

**SELECT BOARD MEETING MINUTES  
MAY 18, 2023, AT 5:30PM  
LEICESTER SENIOR CENTER, LEICESTER, MASSACHUSETTS 01524**

Chair Rick Antanavica called the meeting to order at 5:30PM. Chair Rick Antanavica, Vice Chair Allen Phillips, Second Vice Chair Dianna Provencher, Selectman Herb Duggan Jr, Selectman John Bujak, Town Administrator David Genereux, and Executive Assistant Maria Cataloni were in attendance.

**ATTENDANCE:**

Chair Rick Antanavica	Present	Chair Donna McCance	Present
Vice Chair Allen Phillips	Present	Vice Chair Scott Weikel	Not Present
Second Vice Chair Dianna Provencher	Present	Secretary Dylan Lambert	Present
Herb Duggan	Present	Nathan Hagglund	Not Present
John Bujak	Present	Jonathan Boisjolie	Present

Chair Peter Cusolito	Present
Bill Brennan	Present
Dorothy Dudley	Present
Ashlyn Coyle	Present
Mary Kay Hannant	Present
Sandy Wilson	Present

**MODERATOR**

Doug Belanger

**ADMINISTRATORS:**

David Genereux, Town Administrator  
Brett Kustigian, Superintendent of Schools

**CALL TO ORDER/OPENING**

Town Moderator Doug Belanger called the meeting to order at 5:30 PM.

**1. Discussion of FY 2024 Budget**

Mr. Belanger began the discussion by allowing public comment from the audience. Mr. Andrew Kularski voiced his displeasure at the cost of students opting to leave the district and his concerns regarding the lack of services resulting from the failed override.

Mr. Jeffrey Fisher asked about the sequence of the meeting; allowing public commentary before the boards/committee had an opportunity to vocalize ideas to improve the financial situation of the town and school. He suggested allowing the boards and committees to share their ideas and allow for public input and questions following their presentation.

Mr. Antanavica agreed with Mr. Fisher's suggestion.

Mr. Allen Phillips initiated the Select Board discussion by stating he has reviewed the town budget and is opposed to making cuts to public safety and the senior center. He stated when looking at all the funds that could potentially be redirected to the schools, there is \$1.3 million in available, unallocated ARPA funds, \$175,000 in State Aid and \$800,000 if the proposed shelter were to be approved for a total of \$2.3 million which is only \$300,00 off the override request. Mr. Phillips pointed out this redirection of funds would strip the town of all monies should an emergency arise and stated the proposal would not fix the funding issue long-term but would only delay it a year. Mr. Phillips stated if the shelter project continued into a second year, that funding with HCA funds would partially assist with budget shortfalls. He stated with his plan, there will not be a need for layoffs or an override. Mr. Phillips said other plans would involve cuts to town departments and as a result, town services would suffer.

Ms. Ashlyn Coil from the Advisory Board asked if the town administrator was hiring for the vacant Assistant Town Administrator position. Mr. David Genereux stated there isn't hiring at this point in time but the board would decide in the future if the position is ever filled.

Mr. Phillips reiterated that currently there is a hiring freeze for all open positions but the board may look at filling the positions in the future. He stated the town is not looking to spend more money but shift the money to support the plan Dr. Brett Kustigian has for vocational programs to generate more revenues for the town.

Mr. Herb Duggan stressed potential cuts to public safety would be detrimental to the public and stated the town is bound by contractual obligations to fulfill and wanted to ensure staff are working in safe environments and that both police and fire are currently working with minimal staff as it is.

Mr. John Bujak spoke of his financial experience and recommended cuts be made to the budgets and he suggested the vacant positions be eliminated. He stated \$600,000 could be cut from both the town budget and \$600,000 cut from the schools. He suggested utilizing the ARPA and HCA funds to fund the budget shortfall for the next two years until Dr. Kustigian's plan for vocational programs is implemented and grants and state aid could potentially assist the town in the meantime. He stated he developed a 5-year forecast and mentioned other possible funding from the state, expenditure cost reductions, selling town-owned property on Route 9 to reduce debt and consideration of a small override in the future to subsidize. Mr. Bujak suggested exploring all forms of revenue streams in addition to making cuts to the budgets.

Mr. Peter Cusolito stated the budgets contain "fluff" including funds resting in old warrants that could be returned to the budget. He stated overestimation of funding later rolls into free cash and control is then lost. He suggested against cutting positions and instead not filling vacant roles for a savings of approximately \$260,000 per year. He stated the HCA and ARPA funding would only be a bridge as temporary funding and stated it was the same practice that led to the budgetary woes. He suggested exploring other avenues of revenue generation. Mr. Cusolito stated the town has a mirrored tax rate and the collection rate for commercial business is not collected as much as it could be and mentioned a decrease in the value of the local Walmart building. He suggested the town work together to find revenue and funding solutions. He stated they need to stretch the funding for at least two years to rebuild the financial management of the town.

