

**SELECT BOARD MEETING MINUTES
FEBRUARY 27, 2024 AT 6:00 PM
TOWN HALL GYM – JOINT COMMITTEE MEETING (SELECT BOARD, ADVISORY & SCHOOL)**

ATTENDANCE:

Chair Rick Antanavica	Present
Vice Chair Dianna Provencher	Present
Kevin Menard	Present
John Bujak	Not Present
Chair Donna McCance	Present
Dylan Lambert	Present
Paul Messier	Present
Jim Reinke	Present
Stephen Johnson	Present
Chair Peter Cusolito	Present
Bill Brennan	Present
Mary Kay Hannant	Present
Sandy Wilson	Present
Michael Zalansky	Present

**CALL TO ORDER/OPENING
VETERANS POEM**

Chairman Antanavica opened the meeting at 6 PM.

1. FY 2025 DEPARTMENT BUDGET REVIEW –

Mr. Antanavica stated the budget was built to work without an override. There is no consideration by the board now to pursue an override even with an increase of 1.5 million. He stated the drop in school budget was approximately \$275,000. A couple of corrections have been made to the Police department, Fire Department and DPW and will be updated in the short form as well but the bottom line of the budget did not change.

Mr. Cusolito asked what changed with the police department?

Mr. Genereux stated a formula error was corrected and moved into salary line. He said department budgets and vocational school tuition were dropping. There were state aid and state offsets and a net loss of over \$100,000 in State Aid. Some has to do with the Chapter 70 formula. The municipal revenue factor is the 3rd highest in the state and town was hit hard with the charter school assessment and they had talked to state reps about their concerns. Those budgets had not been finalized. When the school presents – the commentary is that there is a \$300,000 difference. At this point they didn't think that \$300,000 was insurmountable. His recommendation was to stay the course and try to find those funds by fall town meeting.

Mr. Antanavica stated the schools got \$3.1 million put into budget over the last year. One-time funds were utilized and the dorms being rented out had gone towards their budget. He thought it was up to the school to find some of it.

Mr. Cusolito asked why the budget calendar was removed?

Mr. Genereux replied they had not set a calendar for this year.

Mr. Cusolito stated free cash history was not included in the budget.

Mr. Genereux replied it is not and that was the format they had used before. There were requests to add new items.

Mr. Cusolito asked why is the shared maintenance under insurance?

Mr. Genereux stated it is unclassified because it is shared by town and school. That way it will not show a huge increase.

Mr. Cusolito said that does not make sense and asked if there was nothing for the capital improvement plan?

Mr. Genereux stated there was not.

Mr. Cusolito stated the first three paragraphs do not belong there. In the same section \$745,000 was used, but that was the amount received.

Mr. Genereux stated they used over \$500,0000 for capital improvements. That is the amount we received in the general fund budget.

Mr. Cusolito asked so what are the expenses?

Mr. Genereux replied they get paid through warrant articles as they have revenue coming in.

Mr. Cusolito replied not when you have a lease and asked for him to look it up on the state website. He stated they needed to account for facilities. He also inquired about the charter school tuition.

Ms. Provencher stated that David LeBeouf was here and she spoke to him. He said that many towns have been complaining about the increases.

Mr. Cusolito stated this was not a zero-based budget. He asked last month – what were the strategic reductions mentioned for the Town Administrator's office?

Mr. Genereux stated each department put together their own list of requests based on salary and past expenditures. Two positions were eliminated. There were jumps on the other side when it came to gasoline and parts. The municipal and school budget has gone up by the same percentage each year, but they did not do that this year. They funded the municipal budget as it should be and took \$700,000 free cash.

Mr. Cusolito asked what strategic reductions were made?

Mr. Genereux stated there was one in the Town Administrator's office that had not been funded yet.

Mr. Cusolito stated it was back-door dealing and he was sick of the use of free cash. He understood unemployment insurance was used to fund the budget and asked if there were calculations done to support that?

Mr. Genereux said they had never come close to using that amount of unemployment insurance. At this point, he was not expecting to see layoffs. The history shows they had not been using much. History says that had been over-funded.

Mr. Cusolito asked if it does not include free cash used for high school campus expenses. How much had they allocated?

Mr. Genereux stated now it is budgeted.

Ms. Hannant so we still have expenses for 2025.

