Finance Committee

TOWN OF HALIFAX

499 Plymouth Street

Halifax, MA 02338

**Meeting Minutes**

**Monday, February 24, 2020**

**Committee Members Present**: Melinda Tarsi, Bill McAvoy, Cheryll Zarella Burke (no quorum)

Also, in attendance in the audience were: Sandy Nolan, Charlie Seelig, Christine Healy, Gordon Andrews, Jill Proulx, Carl Pike, Jason Fraser, Deborah Mclean, James Soule, Steven Lewis, Jess Kramer and Chris Eklund.

The meeting was recorded by Area 58

**Melinda called the meeting to order at 7:07 pm**

Melinda asked if any of the Silver Lake Regionals School Committee members had comments to make since they had their budget presentation on 2/13/20. Jason Fraser spoke up and said that he believed Charlie Seelig and Carl Pike had done a very good job at the 2/13 SLRSC meeting expressing how Kingston and Halifax felt about the school budget. He said that the Committee had worked very hard to trim the SL budget to just under 3% (2.99ish). He said that Plympton had not necessarily given any guidance to the Committee this year on their standing. He wanted to point out that even with trimming the budget, they had added in the Allied Health teacher and that she would be paid 50% by grant this year and so 50% of that salary was in the budget. He also wanted to make it clear that adding this position would likely bring in increased revenues for the future because of better state reimbursements per pupil in Chapter 74 programs. The School Committee is trying to be conscious of revenue streams. The Committee also added a Nurse manager into the budget while still trimming it down as much as possible. Jason said that the biggest issues facing the budget were the Transportation costs and the unexpected increase in the Plymouth County Retirement assessment. While the PCR assessment may be a one time increase like this, Transportation continues to be a problem. Jason said that Christine Healy had been working with the Committee to look at new ways to try and negotiate with the Transportation companies. She had started looking into ideas such as long-term contracts to entice others to bid. Jason said that the Committee has asked the SL Administration to also look at other potential areas to cut costs. Jason said the Committee would like input from the three Towns if they had ideas. The Committee is really trying to work with the Towns and the budget has not yet been finalized and voted by the Committee. Melinda asked if Kingston or Plympton would like a chance to speak to the issue.

Carl stated that the total budget for Kingston, excluding water is $53 million. He said the schools use up about $25.7 million of that, or 51% of the Total budget, and that is pretty standard for Kingston. Carl said that the most push back in Kingston comes from the fact that the Town budget is only increasing by about 1.7% from year to year while the schools budget tends to increase by around at least 3% each year. Carl said the Townspeople have a problem seeing an increase of 3% ($200 per taxpayer) year after year with no reprieve. Carl said Towns can’t just necessarily raise money by increasing Commercialism (as some might suggest) because bringing in more commercial business is often voted against because people don’t want the increase in traffic or noise, or a certain type of business near their property. He said in the long run, the schools absolutely need to have a year where their requested increase is more like 2%. He said the schools must find a way to decrease their requests at some point.

Plympton’s Fin Com rep had nothing to add.

