

Lunenburg Finance Committee Meeting Minutes
Bilotta Meeting Room
Lunenburg Town Hall
January 25, 2024

Members Present: Chair Evan Watters, Vice Chair Chris Menard, Clerk Tiffaney Tavares, Board Member Tom Gray, Board Member Dave Passios, Board Member Jean Russell, Board Member Jay Simeone

1. Call to Order

The meeting opened at 7:00 PM

2. Pledge of Allegiance

3. Announcements

a. Plan Lunenburg Public Meeting 2/1/24 @ Adult Activity Center

i. Session 1: 4p-6p

ii. Session 2: 6:30p-8:30p

4. Public Comment

Dave Passios- 56 Whiting Street -shares that this has been a challenging year with a lot of unknowns. Numbers are changing daily. It's going to be a difficult year for the school district and the town people.

Chris Sullivan- 108 Highland Street- attended the School Committee meeting and heard about the financial cuts. The school district is already doing so much. A responsibility of the town and a top priority is to properly fund our school. A 2.5% budget increase is not going to cut it. Chris Sullivan questions if there is anything the citizens in the town can do.

5. Old Business

Board of Assessors Liaison

Evan Watters received an email from Renee Emkey about the possibility of having a liaison for the Board of Assessors.

6. New Business

a. School Committee Budget Discussion

i. FinCom Point Person

There was a discussion and Chris Menard believes that the public should be able to reach out to anyone on the board. Evan Watters is suggesting this person be the general point of contact for general questions, presenting

information, and emails. Evan Watters states that this person is not be speak on behalf of the finance committee.

Dave Passios agrees with Evan Watters that this will prevent any emails from falling through the cracks. Ultimately, the board agrees that a point person would be beneficial.

Jean Russell volunteers to be the point person between the Committee and the public.

ii. Public Q and A

Prior to the question-and-answer session Dave Passios states the Finance Committee doesn't develop the school department budget. It is the School Committee and the Superintendent. The Finance Committee is there to allow people to voice their opinions.

It should be noted that the night before there was a School Committee Special Meeting.

Evan Watters starts the Q and A by sharing the Town Revenue and Proposition 2 ½ presentation. In addition to this presentation, Chris Menard shares that there is a 2-hour presentation video on YouTube from October 28, 2021. This video shows a better understanding of how finances work. Chris Menard encourages residents to get involved and get up to speed and continue to go to the School Committee meetings. Information is just starting to trickle in and wants residents to be patient, respectful, and be part of discussions.

Rhonda Lisio -181 Reservoir Road – attended the School Committee meeting and there was a claim by a resident that half of the student population is involved in athletic programs. Rhonda Lisio believes that athletic programs are only offered to grades 6-12. Rhonda Lisio requests the exact number of students who benefit from athletic programs versus academic programs that are beneficial to everyone.

Mandy Gilman – had questions and is seeking clarity about the prop 2 ½ process. Mandy Gilman is requesting the Committee reach out to the Town Council to see if there is a different option.

Evan Watters states the first part of overriding prop 2 ½ is to have the question added to the town ballot. The only way to get a question on the town ballot is for the Select Board to have a majority vote to put the question on the town ballot. The recommended budget is submitted by the Select Board and the Town Manager. It's still up to the town to appropriate those funds and to accept the levy. Further

discussion can be clarified by the Town Manager or the Town Moderator who consults with the Town Council. Another option is for the town to petition to get a warrant article for an override. This would require a number of signatures from residents. Evan Watters will check with town council to confirm.

Peter Beardmore- 282 Pleasant Street- states that in the past there was a separate article on the warrant written with the language as described by statute which is an override article. There is an expiration as well. This is considered cleaner because we are not going into summer with an unbalanced budget. Peter Beardmore doesn't want to pass an underfunded budget. Peter Beardmore requests some sort of opinion from the Town Council.

Mandy Levine – 163 Island Road- feels there is a contradiction between what the Committee and the School Board are saying. Mandy Levine questions who sets the budgets and what is the Town Manager's job versus the financial director.

Heather Lemieux states the charter outlines that the Town Manager is tasked with developing the budget and presents a preliminary budget. The Finance Committee and the Select Board vote on recommendations for the articles on the Town Meeting Warrant including the budget articles.

Mandy Levine questions who sets the tax rate.

Evan Watters responds that the state sets the 2.5% which then goes to the Town Manager to distribute to all the departments heads. Then the department heads come up with their budget to try and fit within that 2.5 increase to their bottom line.

Joe Mule-139 Cove Road- asks when the last time the town had an override.

Mandy Levine believes it happened in the early 1990s. Evan Watters says that the legislature bill hasn't been updated since 1980.

