

**SELECT BOARD/SCHOOL COMMITTEE/ADVISORY COMMITTEE JOINT MEETING MINUTES
MARCH 6, 2023, AT 5:30 PM
LEICESTER SENIOR CENTER, LEICESTER, MASSACHUSETTS 01524**

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	Not Present
John Bujak	Present	Jonathan Boisjolie	Present
Chair Paul Messier	Present		
Vice Chair Peter Cusolito	Present		
Bill Brennan	Present		
Dorothy Dudley	Present		
Ashlyn Coyle	Present		
Bob Mercer	Present		
Sandy Wilson	Not Present		

ADMINISTRATORS:

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

CALL TO ORDER/OPENING

Select Board Chair Allen Phillips called their meetings to order at 5:30PM.

1. EXECUTIVE SESSION (SELECT BOARD)

Motion 030623-SB1.1: A motion was made Mr. Duggan to go into Executive Session, seconded by Second Vice Chair Ms. Provencher at 5:33 PM. **Motion carries 5-0-0. (Roll Call Vote)**

- a. **To consider the purchase, exchange, lease, or value of real property if the chair declares that an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the negotiating position of the public body pursuant to M.G.L. c. 30A, §21(a)(6) – Former College Dormitory Leases**

- b. **To consider the purchase, exchange, lease, or value of real property if the chair declares that an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the negotiating position of the public body pursuant to M.G.L. c. 30A, §21(a)(6) – Disposition of Former College Victorian Properties**

Motion 030623-SB1.2: A motion was made by Ms. Provencher to exit Executive Session, seconded by Mr. Bujak at 6:39PM. **Motion carries 5-0-0. (Roll Call Vote).**

2. SCHEDULED ITEMS

Mr. Phillips reconvened the open meeting at 6:51PM. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited, and a moment of silence was held.

a. 6:00PM – FY2024 Budget Presentation and Discussion

Mr. Genereux started the discussion by stating the budget was updated after the State released their proposed budget. Mr. Genereux stated the town received additional funding, which was used to plug holes in the budget. Mr. Genereux provided an overview of the revenue and expenditures in the FY24 town budget. Mr. Genereux stated free cash usage on town operations is a concern. Mr. Genereux stated the town was fortunate that the Facilities Director took on the role of DPW Director. Mr. Genereux stated the other area of concern is the \$850K of free cash to operate the former Becker College campus. At present, the Town of Leicester is on track to run out of free cash. The \$850K is used to pay for utilities, landscaping, maintenance, plowing, and personnel. The Town needs to find a way to build this into the operating budget. Mr. Genereux stated the town is making it by barely. Mr. Genereux stated Department Heads were in attendance to answer any questions from the boards.

Superintendent Kustigian began the discussion by providing an overview of the major school expenses. In total, the shortfall is just over \$3M. If we deduct school choice offset, that shortfall is approximately \$2.65M. However, if the town does not override the \$850K of shared maintenance expenses, the school will need to account for that and make additional cuts. If school has to make cut, it will be in salaries, which account for 73% of school budget. Worst case scenario, the school would need to cut 20% of salaries, or \$3.2M. \$3.2M is 15% of the overall school budget. Dr. Kustigian stated if the town keeps making the same decisions, they will keep getting the same results. To fix this, the town either needs to raise revenue over the short and long term or reduce the budget. Dr. Kustigian stated the town should invest and create vocational programs. Over time, this will keep kids in district and attract students from other communities. Dr. Kustigian identified potential career pathways, including CNA, advanced manufacturing, building & property maintenance, and fire science. To create these programs is 2% of the proposed overall school budget.

Dr. Kustigian stated he believes it will be about 3-5 years before the town could recoup its investment into the vocational programs. Beth Auger stated the schools have a grant writer who are helping offset cost of the programs by purchasing equipment and other items.

Dr. Kustigian stated the first program participants will be current students, ten from each grade.

Advisory Committee member Mr. Mercer asked if the School Department had enough physical space to pull it off. Dr. Kustigian stated they are looking at utilizing part of the former middle school and are in discussion with contractors. The goal of the programs is to get students exposed to career paths and get them hired in jobs.

Mr. Phillips stated the group has a decision to make, but believes the town and school are on the same page.

Resident Lucky Margadonna raised concern about putting kids back in the middle school after the school rushed to close down the building. Dr. Kustigian stated student will spend a minimal amount of time in building. Mr. Margadonna asked how it will work for career path staff who have other full-time jobs. Dr. Kustigian stated they will work on flex scheduling.

Advisory Committee member Peter Cusolito stated the town needs to consider building maintenance and revitalization in its five-year capital plan.

Mr. Duggan stated the town will have the Board of Health get an air quality test and vet the middle school independently.

Mr. Phillips stated the town cannot keep looking for reasons not to do things while other towns are moving forward.

Resident Bill Brennan asked how it will impact the tax bill. Mr. Phillips stated that information will be provided.

Mr. Bujak stated he supports the schools, but the town should look at strategic cuts as well through the departments.

Ms. McCance stated they are running a school district, and it is not that easy to make cuts that do not impact kids. There are mandates the school has to follow. Making additional cuts is probably not possible.

Ms. Auger stated they built the budget in December, and there is no more room to play with the budget. The things impacting the budget are outside their control.

Ms. Provencher asked what Plan B is if an override does not get approved. Mr. Genereux stated he is hearing people say do cuts on municipal side, but in his 5 ½ years with the town, he cannot find surplus staff. Every department struggles to get work done. Mr. Genereux stated they can go through the budgets, but the only thing you will lose is service and accountability. Mr. Genereux stated without additional revenue, he would cut vacant positions first. Mr. Genereux stated he is not in support of filling vacant positions and telling others their positions will not be funded.

If the school's override fails, it is not just a school program. The Town would have to get back together and figure out a solution. Mr. Mercer stated cutting profitability does not work. If you cut 17%, you will need to cut more for unemployment expenses. Mr. Mercer stated the town needs to do zero-based budgeting and believes there is savings in the municipal budget.

Mr. Suggan stated even if they make cuts, they are still in huge predicament for public safety and schools.

Mr. Antanavica stated the town has been in trouble for years. Mr. Antanavica stated an override is needed.

Mr. Messier asked what the override amount would be. Mr. Genereux stated approximately \$3.5M, but the School Committee needs to vote before finalizing the number and putting it out.

Mr. Bujak stated he sees questions in the budget. Mr. Boisjolie stated if an override is voted down, the town will have to live with the consequences.

Motion 030623-SB2: A motion was made by Mr. Duggan to adjourn, seconded by Ms. Provencher.
Motion carries 5-0-0.

ADJOURN