

Finance Committee
January 12, 2022
6:00 p.m.
GoToMeeting

The meeting was called to order at 6:06.

Present: Joyce Muka, Nate Messer, Tom Raffensperger, Ginger Robinson, Michèle Higgins. Michele Giarusso was the host at beginning of meeting- was present for Patricia Kinsella's presentation.

Absent: none

Guest: Patricia Kinsella, Interim Superintendent PVRSD

We postponed approval of the minutes from December 15, 2021 in order to hear about the school budget process from the Interim Superintendent of Schools Patricia Kinsella. She told us that there is a group of priorities for FY23 which include the well-being of Students and Staff, long-term operating stability, improving non-educational operations in particular, and long term financial sustainability. She wants the towns and the staff to feel included in this process.

She told us that she is 95%done with the first draft of a master budget and will begin meeting with budget managers, building principals, technology coordinators and Facilities manager. This is also a contract bargaining year with the teachers and non-teaching personnel. She reminded us that 80 - 85% of the budget goes towards people (including salaries, benefits and retirement).

Some of the issues being examined include: review of class size, class size language, looking at the past five years in view of next year's student population as well as demographic projections; the number of teachers and support staff; custodial staff; administration and classrooms/operational improvements; cafeteria issues; insurance (Pat told us that the Hampshire Retirement System will be issuing its report on retirement costs on January 26 which will give her figures to work with in negotiations and in the budgeting process.)

Pat told us that she will recommend a firm to audit the HR process at PVRSD; there currently is no HR department at PVRSD. She said that she will recommend a firm to the School Committee to conduct an audit about the HR processes at PVRSD in order to improve operations in the district.

She will be looking to join eight towns (she did not say which ones) in applying for a grant called Rural Innovation and Efficiencies. She talked to us about safety and security planning and issues in the buildings. For instance, PVRSD has a new radio system which hooks up with the State, but the system in the school does not work, and the cost to make it operational is in the tens of thousands. There are walkie talkies, but there is no capability to communicate among the schools with them.

Michele G. asked if Pat knew about any grants that could help with the cost, but Pat did not. Ginger asked about other safety issues. Pat noted that the outside doors are not numbered and lettered which would help emergency personnel to more quickly know where they were needed. There is no signage in inside hallways with maps showing people where they are and which direction to go. Interior doors need locks that can be bolted from the inside. They need to look into a key card locking and entry system to control and know who is in the buildings and when. No one knows how many keys there are nor where many if they are, and a key card system would take care of that. Pat wondered if there should be a camera system. Tom noted that they have a key card system at his work where entry is controlled for certain groups for certain times; who comes and goes is tracked. He noted that there are also some inside cameras, as well.

It is also Pat's plan to develop a facilities master plan for what work could be needed in the next decades. She would like to be putting out a bid to an architectural design firm to conduct a thorough examination of the building. The State has told her that she can use certain monies (ESSER funds) for this task, and she will soon be asking the School Committee to begin this process which is expected to cost between \$30,000 - \$40,000 at no cost to the towns. The study will look at the building, windows, systems (technology, HVAC), structural integrity. The study will also look at the programs at the school, what grades are in the school, and how this aligns with what the vision for the future is. A separate firm will conduct a demographic review. There will be a cost estimate included for this vision. The final product will be presented to the School Committee. She said that there will be lots of meetings in this process before producing a final blueprint for the towns.

Other issues to consider include the fact that Northfield and Bernardston own their schools; the district does not. PVRSD has 20 year leases (\$1 per year), and there needs to be a discussion on how the towns might agree on cost-sharing for building improvement. She noted that Bernardston would welcome contributions from Leyden for improvement to BES.

Following the presentation, we looked at the minutes from December 15. Nate asked if Michèle could make the “unapproved draft” watermark less visible in the draft. She said she would try. Tom made a motion to approve the minutes of December 15. Nate seconded. Ginger voted yes. Michèle voted yes. Joyce abstained, having been absent from that meeting. The minutes were approved.

Ginger reported on the Committee for Public Safety meeting. There has been suggested wording for the Police Department in Leyden to share services with Bernardston. This wording is being forwarded to the Select Board for their approval. We talked about the Bridge Training money that has been allocated by the State through the FRCOG to train two Leyden officers and also the fact that \$7,000 was appropriated for training and how the use of these monies would be affected in view of the possible agreement with Bernardston but decided to take a wait-and-see approach because there is no way to know how long making an agreement might take.

