

Schools Subcommittee Minutes January 31, 2014

Participating

Carol Kamin (remotely)
James Sturgeos (remotely)
Janet Gelbart
Cliff Brown
Mike Glover
Chad Ellis
Tim Sullivan
Lee Selwin
Susan Wolf Ditkoff

Also attending:

Anne Turner
Peter Rowe (part)

Beth handled Open Meeting requirements for Carol and James phoning in. Discussion of prior meeting minutes. Change made to correct what was agreed with respect to short vs. long term methodology for estimating marginal costs of students.

Beth discussed March 1 deadline and bridge budget on the horizon and asked the SC to sort the list of topics to determine which can be completed by March 1 for FY15 budget and which should be considered for longer term.

Question raised as to whether March 1 is too late for FY15 budget. Town and school budgeting process is at its busiest so their availability to support the Committee will be very limited.

Susan made the point that given the budget timeline anything that would enter FY15 budget would have to be relatively quick to implement (e.g. not extensive public hearings). Point made that budget isn't finalized until Town Meeting approves it and late changes are frequently made. Counter-point made that such changes are rare on the school side.

Discussion of what recommendations we can make for FY15 budget. With school "catch-up" spending (support staff that has not kept pace with growth) we have had some indication from school department of which areas are furthest behind, e.g. guidance counselors. Cliff pointed to study done in 2003-4 when Runkle site council was lobbying for more guidance counselors.

Question raised about whether it is honest to describe bridge budget as sustainable without an override.

Distinction made between technology and catchup spending.

Point made that Community Engagement director position has been hired. Susan clarified that this position has been in the budget for three years but has been cut each year. Point made that the person hired was a press secretary. Point made that these positions were flagged in the November presentation.

Question raised whether we can limit new spending in bridge budget to equal new revenues. Point made that this should be topic for whole OSC on Wednesday.

Question raised whether we should rank priorities for spending. Point made that this gets to a level of micro-management that is likely beyond both our expertise and our scope. Superintendent will optimize with Principals based on what each school needs.

Point made that technology plan is not a new plan but is really catch-up, e.g. moving our computer replacement cycle from 5 years back to 4 (where it has been before). Counter-point made that plan includes new positions which may or may not be needed and that this part of the plan should be vetted before being implemented.

Peter Rowe entered the meeting. Discussion followed about what details are available on how the \$1.6M catch-up spending will be allocated. Point made that if OSC isn't going to set priorities at various spending levels then school must do it. Peter suggested that the difference is one of timing.

Point made that in this bridge budget we could limit new entrance for optional programs. Susan argued that it was impossible to make a change like that within this budget cycle, given the need for extensive public hearings and the seriousness of changing such longstanding policy.

Point made that the OSC is an advisory body; final authority for school spending decisions resides with Town Meeting for the absolute budget level and then with the School Committee and Superintendent on specific allocation.

Point made that OSC can identify what elements can be introduced into the process. School-related items are BEEP fees (and Baldwin), extended day, use of space in the schools, adult education.

Early ed -- largest potential impact = raising rates for BEEP. 2013 rates are a couple of dollars per hour less than competitive programs in town, with waiting list 50% greater than those that got in. Schools proposing 6.5% increase -- estimate is that competitors will increase by 4%, so gap narrowing but only slightly.

Issue #1 -- burdening BEEP users rather than spreading through community. Point made that those who can't get in to BEEP already have to pay what the market charges. Discussion of scholarship followed. Peter believes that scholarships are limited to special ed and students in housing who would otherwise have gone to Head Start.

Point made that 6% increase may have been indicated on a provisional basis to parents, but it is still at least theoretically possible to make a larger change.

Point made that moving BEEP to market rate plus subsidy could lead to barbell effect, where all kids in BEEP are either from families that can afford top preschools and families that qualify for subsidy. Counter-point made that families that might theoretically get pushed out of BEEP if it went to market rate are applying to Soule.

Point made that BEEP should be mindful of impact on low-to-middle income people who do not qualify for subsidies. We're trying to treat this more like a user fee without exacerbating achievement gap.

BEEP could take over Soule space. Saves on rent (equivalent to capital cost). Displaces families currently in Soule. Point made that this couldn't be changed quickly. Point made that fee increase could be recommended.

Point made that change in BEEP location may reduce demand.

Point made that raising money from gym rental is a relatively easy source of revenue. Estimates seem to be around \$200-300K.

Adult ed opportunity is transactional savings and elimination of duplicated overhead.

Question raised whether "cost recovery" is right model and, if mandated, whether you should still raise fees and use additional revenues for appropriate subsidies.

Question raised about how much fee impact there would be from rent increases. Point made that any recommendation we make should include estimate of fee impact.