Mr. Bujak spoke about the DCHD lease option and acknowledged the profitability of the shelter but stated it is not enough to support the entire campus and save the budget shortfalls of the school department. He discussed the unknowns of the ongoing Becker costs and the unforeseen costs incurred for the Fuller building thus far. He vocalized his opposition to the shelter and advised against relying on the funds from the shelter to support the budget given the unknown future.

Mr. Phillips discussed line items in his plan, the utilization of the short-term funds and stressed he believed in Dr. Kustigian's plan to implement the trade programs. He encouraged Dr. Kustigian to provide an overview of the plan.

Dr. Kustigian acknowledged his short tenure in Leicester and the financial stress the school department is under. He stated he anticipates and expects full accountability when it comes to the vocational plan he unveiled. Dr. Kustigian expressed his concern of the divide within town and the low morale in the schools due

to feelings of a lack of support from the town and the healing that needs to occur. He emphasized new programs are not built overnight. He stated the school department has been working on the plans since last summer and they were on the cusp of Department of Education approval. Dr. Kustigian also stated he received correspondence from the Home Builders Institute in Boston for a material donation for the property and maintenance program and he had to place the opportunity on hold because of the failed override. He stated the momentum has slowed and time is of the essence to continue to actively pursue the vocational programs and stated Mr. Phillips' plan offered an opportunity to do that with no cuts. He stated he has been working on reduction in force (RIF) notices in preparation of layoffs which was the 'Plan B' in the event the override didn't pass. Dr. Kustigian stated if the Board decides the school department does not have to make cuts, it would be the best scenario which would give him a year to building programs with community assistance and he feels extremely confident that it could happen.

Ms. Donna McCance expressed support of Dr. Kustigian's plan and Mr. Phillips' financial plan.

State Representative David LeBeouf clarified the state's role in educational funding and the millionaire's tax. He explained Chapter 70 law revisions and the governor's per-pupil budget that is allocated to each town based on population and student information. He discussed special education costs, circuit breaker funds and the overall financial support provided to smaller districts. For the millionaire's tax, Mr. LeBeouf stated 50 percent of the revenue collected from the tax is to be allocated to educational purposes and the differences in proposals from the House and the Senate which was scheduled for debate over the next several weeks. Universal school meals (nutritional program), Green School Works (capital upgrades) and Innovation Pathways were the programs mentioned that could be beneficial to Leicester in the future. Mr. LeBeouf stated there aren't additional avenues for the state to contribute to operational costs of the schools because the contribution already occurs through Chapter 70 funding.

Senator Anne Gobi stated the senate budget was up for debate for the following week. She stated there is potentially extra funding for grades K through 12, however those proposals were part of amendments and were not final yet. Senator Gobi expressed her support of the town. She stated about 80 other school districts in the Commonwealth are looking to do overrides and the financial issues felt by Leicester are shared by many other communities currently. She said there are potential changes being proposed at the state level, but those financial changes would not benefit the town immediately.

Dr. Kustigian asked Senator Gobi about the success and demand of vocational programs throughout the state.

Senator Gobi responded there is a high demand for vocational programs in Massachusetts and the rules around Chapter 74 programs. She also discussed funding and children typically staying within the school district if trade programs are offered.

Mr. Bujak inquired about the unfunded costs of out of district special education assessment and where that responsibility fell.

Senator Gobi stressed the importance of providing top educational needs to Special Education students and clarified the high costs of providing those services are related to the specialized care; medical and intellectual needs the students may have. She stated some of those costs are reimbursed through state and federal funds and Circuit Breaker funds and therefore the cost is not truly an unfunded mandate.

Mr. Bujak stated he supports the costs but was concerned at the lack of control over the expenses.

Senator Gobi stated there may be some additional budgetary relief with those costs with help from the supplemental budget in September.

Ms. Dianna Provencher expressed support of Mr. Phillip's financial plan and stated she hopes the plan will bring people back together by eliminating the need for an override this year and didn't require layoffs. She stated she hoped the board would vote on the plan shortly and directed her commentary to Dr. Kustigian to clarify his vocational plan and the timeframe it would take to implement.

Ms. Provencher asked about the gambling tax to Mr. LeBeouf and Ms. Gobi.