Mr. Genereux stated that is why unclassified went up by a million and the 950 account.

Mr. Cusolito responded the town gets \$2 million net and asked how much they are spending. They needed accounting for all expenses. He asked what happens when the lease ends?

Mr. Genereux stated that lease is currently in the general fund budget. If the lease ends, they are going to be 1.5 million dollars short.

Mr. Cusolito asked so we are doing the same thing as the year before. He questioned the use of uncommitted funds.

Mr. Genereux stated all they had to do is put out the lease.

Mr. Cusolito stated it has a 3-month out clause. It is the same thing as using covid funds.

Ms. Provencher replied not all of us thought that it would last forever.

Mr. Genereux stated he would look into it.

Mr. Cusolito stated personnel numbers were updated. From a format perspective, he asked why wouldn't it follow the same order as the budgets? There are 15 in DPW. There are 28, not 26, in the police department. 7, not 6, in the land use.

Mr. Genereux stated they are cutting the assistant planner.

Mr. Cusolito said the heading above the library is different than everything else. Why is parks and rec even on here. In the Town Administrator/Select Board he had 9 before, but said one was being cut.

Mr. Genereux responded we are cutting one.

Mr. Cusolito stated they are missing 5 departments. So there are actually 268 municipal employees. Another 88 were not listed. He asked if they had a document that lists the number of personnel in each department?

Mr. Genereux responded they did not.

Mr. Cusolito asked what is the process for changing personnel.

Mr. Genereux responded it could be discussed as part of the budget process.

Mr. Cusolito asked if the select board in charge of the hiring.

Mr. Genereux responded the board votes to hire them.

Mr. Cusolito stated they are missing positions that are listed here.

Mr. Genereux responded everything goes before the board.

Mr. Cusolito stated he didn't want to call out a department head because that isn't something a department did. This version includes more increases.

Mr. Genereux stated he questioned what the funds were.

Mr. Cusolito asked what factors were used to determine department budgets. There were more changes. What is the process of getting employee's an increase.

Mr. Genereux stated that was done as part of the budget process.

Mr. Cusolito asked how is COLA determined?

Mr. Genereux responded there is 2% increase each year.

Mr. Cusolito asked if it was 2% last year then they lost out of 1.5%. on the revenue side. He asked how did they find a 45,000 change in tax revenue.

Mr. Genereux stated new growth is at 250k.

Mr. Cusolito said this is since the 1st budget in January.

Mr. Genereux stated they reduced it down to 250k. Then you have some movement with excluded debt because that changes each year. Excluded debt is 26 million.

Mr. Cusolito asked who does the department request?

Mr. Genereux responded the departments make the requests.

Mr. Cusolito asked for the tax? He stated in January, the initial budget was X and now it is Y.

Mr. Genereux responded new growth was not was expected. Assessor's calculation had to be adjusted.

Mr. Cusolito asked when he sees local receipts changed, what was the calculation that found 2k more dollars?

Ms. Provencher stated that some of the questions come from Department Heads. He checked into a lot of things and did his homework. They were notified that there was miscalculation that had been entered wrong.

Mr. Cusolito asked why are the ambulance receipts included in the general fund?

Mr. Genereux responded they get put into general fund and moved to enterprise.

Mr. Cusolito responded the enterprise fund is set up to retain funds. It does not belong in the gen budget. Mv excise tax – why is it less than 7 months ago. What is "other" and why is it increasing?

Mr. Genereux responded the other is boat excise.

Mr. Cusolito asked what about cannabis sales tax? Why is it going down so much?

Mr. Genereux replied it dropped by 80k.

Mr. Antanavica said it has gone down because it is cheaper to buy on the black market.

Mr. Cusolito asked how many pilots do we have?

Mr. Genereux stated he would have to find out.

Mr. Cusolito asked what is other departmental revenue?

Mr. Genereux responded there's always a little bit of other things that are considered "other" and they would provide a list.

Mr. Cusolito asked about the Medicaid reimbursement.

Mr. Genereux replied it is for the schools.

Mr. Cusolito stated he understood they are accounting for the full receipt, but they need to account for the costs. Last year, they talked about reducing costs and expenses. Each department buys its own office supplies, fuel, waste removal, and printing. They got an oil delivery a couple of weeks ago and they paid \$3.849 per gallon when the state contract was \$3.17. They don't have any control over paper supplies. Why are they not consolidating purchases?

