

Schools Subcommittee Minutes February 6, 2014

Participating

Beth Stram
James Stergios
Janet Gelbart
Cliff Brown
Michael Glover
Chad Ellis
Tim Sullivan
Lee Selwyn
Susan Wolf Ditkoff
Lisa Sheehan

Also attending (in part or in full):

Bill Lupini
Peter Rowe
Helen Charlupski
Rebecca Stone
Jennifer Fischer-Mueller
Judy Selwyn
Abby Fernell
Sharon Bodecorliss

Beth opened and the minutes of 1/15/14 were approved. Beth introduced the topic of average class size with a summary of studies on class size and the impact on outcomes. She outlined the PSB's class size policy and Bill described the formal guidelines as a maximum of 22 – 24 students in k-3 and 25 in grades 4-8. The guidelines are referenced in an appendix in the collective bargaining agreement and also in the budget guidelines. Bill said class size has been the top priority as enrollment has increased. Nonetheless, average class size has increased from 19.87 to about 21. The PSB have implemented efficiencies in placement of students in an attempt to limit classroom growth. The PSB have made later placement decisions and consolidated classes in older elementary school grades, generally the 4th or 5th grade. He said the most recent kindergarten class was quite tight, with a low of 19 and a high of 23 students.

Beth suggested that implementing effectively higher class sizes would require either later class assignments than the current May-June timeframe or trying to increase the incidence of larger classrooms than the current count at generally 18-24. Chad mentioned that this was not an either/or approach and could be done by some combination and Beth agreed.

Lee expressed that he did not understand why implementing higher class sizes in FY15 was not possible. Bill said it was really a question of how you would increase class sizes. It would require a series of changes, some known at this

point like later orientation, something Bill opposed, further expanding buffers, and a variety of other things that the PSB would need to consider. Bill said the PSB was increasingly saying “no” to families about their preference of schools in an effort to have fewer “messy” classroom distributions. Susan said that higher class sizes might be more preferably implemented with upper grades and not necessarily kindergarten.

Lee asked about technology spending recommendation versus class sizes. Cliff asked about how to characterize class sizes as a priority when they had grown already. Bill said that 21-22 students in the lower grades are about a maximum he was comfortable with.

Chad asked about how we move forward a discussion to better understand what the options are to create fewer smaller classrooms and maximize classroom space while keeping within recommended maximum student limits. Jim asked if having the orientation in the fall for kindergarten, where the first two days are only half days in any event, could not be a way of helping to maximize how student placement decisions are made.

Lee asked when Metco and Materials Fee students are placed. Bill said in the May/June timeline of all other known incoming students so that they could be assigned to a school and experience orientation like other students. Lee noted, and Bill agreed, that this may lead to less optimal placement for Brookline residents that register later in the process. Bill also noted that Material Fee students are no longer placed at the same school as a parent if they are a teacher.

Jim asked about the paraprofessionals in kindergarten and first grade and Bill said they are in all classrooms for these grades and noted the benefit in reduced 1:1 special education support as a result.

Lee asked about budget priorities and referenced the ECS and World Language cuts proposed last year and asked why these would be cut if they could be funded with slightly higher class sizes. Chad asked about trade-offs and priorities and noted these programs could be funded with the elimination of only two classes town-wide. Lisa suggested that spending proposals from the schools were not prioritized and asked how much new revenue was too much to expect the town to approve. Lee suggested voters might not approve a double-digit tax increase. Susan noted that enrollment had grown by 35% and the tax increase of 11% was substantially smaller than the enrollment growth.

A discussion about how to move forward on these issues took place. Tim suggested that the town prioritize its budget requests so that it was clear where the PSB would spend its first dollar of new revenue up to its last dollar. Bill suggested this was not how they did the budget. Cliff suggested that the PSB could provide a plan that showed spending at various increased tax levels of 5, 7

or 11%. Bill suggested that his budget message was due on 2/11 and that after the 3/13 budget meeting he would have more time to provide this sort of analysis.

Beth asked what more we needed to do in order to move forward. Lisa said the stopping point should be once we have solid numbers for the various proposals before the sub-committee.

There was a discussion on the appropriate time horizon for an override and what taxpayers could expect about the frequency of future potential overrides.

It was decided that Metco and Materials fee would be decisions for the full OSC and that the Sub-Committee would attempt to have agreement on the numbers as well as the capital modeling of costs.

Michael suggested a consultant might help with this analysis.

Both Task Forces decided that future task force meetings should occur. Jim asked for a discussion on the bridge budget, especially as it seemed to propose ongoing spending not supported by current revenue.

Lee presented his analysis on the program costs of Metco and Material fees. He said that he used a range based on his regression analysis of approximately 80% to 120% of calculated cost. There was a discussion about some of the word choices in Lee's draft. There was a discussion about whether Metco changes could be an option for the FY15 budget. Several members of the Sub-Committee expressed that it should not, although some members felt perhaps it should be open for discussion. Susan requested that OSC members be made aware if the full meeting discussion on Metco scheduled for Monday was to be a numbers-only discussion or would also include a discussion about the value of the Metco program or potential elimination for FY15.