

**SELECT BOARD/SCHOOL COMMITTEE JOINT MEETING MINUTES  
FEBRUARY 7, 2023, AT 6:30 PM  
TOWN HALL, SELECT BOARD CONFERENCE ROOM**

**CALL TO ORDER/OPENING**

Select Board Chair Allen Phillips and School Committee Chair Donna McCance called their meetings to order at 6:30PM. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited, and a moment of silence was held.

**ATTENDANCE:**

Chair Allen Phillips	Present	Chair Donna McCance	Present
Vice Chair Rick Antanavica	Present	Vice Chair Scott Weikel	Present
Second Vice Chair Dianna Provencher	Present	Secretary Dylan Lambert	Present
Herb Duggan	Present	Nathan Hagglund	Present
John Bujak	Present	Jonathan Boisjolie	Present

**ADMINISTRATORS:**

David Genereux, Town Administrator  
Chris Vitale, Assistant Town Administrator  
Brett Kustigian, Superintendent of Schools  
Beth Auger, Director of Finance and Business

**1. SCHEDULED ITEMS**

**a. FY2024 School Budget Discussion**

Mr. Phillips and Ms. McCance began the joint meeting at 6:35PM. Chair McCance turned it over to Superintendent Kustigian, who prepared a PowerPoint presentation. Dr. Kustigian started the presentation stating the district has great potential, and this discussion will be how the town can get there. Dr. Kustigian stated Ms. Auger was going to resign but ended up staying on because of the district's potential. Dr. Kustigian stated he and his staff will always be transparent with the status of the schools. The presentation started with an outline of the FY24 budget timeline for the State and Town of Leicester. The school expects to approve their budget on March 14<sup>th</sup>, which is the same week as the deadline for the Annual Town Meeting. Dr. Kustigian stated he hopes everyone is on the same page going into the Annual Town Meeting.

Dr. Kustigian's presentation then moved toward the school's budget status and current issues. Dr. Kustigian stated that when the district began increasingly using ESSER funding for operating expenses, it put the schools on a fiscal cliff. Leicester received total of \$2.6M in ESSER funds. Over the years, the schools have kicked financial issues down to road by tapping into these funds.

The second issue is contractual increases and new position expenses, which total approximately \$920K. The current teacher contract expires on 6/30/23. There are additional security costs due to the complexity of the open campus format. In the future, with new buildings being activated on campus, the open campus format will come with a cost. Across the Commonwealth, special needs are rising. Because

of that, it will require two new educators, or the district will have to send the students elsewhere at an increased expense. Dr. Kustigian stated vo-tech will be critical for the district's success in the future, so he is trying to get those programs off the ground.

The third issue is there is a 14% increase in FY24 for out of district SPED students, which will now total \$640K. Mr. Phillips asked why there is such a drastic increase. Dr. Kustigian stated it is out of the school's control, but his understanding is this is for staff retention purposes. Dr. Kustigian stated it is an unfunded mandate.

Dr. Kustigian stated the fourth issue is salaries paid from school choice is approximately \$520K, and the district does not have reserves. Dr. Kustigian hopes the district will be more competitive in this area in the future.

The fifth issue is the increase in elementary aid amounting to \$331K. Dr. Kustigian stated this is a result of the increased behavioral needs from students being out from COVID-19. He stated learning loss is pretty common amongst educational institutions.

This sixth issue is the approximately \$158K in utility expenses as a result of occupying and operating the new campus. Dr. Kustigian read the quote, "Becker College did not survive due to finances. It is not cheap."

The final issue is the increased shuttle costs of \$72K as a result of transporting high school students between the two facilities. Totaling up those items, the FY24 major expenses are \$3.7M. Taking into considering the offsets in FY24 from remaining ESSER funds and school choice funds, the shortfall is expected to be \$2.98M.