Mr. Genereux stated it takes time and personnel.

Mr. Cusolito stated this is the 3rd year in a row they had talked about it and asked if they had a certified public purchasing official.

Mr. Genereux confirmed yes, it is him.

Mr. Cusolito said they do not look for savings in the simplest of places and has been brought up numerous times. Who prepared budgets for legal, town administrator, town owned buildings, assessor, and shared maintenance. He asked how is there a difference?

Mr. Genereux responded timing, as the requests come in, changes will be made.

Mr. Cusolito stated he didn't give him anything, just the select board and asked if it was a complete budget? He also asked where is the funding for the union settlements?

Mr. Genereux replied they are in all the departmental budgets as a lump line at the bottom.

Mr. Cusolito responded he didn't see it.

Mr. Genereux asked which one he was looking at?

Mr. Cusolito asked if it was within the personnel line?

Mr. Genereux replied it was a budget adjustment – 60,142.

Mr. Cusolito asked how was it determined who got raises? He could not find any commonality.

Mr. Genereux responded based on the department head request.

Mr. Cusolito asked but you turned down some department requests.

Mr. Genereux responded that in most cases, there were requests for multiple step increases which nobody received.

Mr. Cusolito asked if there was a process for reviewing?

Mr. Genereux responded they put something forward for the employee based on where they are in the class and compensation plan.

Mr. Cusolito asked what was reason for 125k?

Mr. Genereux replied they had changed it to 99K as they had a lot of legal work done over the last few years. He would have preferred 125K, but settled for the 99K.

Mr. Cusolito asked so why do some departments have their own legal?

Mr. Genereux replied the treasurer does their own tax title research which is separate.

Mr. Antanavica stated the school has their own and asked Mr. Cusolito how many more questions he had and asked how about allowing the department heads to speak and then he can continue the questioning?

Mr. Cusolito replied this is not even ready to be discussed.

Mr. Menard responded they will find it out when speaking to each department.

Mr. Cusolito asked why those numbers would change?

Mr. Genereux responded some things needed to be changed based on the formulas.

Mr. Cusolito asked why would it change?

Mr. Genereux stated if you look at department request tab, they were over by a million dollars until they started doing the work on it.

Ms. Provencher stated if he could read the department numbers it might help people in the audience.

Mr. Cusolito said it is 122 and the Memorial School has been on the goals for 5 years. He asked what are the proposed improvements to the permitting process?

Mr. Genereux stated they are down to 2 e-permitting providers and they need to get that up and running. They have done it manually with the clerk and building inspector.

Mr. Cusolito asked about the update of the adaptive overlay that he wrote and it took 2 years to get through town meeting.

Mr. Genereux responded he didn't believe there was another one.

Mr. Cusolito said he would skip over the 5.1% raise. There are 4 employees listed and he said we do not have the need for an ATA and also said we do not have need for HR.

Mr. Genereux responded they have not finalized titles, but there will be.

Mr. Menard stated Dianna and he had negotiated with Mr. Genereux for that increase.

Mr. Cusolito asked if the executive assistant's pay was eliminated.

Mr. Genereux replied no, they were not.

Mr. Cusolito asked so why is the Assistant Town Administrator still in there and referred to the process as shady?

Mr. Antanavica stated it was voted by the board to keep the position.

Mr. Menard stated they discuss things in executive session. Nobody said this was perfect right now and that was the purpose of the meeting.

Mr. Antanavica said before we call people shady he would encourage Mr. Cusolito to look into the mirror.

Mr. Menard said there were no reason for insults.

Mr. Cusolito asked what is difference between additional staff training and professional development?

Mr. Genereux said staff training is courses, professional development is meetings and seminars.

Mr. Cusolito asked why is the treasurer's association listed under the Town Administrator?

Mr. Genereux said he has to maintain his certification from 1991.

Ms. Provencher asked if he needed that to keep the certification?

Mr. Genereux responded every 3 years.

Mr. Genereux recommended the clerk's budget would increase to .26%.

Mr. Antanavica stated it was a heavy election season.

Ms. LaFleur stated costs have gone up for everything from printing to anything to do with the elections – electronics. It has gone up a whole lot.

MR. Antanavica stated it had gone up 36%.