Joe Mule believes this should be added to the warrant to inform residents. Joe Mule wants to know why this process didn't start back in November. The budget comes out so close to the Town Meeting. He believes there is no good reason why the option of an override shouldn't be provided to the voters.

Evan Watters responds that the Committee is only an advisory board. We have no authority in the town whatsoever and we don't put in the articles. We don't make the budget. We are here to look at the budget. An override must be an article put into the warrant. Tiffany Tavares

requested residents to attend the Finance and School Committee meetings to share their opinion.

Rhonda Lisio - 181 Reservoir Road – states that she appreciates the comments of Dave Passios about the emotions from the School Committee meeting the night before. Rhonda Lisio shares that she doesn't support an override because 30 percent of the town's population are senior citizens. She will not vote to increase their taxes.

Chris Sullivan questions if there is a reason why we are losing out on grants and if there is something the residents can do.

Heather Lemieux confirms this is a new development. Previously we received 40S funding as local aid from the state. This was received because the town adopted a smart growth district many years ago that made the town eligible for reimbursement for certain funds related to the district and students that go to Lunenburg schools within that district. After calculations were completed by the program, it was determined the town was no longer eligible. Heather Lemieux will share more information when it is known. This funding has been received for at least the last 10 years.

Lou Franco – 250 Arbor Street – believes supporting prop 2.5 would be a last resort but might vote to get that question to the people.

Board Comment

Tom Gray wants to hear from the people about who is and is not interested in an override.

Chris Menard states that are still 2 and a half more months of discussions and hearings ahead of the Committee. There are a lot of unknowns at this point. Chris Menard likes that the town has taken interest in and are engaging and asking questions.

Dave Passios confirms these are new waters for the Finance Committee and encourages everyone to be involved and to get engaged.

Evan Watters states that at this point he is against an override.

Evan Watters will provide answers to the questions that he noted during the meeting.

b. Town Grant Writer

There were 3 members who attended the MMA conference. At the conference, there was a lot of pushing towards state funding and available funds regarding grant writing. There is a discussion that a grant writer could work for multiple boards and committees.

Dave Passios shares that he was able to meet a lot of people from all over the state on different boards and committees. Generally, other towns are having the same challenges. Dave Passios believes that a grant writer essentially pays for themselves by the number of dollars that they bring into whatever entity that their writing grants for.

Karin Menard- 672 Page Street- supports having a grant writer for the town. Based on her grant writing experience she states that there are other pieces that a writer can't do alone. Additionally, Karin Menard asks if other towns have dedicated employees who write grants or are these employees being contracted.

Motion to recommend that the Town Manager and the Select Board consider hiring or looking into a grant writer, seconded by Dave Passios. All in favor. Unanimous vote. This was an amended motion.

7. Minutes

There are no minutes to approve.

8. Committee Reports

Dave Passios shares that Green Communities has an upcoming meeting at the library on Monday. Kelly Brown, representative from Green Communities, will be in attendance as well as many department heads in town. There is a list of projects to discuss if they may be appropriate to put into their system.

9. Topics for Future Meetings

This topic was tabled for this meeting.

10. Upcoming Meetings

- a. Feb 8th – 5 yr Financial Forecast
- b. Feb 15th – TM's Preliminary Budget Presentation
- c. Feb 22nd – Land Use, Council on Aging, & Library
- d. Feb 29th – Information Technology & Police
- e. Mar 7th – DPW & Facilities

- f. Mar 14th – Fire & Lunenburg Public Schools
- g. Mar 20th – Monty Tech & Administration, Unclassified, & Debt Services
- h. Mar 21st – Public Access Committee, Sewer, & Other Monied Articles – Lunenburg Public School Update

11. Important Dates

- a. Jan 19th-20th (MMA Annual Meeting)
- b. Jan 9th -Mar 18th – Town Meeting Warrant
- c. Mar 28th – FinCom Public Hearing
- d. Apr 2nd – FinCom Report for Warrant
- e. May 4th – Annual Town Meeting
- f. May 18th – Annual Town Election

12. Public Comment

Susannah Marcucci-245 Sunnyhill Road- doesn't believe now is the time for austerity. It's the time to invest in our future and provide the schools with the funds to provide the children with the best education possible. Not just an issue for parents but the responsibility of the town to educate children. Urges finance committee whatever way they seem fit to get the funds to the school. Tiffaney Tavares encourages parents to attend school committee meetings and get their voices heard.

Chris Sullivan- 108 Highland Street- thanks the committee for the question and answers.

Dave Passios encourages everyone to attend these meetings. All the meetings are available on YouTube in case you miss a meeting and want to catch up.

13. Adjourn

Motion to adjourn by Dave Passios, seconded by Chris Menard. All in favor.

The meeting closed at 9:27 PM.