Ginger also talked about her efforts to get an inventory from the Police Department. Her questions have not been answered. There is one page from the State which shows inventory that was from the Federal government but which, over time, has now become property of the Town. She has asked the Town Accountant for invoices of past purchases and made reference to Mass Law 97A which states that the Chief of police “shall be in immediate control of all town property used by the department.” Nate noted that we did get an inventory almost immediately from the Fire Department when it was requested and offered to ask at the Select Board meeting if the taxpayers want to know what is included in the PD inventory. Nate also asked where our boundaries as a Finance Committee are in relation to requests like this one. Ginger refers to the DLS report which says that the Town should know and that Finance can ask. Tom suggests that we request the return of Town property and relate it directly to tracking Town assets. Ginger will write a request and send a copy for the minutes. Tom made a motion to accept the letter that Ginger will write, referencing the DLS report and tracking Town assets. Joyce seconded. Tom voted yes. Michèle voted yes. Joyce voted yes. Nate voted yes. Ginger voted yes. The vote was unanimous. Ginger will submit the letter to the Select Board.

The rest of our discussion centered around our Brain Storm List or thoughts about the DLS report. Vadar training is on that list. Michele G. did say that there was money for a license but did not know how many there are. We can ask her for monthly reports which would be tailored to our questions. Tom suggests that we start asking her now. Angelica has started to give us monthly updates now. Joyce would like to see reports for other accounts not listed in those monthly updates. Tom is interested in policies as

referenced in the DLS report. Joyce said she can locate policies from area towns for us to look at.

We noted that the line for Town Counsel in the expense report is extremely low: \$375 remain. There will be a STM on Wednesday, February 23 during which the voters will be asked to transfer money into this account, most likely from free cash. The library custodial account is also low at \$195, and we wondered about that.

Ginger would like to schedule a conference call with Don Jacobs regarding the wage/salary survey. She asked that we email her within two weeks with questions which she can ask him to address. She will send the committee an email reminder. She will also ask Michele G. for an inventory of the Town offices and ask her to include how old equipment is, how soon some of it should be replaced. Ginger has asked the Highway Department for an inventory but has not heard back from them. She will give them some time to work on their transition to a new Superintendent. She will also ask the Assessors.

Nate asked about the decision to hire a new Superintendent for the Highway Department. Joyce, Ginger and Michèle were in attendance at that meeting and said that there was good give-and-take at this meeting, that it was a good meeting. Bill Brooks was hired. What occurred for the hiring of a new foreman, however, who was hired and what process was used is unclear.

We wondered why the DLS report recommends that the Municipal Assistant be the central person in the budget report. Ginger speculates that because when the State looked into how the departments work in Leyden, there were only three people on the Finance Committee, and Covid was an issue which made our process sluggish. We feel we should include the Select Board in this process and that the Finance Committee should take a central role. We would like to have a public meeting about the budget process and recommendations. We did wonder how many people would come and suspect that the reason that the Select Board stopped offering the public meeting was due to lack of attendance. Nate noted that giving people the opportunity to ask questions at such a meeting might shorten discussion time at Annual Town Meeting. We would like to try. He suggested that we write an article for Leyden Life to invite people to come to such a meeting.

Ginger mentioned that we should consider consolidating all stabilization accounts into one account. Michèle noted that that is a recommendation in the DLS report. Joyce believes that it would require a 2/3 vote at Town Meeting to do this.

The DLS report also recommends that the Town Clerk position be converted to an appointment. We want to remember to ask the Assessors if their work load has been reduced since the new assistant has been hired; that was the expectation. The DLS report recommends that the Town scale that office down to one assessor, but we feel that too much knowledge could be lost in such a move. We noted as a board that tax questions are issues for us.

Joyce suggested that a financial management team would be a useful idea for us. A team would keep everyone informed and on the same page of the financial status of the Town. Ginger will see if there is interest in forming such a team. Ginger noted that we do not look at financial projections or long-term planning and we should. The Select Board did talk about having departments come in on a regular basis; they did have the Highway and Fire Departments come in, but then interest stopped. We thought that we could ask Bill Brooks to come in early in the budget process to see what support he needs and then ask him to come in again later if necessary.

Our next meeting will be January 26 at 6:00 p.m. and will most likely also be virtual.

Nate made a motion to adjourn at 7:53. Joyce seconded. Michèle voted yes. Joyce voted yes. Nate voted yes. Ginger voted yes. (Tom left after mention of the hiring for the Highway Superintendent.) The meeting adjourned.