Ms. LaFleur said she hoped she was being conservative when it comes to the poll workers and not spending too much.

Mr. Antanavica asked if everything is up to date with the clickers?

Ms. LaFleur said she just got the tabulators ready for election.

Mr. Cusolito asked elections budget was 95% gone by December so did they have enough to get through the rest of the year?

Ms. LaFleur said vote by mail had increased a lot and they have already had 1200 people vote. The special state primary and special state election have cost a lot.

Mr. Genereux stated the treasurer/collector's office recommended budget increase was 8.73%. He said if they look over under the salaries bracket, there are recommendations that two positions get increases based on merit.

Mr. Menard asked those are in this budget?

Mr. Genereux responded yes.

Mr. Genereux said the tax title accounts used to be zero-budget. They have removed it and it is being raised from the general fund budget at 32k.

Mr. Nick George stated he is working with Coppola to begin the mailings. He said he would give him the updated list to Coppola to begin foreclosure.

Mr. Cusolito asked for this year's tax title was money transferred into it?

Mr. George stated previously it was set in the tax rate, which would make those funds available.

Mr. Genereux asked Mr. George in the current year's expense –those expenses were journaled over to tax title?

Mr. George responded yes.

Mr. Genereux discussed the health insurance budget and the increase of 9.93%.

Ms. Hannant how much do employees pay?

Mr. Genereux said most pay 70/30.

Mr. Genereux discussed retirement and stated that one was expensive. It jumped up 10.8% and had gone up substantially.

He discussed the debt principal dropping by 123K, interest dropping by 35K. Temporary debt was going up by 29.59%. The temporary debt is the last year for it as it will be permanent in FY'26. For 2025 they are finishing off the feasibility study, Waite Pond Dam, fire study, and Becker. The Becker debt will be offset by the sale of Victorians.

Ms. Hannant said they have Becker listed on the principal and the temporary.

Mr. Genereux stated they are required to pay some of the principal.

Mr. Genereux discussed the accounting department and recommended 1.63% increase.

Ms. Allison Lawrence said there is not much to it, just the audit. I did request a step increase for myself which was not approved and her assistant received a step increase last year.

Ms. Hannant asked do all depts have their own supply budgets?

Ms. Lawrence stated she purchased a lot of supplies for other departments. They used Staples for a lot of items. Unfortunately, they do not have the rewards that they used to.

Ms. Hannant asked do they swap supplies if there are too many of one?

Mr. Cusolito responded both WB Mason and Staples have state contracts. I wonder what that would look like.

Ms. Lawrence stated the paper they get for the building comes from Amazon and it is a very good deal. Mr. Genereux replied generally speaking, the reason it is in each department, if you comingle – nobody has an ownership. It might throw things out of sync.

Mr. Cusolito stated he agreed with leaving the process as is. Office supplies are not that big in total.

Mr. Genereux discussed the land use/DIS department and the major changes. DIS used to be all inspectional services departments. This year, they were looking at having board of health moved into department 510 and it was removed from the DIS budget. The Assistant planner was budgeted for the last 3 years. It moves the salaries/stipends over to the BOH. Now the dept has 2 employees and planning board stipends.

Mr. Cusolito pointed out the number of employee's is incorrect.

Mr. Genereux discussed the library budget and said he didn't have much to say about the library, but they could look at it. The increase was 4.13%. The change had to do with a recent increase in water and sewer rates and would allow the library to keep their certification. They have to maintain a level of spending to be in the CW Mars network.

Ms. Hannant asked what is that increase minimum?

Mr. Genereux responded the budget has to go up by 1.25% each year.

Mr. Antanavica stated the water is still coming into the building through the wall in the children's area. He didn't know if it was a town responsibility or the library trustees.

Mr. Cusolito responded it may be undermining the support of that wall. It's been enough time and enough water.

Mr. Genereux discussed the police budget and the major changes. He said it was double-counting one of the numbers which wound up being about 38k. In correcting it, we put it into the police overtime. The other change was total hours.

Mr. Cusolito stated the number on the detail sheet is different on the summary page. A difference of \$19.

Ms. Hannant stated the new version is correct.

Mr. Genereux stated he is looking at it. They were \$19 over and he adjusted it.

Mr. Cusolito asked if there is a newer version of the budget?