Mr. LaBeouf stated the gambling proceeds were just put into effect and would go to the general fund which would later be directed to targeted programs. An online lottery for early childhood education grants was mentioned as a possible outcome being discussed. He stated some of the proceeds would go to the Department of Public Health for programs related to online gambling.

Mr. Bujak stated the Becker Campus is not yet up to code and funds were needed to assist with the capital improvements for the buildings under school use and discussed potential funding avenues to correct those issues.

Mr. Genereux gave an update on the Borger Building status. He discussed issues, progress with railings on the exterior of the building, entrance ways, ADA compliance design, needed bathroom work and the tight schedule for bidders to complete the work.

Mr. Phillips asked the public to stop putting each other down and to end the criticism amongst the yes and no voters.

Mr. Rick Antanavica mentioned the two budget proposals and stated there will be another meeting to discuss which plan the board would select. He stressed both proposals involved one-time monies and would only bridge the gap and there may be the potential for an override request in the future if revenues don't increase. He stated the town would utilize all the free funds to support Dr. Kustigian plan.

Mr. Duggan stated he only had a few weeks left of being on the board and emphasized it was okay to disagree. He said Covid presented a tough financial challenge and his family and community members helped him get through that time. He asked for the name calling to end and come to a common ground to get things done.

Ms. Coil asked Dr. Kustigian when the pinks slipped were to be handed out.

Dr. Kustigian replied they would be given to the teachers on Friday, but with the board's decision to move forward with another financial plan the cuts wouldn't be necessary. Dr. Kustigian echoed Mr. Duggan's sentiment and encouraged everyone to work together. He welcomed the public to submit their ideas to him and stressed he would be willing to work and speak with anyone.

Ms. Coil asked the boards to make a financial decision by June 10<sup>th</sup> on the plan without excuses.

Mr. Phillips asked the public to make suggestions and be interactive on ideas to eliminate costs to save money.

Mr. Bujak asked residents to spread the word the schools are open and spread a message of hope in the superintendent and the school system as a whole.

Ms. Mary Kay Hannant stated she has gone through the numbers and ran calculations. She expressed if everyone controlled their spending for the remainder of the fiscal year, a turnback of \$1,000,000 could easily be done.

Dr. Kustigian expressed the school department would be fiscally conservative.

Mr. Antanavica thanked everyone for attending the meeting and reminded everyone funding would be extremely tight.

Ms. Sandra Wilson pointed out with either proposal and the budgetary increase for the school department was larger than what was originally voted on at Town Meeting and inquired about the processes behind the changes.

Mr. Genereux clarified the types of votes, meetings and overall processes required to approve the expenditures out of the differing funds.

Mr. Antanavica reiterated this policy of using one-time funds to supplement the budget is what led to the financial ramifications that preempted the override request and stressed the importance of being cautious in the planning.

Ms. Coil inquired about the status of a grant for the school department.

Dr. Kustigian stated he hadn't yet received feedback.

Ms. Hannant asked about the status of positions at the school department being unfilled.

Dr. Kustigian stated they weren't able to find professionals to fill the positions but because they were at the end of the school year, they were still in good shape in terms of staffing.

Mr. David Orth asked about a rumor regarding another override vote on the tenth.

Mr. Phillips responded stating that's why the meeting was being held; to prevent and come up with alternative solutions.

Mr. Lucky Margadonna stated he was glad no one was getting laid off but pointed out the town was being stripped of all funds at a time when capital requests could not be granted. He said by utilizing the one-time funds, there would be no maintenance monies for the Becker campus.

Mr. Phillips clarified half the money would be saved for the maintenance of the Becker properties.

Mr. Margadonna asked if the school would repay the town for the one-time stimulus or if the money would ever be transferred back to the town.

Mr. Phillips said potential turnback would be something to discuss at a later date and his plan was centered around utilizing the funding to keep the town operational for another year.

Mr. Bujak reiterated the supplemental budget coming out in the fall could result in additional revenue for the town and stressed the importance of cost management.

Ms. Megan Shaw stated the receipt of funds from the town would be an appreciated gift that would be used wisely. She stated she believed the fundraising efforts would continue to supplement the budget.

Mr. Bujak suggested looking at the ambulance enterprise fund and potential uses for that money.

Ms. Linda Monahan complimented both financial plans and Brett's enthusiasm for the school. She asked if anyone had looked into utilizing the town buildings for advertisement and police use of building fees to generate additional funds for the school department and offered to volunteer her time to help with certain items to avoid having to hire vendors.

Mr. Phillips stated the board would have to change the bylaw to allow for advertising and local police officers are benefiting from the trainings held in town buildings.