Dr. Kustigian stated that is the problem. Short term, the town needs to raise revenue. Long term, the town needs to develop its vocational programs. Dr. Kustigian stated different efforts that are underway, including establishing a Building and Property Maintenance Program, Early Childhood Education Program, and Veterinary Science Program. In addition, through earmarks, the town is developing pathways for CNAs and Fire Science. To summarize, Dr. Kustigian stated the schools have a major funding issue. If the schools make massive cuts, it will have a ripple effect.

Mr. Phillips requested that a copy of the slides be sent to Mr. Genereux to share. Dr. Kustigian stated the presentation will be put on the school website. Mr. Phillips asked what Mr. Kustigian's request is. Mr. Genereux stated the only way to raise and appropriate that amount is through an override. Mr. Genereux stated a secondary discussion is the \$850K in operating that comes out of municipal free cash to support the campus. Mr. Genereux stated the town does not have the money for capital this spring, and the town will have just enough to handle its obligations.

Ms. Auger stated the numbers speak the truth, and she has the backup information to provide if needed.

Mr. Phillips stated they are trying to get handle tonight, but it may be prudent to have another meeting with the Finance Advisory, Select Board, and school administration to review the options.

Mr. Bujak requested a report to see the spending trends over time. Ms. McCance stated they are putting together a structure that shows that information so people can see the visuals. Hopefully, that report will be done in the next week.

Ms. McCance stated she is excited that the new Superintendent has a vision for students. She stated they need to invest in the children.

School Committees members agreed that the town should do whatever it takes to get the job done.

Resident Mr. Ivel stated the school will need to take into consideration the loss of the ESSER funds into the override to ensure there is not a larger shortfall next year.

Resident Ashlyn Coyle stated she started getting more involved in the last couple of years. She does not care what happened in the past, she cares about the future. She stated if they need to bring the override to a vote, that is what they have to do. Ms. Coyle stated Leicester is fortunate to have two excellent professionals in Dr. Kustigian and Ms. Auger.

Mr. Phillips stated two years ago he would have said no to an override. Today, however, its different because of the school administration and school committee and the increased accountability. He stated he is not an override person, but he believes putting the decision in the hands of the voters. Mr. Phillips stated the town has work to do to get the necessary information out to the public and how it will impact them. Mr. Phillips stated this is a town problem and he is on board to get this to the town meeting floor.

The School Committee agreed it is time to forward. Mr. Duggan stated the information needs to be put to layman terms and be honest.

Mr. Antanavica stated the last override was 1992 and it was for the schools. At the time, they were going to cut fifteen teachers. Mr. Antanavica asked Mr. Kustigian the number of positions that would need to be cut without an override. Dr. Kustigian stated he does not have an exact number, but it would be more than fifty.

Ms. Provencher stated the town has to do its due diligence during this process are work closely all the way around.

Dr. Kustigian stated neighboring communities are building schools that are costing over \$100M. Leicester got the deal of the century with the Becker Campus purchase.

Mr. Phillips stated the issue will be convincing the general public and having facts together.

Mr. Phillips stated he wants this discussion to take place as part of the rest of the FY24 budget discussion so everyone can get a handle on things all at once. Mr. Phillips asked Mr. Genereux to coordinate with the applicable committees.

Select Board and School Committees members encouraged the public to contact the staff with questions. Mr. Bujak stated town also has responsibility to cut on municipal side too.

Resident Mr. Brennan asked about the interest payments on the Becker campus purchase and cost. Mr. Phillips stated the town will be working on getting all the figures together.

Resident Mr. Peter Cusolito requested a cost of the new educational programs and the return on investment (ROI). Dr. Kustigian stated he is working on putting that together.

**Motion 020723-SB1:** A motion was made by Mr. Antanavica to adjourn, seconded by Mr. Bujak. **Motion carries 5-0-0.**

**Motion 020723-SC1:** A motion was made by Mr. Weikel to adjourn, seconded by Mr. Lambert. **Motion carries 5-0-0.**

**ADJOURN**