Mr. Cusolito stated he was looking at the summary sheet versus the detail sheet.

Mr. Genereux said they fixed every other sheet.

Mr. Ken Antanavica spoke of some of the expenses including paper. He stated they have printers in the cruiser and they have to buy it in small batches. He mentioned shredding day and having 9 barrels of paperwork. He said his department is doing due diligence and they try every day.

Ms. Hannant asked where is shredding in the budget?

Mr. Ken Antanavica stated it is in one of the services lines. He said they received permission from the state to digitize old documents.

Ms. Wilson stated the budget showed three but they have 5. Salary only has 15K. She asked if they were going to fund the lieutenant.

Mr. Ken Antanavica said the lieutenant position is open. He stated they would lose a sergeant but gain a lieutenant.

Ms. Wilson stated the summary sheet is wrong. She stated last year they had 21 total officers and they agreed that 20 was enough. She asked if they were going up to 21 or 23 to make 26?

Mr. Cusolito stated he had a question because there were 29 positions.

Ms. Wilson said the part time clerks have been in the budget for 5 years, but don't seem to be staffed.

Mr. Ken Antanavica stated they had tried and were looking for the right people.

Ms. Wilson said it does show filling the open patrolman this year. She said they received the late bill from National Grid and they will have to vote it at town meeting.

Mr. Ken Antanavica said it has gone up a lot like everything else, but National Grid has gotten more and more expensive.

Mr. Wilson asked did you budget for that?

Mr. Cusolito asked how much does the PD pay for gas?

Mr. Ken Antanavica stated everything is getting more expensive everyday. One of my cruisers needed a new headlight and it was \$1800. It is very complicated and LED, they are on national back-order.

Mr. Rick Antanavica had a question on electric; they have 3 different companies.

Mr. Cusolito asked what is Syncarpha?

Mr. Ken Antanavica said it is a solar farm. National grid we have the station, the range, and a tower. Nexamp also has to do with solar.

Mr. Cusolito stated he had seen Syncarpha in a lot of places. Are we actually seeing a return on credits?

Mr. Genereux responded yes, they are currently working with a broker to move the credits around.

Mr. Cusolito asked if they still got credits from the memorial school?

Mr. Genereux responded they did.

Mr. Cusolito asked how is the carport?

Mr. Ken Antanavica said it is in a plan.

The fire department's increase of 1.41% was discussed.

Mr. Cusolito said that department was also affected by the calculation.

Mr. Genereux responded yes, it actually was on the chiefs salary which was a bit short.

Mr. Cusolito asked there is line somewhere for contract settlements?

Mr. Genereux responded yes.

Mr. Rick Antanavica asked what is the situation with equipment?

Mr. Dupuis stated if they do not get an extended warranty it hurts the budget quite a bit.

Mr. Cusolito said periodic services cost as much as a new car.

Mr. Dupuis responded he had a fleet guy that comes in and checks things before sending them for repairs.

Ms. Hannant found an error in the formula. There is someone at 19 hours and it should not be more than 20 hours.

Mr. Genereux stated he would take a look at that.

Ms. Wilson said you went from having a lot of detailed line items to fewer.

Mr. Dupuis stated he actually had 39 now. He wanted more, but can only put so much. He worked with the accountant to consolidate.

Ms. Wilson asked if all the trainings and dues and memberships went into professional development?

Mr. Dupuis responded yes.

The EMS department showed an increase of 8.49%

Mr. Antanavica asked why is that?

Mr. Cusolito asked if they have a revenue fee?

Ms. Molly Dube it is not attached. As far as wages, the prior person in her position was part-time, so she takes up a good portion of that.

Mr. Dupuis has Molly there 5 days a week has been stabilizing.

Ms. Dube stated one of the major purchases is the new ambulance which will increase by 35K per year. They can't just order something and use it as they have contracts to work with.

Mr. Dupuis stated they have a lot of things that need to get replaced.

Ms. Dube said some of our contracted items near end of life will be big purchases. Only some of that has been budgeted.

Mr. Cusolito said there are grants from public health.

Ms. Dupuis said they already tried with Sam and she did not find anything.

Mr. Cusolito said FEMA fire does not like to fund EMS.

Ms. Dube responded that was part of the problem. She said she just got something from the state for them to test blood right away. They are making EMS more like a portable hospital than what they already are.

