

Town of Charlemont
Joint Finance Committee and Select Board Meeting
Minutes February 15, 2023
Via Telephone and at the Town Hall

Board Members Present: Jay Healy, Lynn Hathaway, Bill Harker, Rich Filoramo

Board Members Joined by phone: Valentine Reid

Absent: Amy Wales, Ron Smith, Jared Bellows

Others present: Sarah Reynolds (Administrator,) Sheryl Stanton, Amber Tulloch, Bill Latailly, Ken Bertsch, Anne Kaplan, Elizabeth VanInderstine, Cheryl Handsaker, Bella Levavi, Star Atkeson (Secretary)

Rich Filoramo called the meeting to order, 3:01.

APPOINTMENTS:

1. 3:00 PM Sheryl Stanton, School Superintendent; Bill Latailly, District Business Manager.
 - Sheryl began by inviting The Finance Committee and the Select Board to come to the Budget Subcommittee meetings. They will be going through the operating budget for FY23 and FY24.

DISCUSSION ITEMS:

1. Enrollment Numbers
 - Sheryl said the school enrollment numbers are down for both Hawlemont and Mohawk Trail which is not uncommon. It has been bad for Hawlemont in the last few years. In 2013 there were more students out than in, which had reversed in 2017 in Hawlemont's favor. Now it is moving again towards choosing out.
 - Sheryl said they were addressing this issue as part of their Strategic Plan, they would like to reverse the trend and leverage the unique experience of Hawlemont to attract students.
 - Lynn Hathaway asked why families are choosing to "choice out."
 - Sheryl believed that it was the uncertainty of Hawlemont, there was discussion of closing; there was an issue of misunderstanding of discipline and process that happened at Hawlemont; and in general a feeling of instability
 - Rich Filoramo asked Sheryl what attracts students to Hawlemont— the HAY program? (Hawlemont, Agriculture and You) Sheryl and Amber confirm it is the Hay program. Sheryl said that part of the plan moving forward was to embed HAY into the regular course curriculum. Teachers are doing that already but they will make an effort to embed it further and not have it thought of as a separate activity. Sheryl is looking forward to the return of the climbing student enrollment of 2017.
 - Rich asked what the Pre-K enrollment was: It is at 17 students. The graduating class of 6th graders is also 17 students.
 - Valentine Reid wonders what enrollment numbers look like in the rest of Franklin County. Are Hawlemont and Mohawk Trail competing for a smaller pool of students? Sheryl confirmed that there is a decline in graduating classes in Franklin County and more use of "school choice" into more resourced districts. From Mohawk to Frontier for example (who have a stronger athletic program and the perception of more opportunity.) Sheryl also saw that COVID had parents seeking out alternatives that they hadn't considered before like homeschooling, online learning, private schooling and school choosing out. +

- Val pointed out that since enrollment numbers are down County wide and the other circumstances of Hawlemont's decline, having 17 preschoolers coming could be seen as a positive enrollment number. The school committee members agree.

2. Sustainability Study

- Sheryl told about the Sustainability Study that Mohawk is doing now. Enrollment and Demographic Data will come in April including Charlemont and Hawley. They will have information on the population and a population projection to use towards the second round of the study which is to explore and model out all the options of how to educate students from Pre K to 12th grade in this region most effectively. For example: new regional transportation strategies, consolidation as an option, and the option of closing a schools or schools. All options will be on the table. They will figure out what their resources are and how they can most effectively educate the students in this region.
- Jay Healy pointed out that the numbers were "chilling" if they are indeed overall numbers. Serious decisions will need to be made to get to a great education with the dwindling numbers and the dwindling resources.
- Sheryl agreed. Looking at the results from the BEST committee Mohawk was seen as the canary in the coalmine with the loss of student enrollment. The new sustainability report will build on information and ideas that BEST came up with and explore options that BEST did not come up with.
- Rich asked whether with what she is learning, working with the other Superintendents, if they have considered ways to work together to keep students in their respective districts by offering a greater variety of remote classes, for example. Sheryl confirmed that the work they do will be to organize across district
- The Rural School Commission report (the Adam Hinds and Natalie Blais legislation) and The Student opportunity act, require the State to look at Rural School issues and come up with recommendation. Blais put Funding in Omnibus Bill legislation: 60 million over the 4 million. Tags to Increase transportation reimbursement and fully funding regionalization
- The MSBA (School Bldg. Authority,) raised special concerns about closing school to renovate to be more energy efficient. They are working with Gateway, Southern Berkshire, Athol, The Cape and North of Boston. All the schools are having similar issues. Population decline, and enrollment decline everywhere.
- Rich asked any notion of what "pan" regionalization at the high school level would look like— more courses? The school is already regional. Sheryl gave some statistics on Mohawk: There are 12 advanced placement courses, and 76% of the students have qualifying scores. There are over 70% of students participating in AP classes. They do use remote courses. GCC built a committee with Pioneer, Frontier and Mohawk. The will offer dual enrollment with the schools and GCC with emphasis that it is a rural district, not urban. The key difference being that transportation will be made available. They will create spaces for remote learning, and take the model to all the districts. Most likely what is good for Mohawk will be good for Pioneer.
- Jay Healy brought up the need to deal with the overarching issue and really figure out what sustainability looks like.
- Sheryl agreed that the Rural Commission Report and Omnibus Bill is a first step towards addressing the problem. Rural schools are in crisis and they need a short term investment to weather the crisis, to see what the assessments look like in 5 or 10 years.
- A question came in about if there were other ways they can organize added funding, (at the same time, staying on top of the legislation,) to make clear that rural is more expensive. Are there addi-

