

January 8, 2010
Budget Advisory Committee

Present - Committee Members: Jim Chumbley; Joe Cullen; Joe Gensheimer; Becky Demling; Jennifer Holme; Stan Gawle; Rick Hood; Alison Donta-Venman; and Ernie Dalkas. Budget Subcommittee Members: Farshid Hajir and Irv Rhodes. Visitors: Conor White-Sullivan and Vladimir Morales.

Alison called the meeting to order at 5:15 PM in the Professional Development Center of the Middle School.

The minutes for the December 21, 2009, and January 4, 2010, meetings were approved with minor changes that Ernie will make.

Irv will schedule the Community Room at the Amherst Police Department for our Saturday, January 23, 2010, meeting.

Irv distributed copies of the FY11 Amherst Regional budget to some Committee members and Jim will arrange electronic copies for members.

Irv indicated that a link to the BAC will be added to the ARPS website but the Committee will need to maintain its own webpage/site.

Farshid indicated in response to Rick's concern that a line item budget like the one Northampton has on the Internet is not feasible for this year but both Farshid and Irv were adamant that it is a high priority item for future years. Joe Cullen suggested that Rob Detweiler might need additional resources to meet our goals of timely transparency.

Alison reported on the Budget Subcommittee meeting held just before our meeting. We already have the documents distributed (except the FY11 Regional budget that Jim will provide).

Stan wondered how many of the cuts outlined in the documents were appropriate for the sake of efficiency and would not have any adverse effect on the educational mission of the schools. Alison, Irv, and Farshid concurred. Stan believes a zero-based budget is a high priority and Farshid agrees. The Elementary budget is already close to zero-based.

Ernie noted that concern about the quality of Amherst schools should be somewhat alleviated by the fact that Amherst sends its high school graduates to excellent colleges.

Stan expressed concern about money wasted on math programs like Investigations which are not working. Becky noted that Boston uses Investigations with good success. She also explained that other programs were useful in teaching students who learned in different ways.

Stan is concerned with the attitude of some Amherst residents when it comes to financial discussions. He feels that too often discussions are one-sided and some participants are unwilling to listen to competing viewpoints. The Amherst community seems to often simply accept without question what the town leaders and committees have approved.

A brief discussion of the staffing documents was held. Alison indicated that Kathy Mazur's provision of job descriptions was very helpful. Joe Cullen would like a summary for Regional School and Administration like we already have for Amherst Elementary.

Rick initiated the discussion of the web page. He proposed a link on the ARPS web site to a simple web page with links to our documents on ARPS and documents on other sites. Joe Cullen expressed concern about links

that no longer work on the ARPS website. Farshid expressed concern about using the ARPS site for a web page in addition to a link. The ARPS page is under the control of the Administration and our Committee is a creature of the School Committee. The Administration might have justifiable concerns about how we might use the web page. Ernie wants whatever we finally use to have some permanence and not to disappear after this round of budget discussions. Debbie felt that our web page should be part of the ARPS page to give it a measure of authority in comparison to other websites hosted by Amherst residents. Irv will check on the Administration's position on the issue. In the meantime, Rick will start work on a web page that is inaccessible to outsiders until we know the final location.

Vladimir expressed concern about communicating with people who do not have access to the Internet. After some discussion, Alison noted that we can only do so much since we have no budget.

The discussion of the questions began at 6:20 PM with a call for any editing changes and additions to or deletions from the list of questions generated by the Committee. There were none.

Joe Cullen, Joe Gensheimer, and Farshid all agreed that we need to screen questions for opinions and assumptions that may be incorrect. Joe Cullen suggested we prioritize the questions and pick the ones with highest priority. Ernie suggested we could simply have people assign a rank to each question and then use the sum of the ranks to determine the Committee preference. Alison will implement such a system by converting the questions into an Excel spreadsheet with a column for each of us to use in ranking. Once she has received back our set of ranks, they will be compiled. We have a Monday deadline for returning our rankings.

There was a discussion of the two versus three study halls issue. We learned that the Superintendent had mandated only two. The cut lists we received reflected this mandate.

Stan raised the issue of holding UMass to a commitment to provide additional financial support to the Town if Marks Meadow was closed. We learned that the commitment was unenforceable and that the Chancellor had indicated to School Committee members that UMass would not be providing additional support.

There was a brief discussion about the Dean of Students positions at the schools with Committee members wondering what the duties were and whether the duties could be carried out by people paid less than the Deans are.

Vladimir wants us to ask questions about the legal fees the Schools incur over Special Education.

Joe Gensheimer had questions about the Deans, note-takers for Special Education students, and empty school buses.

Our next meeting is from 5 to 7 PM on Monday, January 11, 2010, in the ARMS Professional Development Room.

The meeting was adjourned about 6:50PM.

Submitted by Jim Chumbley