Mr. Antanavica said those costs will keep going up because of the training involved.

Ms. Hannant stated heating and electric costs look like the same as last year.

Ms. Dube stated yes, they are now getting Syncarpha credits and have not had a full year.

Ms. Hannant asked if they will need these expenses in FY25?

Ms. Dube responded not necessarily 25, but in the next few years as parts become obsolete.

Ms. Hannant asked if she had a ballpark?

Ms. Dube said if there are no grants, about 250K.

Ms. Cusolito asked do you have revenues of 1.2?

Ms. Dube as far as EMS, it all depends on what people end up paying. Our failsafe is vibra and the meadows.

Mr. Cusolito asked how much is in retained earnings?

Ms. Dube stated she believed around 600. It is a bit of a buffer if they did not get any grants.

Mr. Antanavica asked if they were up-to-date with billing on vibra and the meadows?

Ms. Dube said yes. Some is based off of volume of calls. The percentage of pay for our billing company will go up with more calls. They did apply to the state and have a large Medicare survey coming up and the state can pay them back for ambulance bills.

Mr. Cusolito asked Mr. Antanavica about casino revenue.

Mr. Antanavica stated that is for next time. He wanted to know where that billion dollars went.

Ms. Willson asked Ms. Dube how are you doing for getting paid for all the calls at the shelters?

Ms. Dube responded she believed it is MassHealth and they get paid directly.

Mr. Cusolito asked are they doing a lot of calls over there?

Ms. Dube responded it has dropped significantly. They talk to them and provide a service to everyone.

The emergency and veterans services budget was discussed with an increase of 1.24%

Mr. Antanavica asked Mr. Jason Main how things were going.

Mr. Main responded he updated the AEDs in Town Hall. They are not cheap but we are now compliant on each floor. Mr. Genereux got the money to be able to get those. They are now working with some contractors to get training on AEDs and CPR. They have a plan in the works with MEMA and will be presenting soon.

Ms. Dube said Jason and her had attended a table-top drill, pull all resources together. MEMA had been extremely helpful in getting them prepared.

Ms. Wilson stated the budget is optimistic that they have no disasters.

Mr. Main responded you cannot plan for that. He always goes to the Town Administrator and MEMA. Leominster is a good example. They have been denied twice by FEMA.

Mr. Cusolito stated if something happens today, they only have so much left in the fiscal year.

Mr. Main responded the amount that Leominster went through – it went quick. The fire, as an example, at the senior housing was 14000 per day for hotels. He worked with MEMA to go over the importance of having funds they can pull from.

They discussed department 543 with a budgetary decrease of 32K and Mr. Main's efforts to reduce that.

Mr. Main stated he had gotten them onto federal programs. Through filing for VA benefits, he has been able to reduce our spending.

Mr. Genereux stated they had discussed making the stipend something more attractive and based on the hours that he works, it would be an increase.

Mr. Main said he sits on a board that involves many towns. He thinks they need to increase it over a few years. The position was billed for 8 hours a week. He does 16-24 hours each week. He wanted the town to be competitive in the future. 3 million comes into the town each year through the VA. The goal for next year is 4 million.

Mr. Antanavica stated he has done great work and has no problem with it.

Mr. Main said it is a rewarding position he gets tremendous joy from.

The DPW budget with an increase of 9.26% was discussed.

Mr. Lauzon spoke of oil and trash costs. From town and school perspective when he first arrived in Leicester, there was 5 or 6 companies. Now they have republic for schools and waste management for town. For the oil they go out to bid with the school buildings. They do that through the French River connection. They would include town hall, but not any of the other smaller buildings.

Mr. Cusolito stated the state contracts drop the price significantly. It can be 50-60 cents per gallon.

Mr. Genereux responded National Grid gives the town a credit and Syncarpha bills the town their portion. It comes through national grid and then Syncarpha bills for it.

Mr. Antanavica commented he liked the idea of having 2 trash vendors in case something goes wrong with one.

Mr. Duggan asked has there been any movement on the Pellegrino compactor?

Mr. Genereux stated they did a tour but have not heard back. The office will follow up.

They discussed the pest control budget.

Mr. Cusolito asked if they were still paying for a street light National Grid took down.

Mr. Lauzon responded he did not know.

Mr. Genereux said the budget has gone up 87.26% - take down trees, wont make much of a difference.