tional things that need to be done? Sheryl thinks a good start would be to ask for Special Ed support for students in district— to keep them in their home schools and be reimbursed at a higher level. That would be a good addition to the legislation. Rich added that would be a very good response to the mandate that they put on the schools already. Rich thinks they cannot realistically hope for the 60 million or even half of it. But different regional people getting together and talking Turkey is good.

- Sheryl agreed and hoped that although there was a decline, hoping that they will now stay stable. Most families have high speed internet, they have shifted how they work, hope that the district they will be attractive for families with students. The impact of the COVID changes are still 1 to 4 years out. She has heard anecdotally that folks have moved out from Boston and are happy with the education. She hopes that they will see the value of the quality of life that this region has to offer.
- Val wonders if affordable housing is on the radar in regards to the sustainability study. Families with potential students would need to have somewhere to live. Sheryl said that it is something they think about. Mary Lyons had organized a meeting acknowledging the increased aging in place and the creation of a shift in demographics. The entry level homes usually affordable for young new families are not available. They talk about it but don't have answers yet. Val agreed that he also doesn't have answers but that the two—education and housing do go hand in hand.
- Jay Healy brought up efficient heating system incentives. Energy efficiency is saving money, which could be offered up as a way to help the State with cost, by asking they provide incentives. They could be applied to other schools in the region. Sheryl spoke of the solar installation project, she doesn't have exact numbers, but it's possible there will be about \$30,000 a year in savings, which they can put back towards their operating budget. Buckland Shelburne Elementary is an option to receive an upgrade and they will contact Sanderson. Colrain was not interested as it is a Town building. Hawlemont is looking into Solar.
- Amber Tulloch said they are about to install mini splits at Hawlemont which would earn them credit towards installing more. The community has rallied around efficiency.
- Ken Bertsch pointed out that the key issue with Solar is connecting it to a compatible grid. It came up with Natalie Blais at the Hawley SB meeting.
- Bill Harker added that Charlemont owns land here and there, the solar doesn't need to be right next to the school, Bill Harker recommended that from experience he doesn't like to put anything on roofs, anything on a roof damages the roof and inevitably requires repair.
- Jay Healy recommended they should do the Grid upgrade as a town project, if there are road-blocks, we will work with school systems to see what we can do.
- Sarah Reynolds said she was working with Ken, and got responses with Western Mass Natl Grid. Also for EV chargers only 1000' feet is required to reach the fairgrounds. Sarah has had multiple meetings with Sean O'Neill about the Grid. The Town's Grid projects need to be upgraded to 3-phase power for Solar and EV charging.
- Rich said that as much as the Town can do on our own is good.

Budget projections

- Happy about what they came up with.
- They used the ESSER Elementary and Secondary School emergency Relief funds strategically in both districts to not approach a cliff at FY2024. \$1.4 million at Mohawk and \$350,000. at Hawlemont. It was used where needed for COVID related positions, and they used the rest to reduce assessments on towns, to offset the budgets. They took school Choice revenue and pushed it forward. ESSER

funding was earmarked and applied to FY24, then school choice will be used to keep assessments lower for towns in the following FY. Sheryl wants to stabilize the district while they can strategize for what comes next.