Melinda said that although Halifax is in a better place this year then the two other Towns (particularly Kingston), Halifax is also very concerned about future years. She said the schools use up so much of the budgets that it really does tie up figuring everything else out budget wise. Cheryll agreed with Melinda. Melinda asked Charlie if he would like to speak to this. Charlie said just looking at Assessment and not budget numbers, that long term a Town cannot handle Assessments going up 3% each year. Gordon asked Carl what was the allowable amount for Kingston under Proposition 2 and a half %? Carl said that the schools alone are eating up the full amount of the budget under the 2 and a half percent. Jason assured all in the room that the Silver Lake School Committee has heard the concerns about long term planning. He pointed out that they are the first committee in a decade to look realistically at cuts. Jason said we need to be careful to make sure that while making cuts we are still meeting curriculum requirements set by the State. Carl acknowledged that the budget of the local elementary schools is also a concern for Finance Committees. Gordon said that money spent bringing in Special Ed programs at the Elementary level over the last few years has had a positive impact on the overall budget. Melinda said that a lot of members of Halifax’s Finance Committee have not necessarily ever been on the board during times of fiscal crisis and are not used to having to deal with making drastic cuts. Gordon said that long term we need to consider work on the school buildings and replacement of equipment in the buildings. Possibly in 2027 when debt for the schools ends, we would use that previous debt amount to fund capital projects. Melinda asked if the 5-year plan for the schools had been updated and Jason said it had. Jason said they have used some one-time revenue sources to do projects but many of the capital projects so far have been paid by the Excess and Deficiencies account. Carl said that we need to make sure that we aren’t tightening the budget so much that there is no excess in the future years to be spent on special projects. Melinda said Halifax wants the school committees and the other Finance Committees to know where Halifax stands on the Student Resource Officer. Last year the Halifax Finance Committee asked for data on the need for an SRO but also questioned the funding process (last year SL tried to put the funding through as a Town Meeting article, but it was voted down). Melinda said that philosophically Halifax doesn’t want the funding to be done as an article that would have to come up for vote again every year. It is hard to plan a budget when you have funding tied up in articles, She said other Town offices also want additional personnel but Finance tells them they can’t have it, so it would be inequitable for one to one go through Town meeting and not the other. Melinda stated that the Halifax Police Chief has also sent in written statements saying that he does not like funding this position through an article. Melinda said that she has reached out to other local regional school systems to see how they fund their SRO. Carl said that Kingston pays for the high school SRO by themselves and now absorb that into their Police budget. He stated that since they pay for the high school SRO by themselves with no other Towns helping, they aren’t necessarily looking to shoulder more of the burden. He said at some point the School Committee and the Finance Committees may just have to say, “we can’t afford it.” Carl pointed out that sometimes a small minority can make a lot of noise. He said that in our Town meeting style of government, you can have a certain minority stack a Town meeting vote and the next thing you know, they could be voting to cut the school budget by a million dollars and that would be devastating. Carl suggested that with a school budget that stretches across 3 towns the School should be able to figure out a way to fund this position in the budget, or they may just have to move on from requesting it. Melinda stressed that the Town of Halifax believes in the position, and does not want to take “a free ride” anymore by having the other Towns funding something that Halifax won’t, but she does not see the Finance Committee supporting a funding scheme that relies on a Town meeting vote. Melinda said that she agreed with Carl that it should be figured into the budget to be part of the Assessment the Towns pay. Jason said if it is put into the budget Halifax might get stuck with the increase to add the ½ time SRO, because it may not effect Plympton’s part of the Assessment and Kingston may not increase either. Jason apologized for the fact that their Committee had not gotten more information on funding procedures of other regional school districts. He said they have been very busy just trying to figure out how to trim the budget as much as possible. Jason asked if Halifax would want the SRO added to the budget this year? He said, if they do add it into the budget the School Committee is not willing to cut any more teachers to get it, so the cuts would have to be elsewhere or there would have to be an increase in the Assessment. Melinda said what Halifax really wants is to be included in the conversation about how this position will work. Items such as what Town gets to choose where the SRO comes from? How will it be funded? Melinda said we just want it to work out to be something all 3 towns can agree about. Christine said it is her understanding (from a meeting of all 3 Chiefs) that Kingston has the final say in where the officer is from, and Kingston wants it to be a Kingston officer. Sandy commented that Halifax has a real issue with the fact that Kingston uses one of their policer officers, but he is paid at an overtime rate. Halifax wants to know why you can’t use a different officer or choose an officer from another Town who would not have to be paid at an overtime rate. Melinda said she spoke with the Bridgewater Raynham School District and she was told that both of those towns share the responsibilities of the SRO and the two towns split the hours between their officers, so overtime doesn’t have to be paid. Melinda said that the Halifax Finance Committee would have liked to be presented with all the options possible and have had some say in the decision. She said that last year the residents of Halifax voted down the article for the SRO at the Annual Town Meeting. Jason said that Plympton has investigated ideas about this too and other options. He said that Kingston and Plympton are shouldering the burden of paying for the high school and middle school SRO and he hopes Halifax will help out also. He said that last year Plympton town meeting voted unanimously to fund the ½ time position SRO at the middle school and that was even after Halifax had already taken its vote, Plympton residents felt that strongly about it. Jill said the SRO relationship with the students is what really matters. Melinda wanted to clarify that all Halifax is asking for is to have the Schools add the SRO into their regular operating budget just like any other department would have to do with a new position. Melinda said she believed that the Halifax Finance Committee would fully support the SRO if it was included in the budget. Gordon said that you could always add the SRO as a subline in the budget. Carl stated that the Kingston Police chief has made it clear that he is only willing to use a Kingston officer. He has the final say because the school is actually located in Kingston. The School Committee has no say in choosing an officer. Melinda agreed but said it still should be part of the school budget.

Gordon asked where Halifax is now with requests for new budget items vs availability of funds? Melinda said that as per usual, the Finance Committee tries to leave about $300,000 “on the table” in case of unforeseen emergencies. Sandy said given that fact we are still slightly in the black, slightly, but that is with no consideration for wage increases for COLA. Sandy said we are about $70,000 in the black, but a 2% wage increase would cost the Town approximately $100,000 to $120,000.

Jason stated that he wanted to make it clear that the School Committee is working to find new revenue streams. He said other schools are looking to “tuition” students in from their school districts. This is not the same as School Choice. This means that Silver Lake has possible spots open in programs and other students can go to school there if their school district is willing to pay for them to attend. He said they are also trying to get the State to increase the per pupil reimbursement that they are supposed to give. Melinda said she wanted to acknowledge that everyone involved is a volunteer and everyone is doing the best they can, and we can all appreciate that about each other. Melinda thanked everyone for attending the Tri-Town part of the meeting and said it had been very informational.

Melinda stated that since we did not have a quorum to vote on any other business, she would entertain a motion to adjourn.

**Melinda entertained a motion to adjourn at 8:05pm**

Motion: Bill

Second: Cheryll

**AIF**

Respectfully submitted,

Linda Cole, Secretary \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Fred McGovern, Clerk