Mr. Ken Antanavica stated the trainings have attracted notable organizations to potentially house a police academy in the town building. Mr. Antanavica stated he'd like to eventually see police officers replaced and DPW employees replaced as the school department personnel grows.

Mr. Duggan commented on capital plans that would require the boards and committees to work together to explore additional avenues to find capital funding sources.

Ms. Linda Powers asked Mr. Phillips if the senior center would close. Mr. Phillips stated he would not be in favor of closing the senior center and Mr. Bujak reiterated that it was only an untrue rumor. Mr. Bujak stated his cuts pertained only to vacant positions that are currently unoccupied and translated to a freeze in hiring. He stated he wished to keep service levels status quo while making the best from what the town already had for the next few years.

Mr. Jerry O'Toole inquired about the follow up for uncollected tax revenues. Mr. Cusolito stated the town was missing opportunities utilizing a flat tax rate. He stated if 2.5 percent was added to the commercial tax rate over the residential amount, the revenues for the town would noticeably increase. Mr. Cusolito suggested fully exploring personal property taxes to ensure the town is capturing everything possible.

Ms. Linda Buckley stated she was disappointed to hear the town was divided and the override amount was scary for residents who were going to be soon faced with the added increase of the Becker debt exclusion and the unknowns of what the tax bills would be. She suggested more transparency on the impacts of the tax rate if the town should ask for another override in the future.

Ms. Mary Moore stated both plans sounded good and inquired about cuts to other aspects of the budget.

Mr. Phillips stated there would be additional discussion on the plans in another meeting he stated he had no additional cuts in mind and Mr. Bujak stated he had no further cuts to disclose.

Mr. Laura Cummins emphasized the school choice mandated responsibly of schools and the cost associated with it. She stated an investment is necessary to support Dr. Kustigian's plan to reduce municipal spending. She read Dr. Kustigian's resume to the crowd. She emphasized the cost of school choice out would be minimized with his vocational plan.

Ms. April White questioned the process about town meeting approval for the transfer of funds to support either financial plan. She asked if town meeting failed to approve the transfer of funds if that would mean cuts will have to be made mid-school year as opposed to the end of the school year.

Mr. Genereux clarified the ARPA funds would be transferred via a simple vote of the board and encouraged all those concerned to come out and vote as the appropriation of funds will have to take place at town meeting, but not the transfer of funds to budgets.

Mr. Phillips stated both yes or no voters shouldn't have an issue with either plan because both involve utilizing funds the town already has.

Ms. Hannant clarified the board is utilizing different pockets of money and the town meeting vote is to move from one bucket of money into another.

Ms. Anne Boviak inquired if a plan is approved next week and new board members are elected if the plan could then change.

Mr. Antanavica stated with the current board that would not happen and they are committed to voting on a plan.

A resident explained the difference between a Proposition 2.5 and a debt exclusion and inquired when the debt exclusion for Hill Crest would be complete.

Mr. Genereux stated the debt for Hill Crest would expire in 2025.

Mr. Bill Robert asked Mr. Antanavica if he had received a commitment from the department heads to not have surprise expenses and develop a balanced budget.

Mr. Antanavica stated the plan to fund the school budget has taken precedence and after utilizing all emergency funds this year, the department heads will not have a choice but to not have surprise expenditures and to watch their pennies.

Mr. Bujak suggested department heads conduct monthly operating reviews to balance their budgets on a monthly basis.

Mr. Cusolito explained his background in budgeting and stated monthly spending plans should be required for all departments and the need for a financial management cycle and long-term financial processes and planning.

Ms. Lori Austin discussed the impacts of the override on the children and the emotions and fears they felt over teachers being cut. She emphasized the importance of kids being kids and not involving them in adult disagreements over override votes. She encouraged the adults to act like adults and set the example for the children.

Ms. Kathy Israelian Fleming stated she attended Tuesday's Select Board Meeting and she praised the Select Board for listening to residents and coming up with solutions instead of asking for another override.

Mr. Michael Mercer stated the plan was risky and the town could potentially be in a worse situation next year. He suggested measurable targets to Dr. Kustigian's plan to hopefully generate more revenue within the next year. He praised Dr. Kustigian leadership and asked for town leadership to develop a plan on a town-wide scale.

Ms. Marilyn Highland stated she was in favor of the override and the vocational program and the potential positive benefits for children to learn trades and utilize those skills to benefit local benefits.

Mr. Antanavica briefly spoke about the impacts of an override in a nearby town.

**Motion 051823-1:** A motion was made by Mr. Phillips to adjourn, seconded by Ms. Provencher. **Motion carries 5-0-0.**