively by funding taxes but measuring student knowledge, 40-50% of the entire student body never achieved the standard. There is an annual appeal, the staff understand the deficiencies and with more money they will make necessary changes. This never materialized. His call to action came when taxpayers were denied their right to petition to remove unwanted books from the library. The School Committee refused to put items on an agenda that were requested by a School Committee member. Their opinion is that the district does not have the best interest of taxpayers so they intend to effect change through the legal power of recourse. Jessica Purcell from Richmond noted her concern about the budget. The fund balance is just under \$400,000; the math does not support more cuts. Dedicated parents make sacrifices for their children. We need to keep working together so students are the top priority. We need to educate ourselves. We have fixed costs we must maintain. On the topic of transportation, she asked the Committee to please add back the \$70,000 that was cut as this will impact families five days a week, two times a day. Please reconsider this cut. Charlestown Town Council President Deb Carney stated that she is speaking tonight on behalf of herself. She supports the budget. It is a compromise and she is asking that the School Committee put forth this budget to the voters and she will support it. Samantha Wilcox, a Richmond Town Council member, was speaking in her individual capacity. She knows what it is like living on a fixed budget as a single mother. She thanked the School Committee for their support and asked that they consider putting back the \$70,000 that was cut for transportation. This will impact families. She commented that it is really important for all to have the facts before making a tough decision. Louise Dinsmore from

Richmond thanked the School Committee and administration for their service. In today's economic climate, everyone is making sacrifices. In the NEA negotiations you are looking for another three year contract. Who represents the taxpayers? She realizes public education is a right but at what cost. Are we expected to roll over and fund budgets? In the near future we will be at 90% fixed costs. She is not going to sit by when schools and unions refuse to compromise. Why are contract negotiations kept secret? We have a right to know how much will be added to the budget. We expect a three-year budget forecast. Are you not sharing that? You have created structural deficits and can't understand why we voted the way we did. I expect we will tell you 'no' again on April 4th. Michael Colasante, Richmond Town Council member has friends each running a business. One was doing well, the other not so well. He is using this as a comparison. Look at Barrington. It is about \$6 million less to educate their kids and they are doing well with just a fewer students. Peel away some of these mandates. We would save tens of millions of dollars. He named a few of the "best" people who came out of one-room schoolhouses. He doesn't want to go after payroll or fixed costs; go after mandates. Mandates should be funded by the State legislature. They wouldn't pass mandates if they had to pay out of their budget. We have a Tri-Town Committee and are discussing ways for legislators to support us. Hopkinton resident Scott Irwin never felt so forgotten as a taxpayer. Stop the insanity. He will vote 'no' on the budget because more money doesn't fix the problem. The recent assessment has raised property values about 30%. They won't know what the effect will be on taxes. He is wondering if he can afford to continue to live in Hopkinton. You should pay the support staff the same as teachers. He encouraged the new School Committee members to forge forward. Michael Chambers from Charlestown stated the budget proposal in its present form is regressive. It does not answer all the educational needs. He has no children or grandchildren in Chariho and is on a fixed income but is an advocate of quality education. It is an investment that pays high interest. Without education we won't have the ability to come together to solve problems. Access to free and quality education should be a right of every child in this district. Public education is only productive if there is collaboration. Charlestown is not rich and it doesn't even have the median income that the other two towns have yet they support quality education. Don't put this on the administration and staff; this is our responsibility. There seems to be a group that wants to level fund again but what will they sacrifice. What is on the table? What will you cut? He would like to know at the next meeting. He noted that in the news today General Dynamics is planning to hire 5,000 and Chariho is in a good position to work with them to supply these people. Can we respond to their needs? Don Panciera from Hopkinton stated that he is 72 and his wife is 69 and they still work part-time. They have to work to pay property taxes. They can't afford an increase in the school budget. Inflation is killing them. Barrington is #1 and spends \$17,000 per student; Chariho spends \$20,000. We all need to tighten our belts. They can't approve a budget they cannot afford. Victoria Bentley from Richmond had four children and five step-children who were Chariho graduates. She is now on a fixed income with no second income. She is doing it on her own. Her home is 35 years old and she is trying to keep up to survive this crisis. Taxes keep going up yet her income stays the same. Cost of living has gone up. Everyone chooses their position to get through life. We should not have to sacrifice for a position you choose. She will vote against a school budget until sacrifices are made. Alexandra Lepore Thompson from Richmond stated that when her children came to Chariho, it was the best school district. It has fallen. Increasing money will not fix it. She too is on a fixed income. She appreciates the School Committee; she wouldn't want to do this and the teachers and thanked the Committee for their time. Sharon Davis from Hopkinton stated this is the fifth year she has gone through the budget and has never touched teacher salaries. This year she really thinks a cut can be made to the health benefit line. She thinks there is money to cut there. Chris Fee from Charlestown commented that Charlestown has low taxes because their town is run properly. The budget is poised so as to cut teachers. There are School Committee members here who never had any intention to pass a budget. When budgets are being discussed, there is never any discussion about the towns' budgets. The school district is an easy target. You should turn your focus on the people in your town who are responsible for the mess we are in now. Hopkinton resident Barbara Capalbo noted how really interesting and encouraging it is to have this conversation. She raised three boys as a single mother and it never occurred to her to cut the school budget. She wanted her kids to see the world and be the world so they could leave here and go elsewhere. She can understand cutting the fund balance to 2% as you can always add this back from another line