Mr. Lauzon said he did not have a boom truck, so they have to hire-out which is expensive. National Grid will take it down if it is close to the street.

Mr. Cusolito said they have been awful in his neighborhood. They have been less than cooperative and start cutting.

Mr. Antanavica said when they were here doing the scheduled stuff the town knew exactly where and when they would be.

Mr. Genereux began discussing the 950 facilities budget.

He said the goal is to increase the ability to track better. The budget was done on first full year of campus expenses. They pulled all of that data from 5 sources; 4 warrant articles and the shared account with the schools.

The analysis showed what it was at the end of 2023. These numbers were going to change, but that is the first attempt of getting rid of all the warrant articles. It should get better each year. The only thing that is not included is the amount they paid for insurance, which got moved to property/casualty.

Mr. Cusolito asked if they could get a list of the buildings and properties listed here.

Mr. Antanavica said he wanted to go back over 192 town-owned buildings.

Mr. Cusolito stated he doesn't understand the salary plan and why the RFO salary is listed.

Mr. Genereux responded it needs to be separate because it is not just municipal or just school.

Mr. Cusolito said he didn't think it should be all the way at the end. They have a DPW, but sometimes it says highway. The transfer of funds doesn't have to happen here. He doesn't like to see the salaries split like this.

Ms. Hannant asked if they approved more than 1.2 million for Becker?

Mr. Lauzon responded a lot of funds have separated. They sold the Victorians, and the school pays for the buildings they are using.

Mr. Cusolito asked who is paying heat and utilities for Winslow?

Mr. Genereux responded the town does, because it is no longer a school building.

Mr. Cusolito asked why there were two different building insurance policies.

Mr. Lauzon stated he walks with the insurance each year in those unoccupied buildings.

Mr. Cusolito stated they pay almost as much for occupied versus unoccupied.

They discussed department 192, town-owned buildings. With an increase of 7.08 percent.

Ms. Hannant asked do the library electric bills go through here?

Mr. Genereux responded yes.

Ms. Hannant responded it is a beautiful building, but do they have to have all of the lights on?

Mr. Lauzon said they have them on sensors and timers. The main floors are all daylight harvesters. Upstairs the lights go on as you go.

Mr. Cusolito asked what do we pay at hillcrest?

Mr. Genereux responded not much anymore. They pay electric for memorial. That is mainly for the library. They could put it in their budget, but that would increase their municipal appropriation.

Ms. Hannant asked the increase is just due to general costs?

Mr. Genereux stated mainly water and sewer.

Ms. Wilson asked who was responsible for department 197?

Mr. Lauzon confirmed he manages everything.

Mr. Cusolito said he has a town hall phone folder. He understood some departments have cell phones. in their budgets.

Ms. Lawrence stated we do that. It is charter, and Verizon, and paytech for long distance.

They began discussing the school budget.

Dr. Brett Kustigian said he wanted to give some background info. He will borrow a song – times they are a changing. This is a 25-year trend of the student population. They lost over 500 students over 25 years. The history and the funding, now that Chapter 70 is based on student population. The town is also changing. In 2030, projections are that we continue to lose students.

People are living longer and there are fewer school age children. This is an issue for a lot of towns west of 495. This is from 1993. Percentage of white students was 97. 2024 there were 66 percent white. One of the things that he thought people would question was the CMHA housing.

From 2023 to 2024 there is not much difference. CMHA had nothing to do with this. This will be posted on the website. 40% is economically disadvantaged. ELL students – students that do not speak fluently have resulted in asking teachers to teach to non-English-speaking population.

Dr. Kustigian asked how to attract students? Reverse the trend. They have done some surveys and an internship program. Parents are looking for more hands-on. He is a strong proponent of technical training. Assabet valley is no longer accepting new students. Tantasqua could be similar. Member districts are upset when a Leicester student comes in. There are limited opportunities for the students.

Mr. Menard asked are those children available in Leicester and they are going elsewhere?

Dr. Kustigian responded yes and yes. They have kids going to vocational schools. They just started and over time we think we can be competitive and get students in. Building and property maintenance – it is a great start and covers a lot. They are looking at culinary, health assisting, vet science. Once you get to five approved programs they have to offer an exploratory in freshman year. \$600k potentially. Culinary would be at Winslow Ave. and the goal is to have a restaurant down the line.