- Question from the Board: What percentage ESSER funds went towards Covid specific programming? Answer was: at Hawlemont is 80/20 new programming.
- Jay Healy said they were pushing it down the road, pushing a big explosion forward a year.
- Sheryl agreed they will stabilize district for FY23 and FY24, with a difficult conversation in 2023. Does 4 small schools make sense? They don't know yet. Would a single large campus make sense? Second part of the sustainability study will inform next actions, they have three years to do that so as to not upset the community.
- Jay said in the past, there were no winners, neither the schools nor the towns, He'd like to see a plan with the Town, the Finance Committee and Select Board in on the plan and decision making at the ground floor. A joint regional push for strategic improvements.
- Bill Harker said they need to work together and stop fighting. Val Reid agreed as do school committee members.

Upcoming Budget Subcommittee Meetings:

- Next full budget subcommittee is Monday February 27th, and then Friday March 3rd. On March 3rd the Cherry Sheet numbers should be in.
 - March 13 Budget Hearing at Hawlemont. Budget Subcommittee remote participation is available.
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- Anne Kaplan noted that they hadn't had Finance Commission member at the School Committee meetings.
 - Sarah has been going and said that Sheryl has been meeting with town administrators which has been good. It gives her a chance to give the information back to the Select Board like school choice for example. She greatly appreciates the increase in communication. Also Sarah noted that she has been putting Hawlemont meetings up on the Town Calendar on the website.
 - School Committee noted that there is a hyperlink embedded in the agenda which will give you all the materials they will discuss at the meeting.
 - Cheryl Handsaker said that in general, Budget Subcommittee meetings meet one hour before School Committee Meetings. And that the regular meeting with School Super Sheryl Stanton in the second Monday of the month.
 - Everyone really happy with Bill Lateilly and the reports he is preparing. They urge people to come to meetings and ask the questions. Questions are welcome.
 - Rich said regarding the Sustainability Study and the rural initiatives, for example with this letter writing campaign, when the Select Board and the Finance Commission know what is in the Omnibus Budget, they can make also help by making recommendations.
 - Sheryl answered that: Mass Municipal Association, Mass Association of School Committees and Mass Association of School Superintendents, are all organized around a request to push forward rural aid backed by the Rural Commission Report.
 - Natalie Blais met with Driscoll, Governor RF DESE Advocated for the Student Opportunity Act, and put in a grant request to start Rural Education Department.
 - Rich suggested a letter along the lines of: To Government re: Government Boards, regarding the 4 mil, from the Rural side they want to recommend full funding.

3. Budget Projections

- Draft numbers developing expenditure side for Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont. Percent includes prior years all funds and local funds Hawlemont is a 2% increase for FY23 on local.
- Did not for revenue side yet as the Cherry Sheet numbers are not available yet. Fluctuate re minimal contribution.
- That includes as part of softening effect FY 24 used money to create to not use school choice (revolving account go out another year) ESSER going down at Hawlemont next year.
- Use ESSER and school choice and earmark to keep assessment to town as low as possible.
- JH reflected in Mohawk Trail figures local to local 4 ½ % as a working draft. Other schools superintendents report: 6%, 13% 5%, 9% 6% to put it in context.
- Proud that they were very conservative with the school choice ESSER funding to be able to push out as long as possible. Hope for the pendulum to swing the other way and Rural School transportation reimbursement
- School Committee Motion to Adjourn.
- Jay reiterates communicating with some bullet points to the State to help districts help themselves, (The energy efficiency incentives for example) maybe clearance and incentives not all an ask for more money.
- Everyone happy with meeting.

ACTION ITEMS:

1. Crossing Guard line item transfer from Police Department to School.
 - The Town Boards would like the school crossing guard line item reverted to the school instead of the town. As of right now they are in both.
 - Bill explains that there is an explainer there in the line item that says reimbursed by twin. Sarah asks if they would go ahead and move it to simplify their accounting. Bill is fine with it.
2. Approve Minutes from 2/08/2023
 - **Rich Filoramo made a motion, seconded by Lynn Hathaway to accept the minutes as written. Jay Healy—Aye, Lynne Hathaway—Aye, Rich Filoramo—Aye**

Rich motioned to adjourn the meeting at 4:00, seconded by Lynn Hathaway. All in Favor.

The next meeting is scheduled for February 22nd 2023 at 4:30 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted on February 17th, 2023 by Star Atkeson, Secretary to the Boards.

Documents viewed at meeting:

The Agenda for the February 15th 2023 meeting

The Minutes for the February 8th 2023 meeting

Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont Regional School Districts Charts from Sheryl Stanton