item. She hopes the Committee will do something good for all of them. Dana Scanapieco from Richmond had a question to all. Have any of you come into our schools or classrooms to notice the rigor, dedication and hard work? Fairfield County came to see their reading program as we are getting notable results that are amazing. Tonight has evoked a lot of emotion in our new reading program. Kids are learning decoding, not gender identify. You can't have it both ways. If you want taxes lowered, you have to bring in business. You can't keep it rural. Cassandra Charette, a teacher from Charlestown stated that if she hears one more time to do the best she can with less or that she doesn't have integrity, feel free to come in our classrooms. She should not have to buy stuff for her classroom but she does it because she does not want to hurt those students who are less fortunate. Ron Areglado from Charlestown commented that he has spent 50 years in education and people who compare Chariho to Barrington don't understand the dynamics. We pay more for special needs students, over \$100,000 to educate some of them. It is a mockery to compare us to Barrington; income levels are different. People also do not understand test scores. Prior to the pandemic, Charlestown School ranked third in the State. Why is it many colleges stopped giving SATs. It is a national problem. You need lessons on how to read and interpret test scores. He is glad to hear the Tri-Town Committee will employ legislators and Senator Morgan to lead an initiative to oppose mandates. The most and/or largest problem is regressive property tax. Abolish this as a fundamental way to fund education. The State is pitting towns against each other. Why aren't the Town Councils putting out a graduated income tax? Take the pressure off families who are struggling. He wants to dispel the notion that Chariho is not doing their job and he thanked the School Committee. Maureen Areglado from Charlestown noted her full support of the budget. Some of those who have left she would have liked to have heard this message. We should not have had State testing following the two years of a pandemic. Pay close attention to what cuts are made before you vote. We cannot afford the luxury of cutting teachers and support staff. Betsy Alvarez from Hopkinton is a parent, teacher and taxpayer. She was hired in 2009 and has not made it to top step yet. Many teachers are taking longer to get to top step. We chose to stay in this district even though others may pay more. We all don't make \$80,000. People did compromise and at some point you will lose teachers. This will affect children if competent teachers leave. Michael Colasante from Richmond has been listening to the debate which is good and healthy. There are three challenges here. The first is to look at Barrington. We have other schools coming from out of state. He challenged the school district to see what Barrington is doing. He agrees with Mr. Fee about the Town Councils – what have Richmond and Hopkinton done to promote growth. If we had infrastructure, we wouldn't be having this discussion. Peel back mandates; the third challenge. Elaine Ricci from Charlestown has two children in Chariho. Everyone is advocating for themselves. She is hoping the School Committee members are advocating for our children. There has been a lot of compromise. Vote for our schools and our kids. She does not want to lose our teachers and she does not want to leave this district. You are here to vote for what is in the best interest of our students. How can we invest in our future if we don't invest in our students? Mike Chambers neglected to thank the members of the School Committee that worked on the budget and proposed logical cuts. He thanked the Superintendent. The School Committee has cut quite a bit. His last dollar will be spent on education.

As there were no more people wishing to speak, Moderator Reynolds called for a motion to adjourn. A motion was made by Ron Areglado, seconded by Craig Louzon and unanimously approved. The meeting was adjourned at 9:41 PM.

Donna J. Sieczkiewicz, Clerk