Mr. Cusolito asked did you find out what happened to the stuff in the kitchen?

Dr. Kustigian said they have been in there. Some is at Memorial and Fuller. The school doesn't want to mix food services with culinary. Health assisting, they are well on their way. What they have already blows away some technical schools. Vet science he said he had some concerns. It is very expensive. We want to press hold. They are approved for part A and can pick up part B next year.

Without a partner it is very expensive. Current cost paying to Assabet and Tantasqua. In 2 years Assabet will be 0. They project that they will save and keep the kids in-house with advanced manufacturing and some courses in business and finance as it is what parents are asking for. They do not get money for CNA and fire sciences.

He expressed how CMHA has impacted the schools with all three halls being filled and with student enrollment, they have not had more than 17, on a rolling basis. There is no way to project who is coming and who is going. It is very difficult to budget for. If there is an overnight influx, it will have a significant impact on the budget. Transportation – some students may move towns, but want to remain in Leicester schools. They have 50% cost burden for the buses.

Mr. Cusolito asked is that something they can talk to CMHA about?

Dr. Kustigian stated it is not a problem right now. He wanted to bring it up in case something changes. He stated he is happy to answer any questions. We did the zero-based budget and he believes in that. He discussed staffing and security with an open campus. He praised the police chief and commended the outstanding job he had done. Police chief has done an outstanding job. We are continuing to focus on security.

Special education is increasing significantly. The out-of-district severe special needs has increased. Utility bills are still being chased down. Mr. Genereux and he have discussed the 300K difference. What they are doing is freezing the budget. Dr. Kustigian was going to roll over some of the funds in to next year's special education. They can get through this year. The school committee will vote in March.

Ms. Hannant asked which number are they talking about being different from Mr. Genereux' s? She knew they had all the encumbrances.

Dr. Kustigian stated for the first year ever the school turned back \$500. This year, by freezing the budget, they wouldn't be turning it back, but would move it into the special education.

Ms. Hannant asked what happens in 2026?

Dr. Kustigian responded there is no doubt they are rolling the dice. They will have fewer students going to Assabet and Tantasqua. He tells staff that he inherited a pretty deep hole. He is trying to think 5, 6, 7, even 8 years down the road. He thinks the town and LPS will be in much better shape.

Ms. Hannant stated she agreed that Mr. Kustigian has inherited a mess. She supported what he is trying to do. They would also have to support the town and the over-65's who fund this town.

Dr. Kustigian stated he didn't think that they can depend on an override. They have to get creative and heal it ourselves. The other thing is that there are no cuts to any other department. They could debate FY26 but this lets the town live another day. The other thing in the budget book is the grants. They are taking in a lot more than the past. The grant-writers are paying for themselves over and over. If we can get through one year without any and press on.

Mr. Cusolito stated grants are great. They have to make sure the grants are executed. A lot are one-chance shots. They have chances to get more money in town. They are not collecting all the property tax.

Dr. Kustigian responded he was really nervous last year. But people banded together and got it done. Many people donated time and resources to help the school out.

Mr. Menard stated he wanted people to understand that money has come back, even if it is not directly given back.

School Committee - the biggest piece is what Dr. Kustigian has done philosophically, is understanding the need to address a much larger audience than they have in the past. I think the town should embrace this 100%. They think this is a challenge and now they have to execute.

Mr. Menard stated he could tell everyone being on national committees for trades – there is a very big concern about not having enough tradespeople in the very near future.

Mr. Cusolito stated they still have a primary school busting at the seams.

Dr. Kustigian stated he was right. They have dividers in the library, using closets as offices. He was originally thinking of taking students and putting them in Swan Library, but it is too small. They could move them to the Middle School, or the 4th grade. To him it is a no-brainer to take the kindergarteners onto the first floor of the Middle School. He didn't want to push too much, too soon, too quickly. If they went slowly and more methodically – give them some time. They have seen other districts and it worked great.

Ms. Hannant asked won't that cost them extra for the restrooms and such?

Dr. Kustigian responded yes, though he didn't have an exact cost analysis right now. He didn't think adding kindergarten to that wing will be cost-neutral, but if it was well-thought-out it can be beneficial.

Mr. Cusolito stated there is a clear need to do it.

Dr. Kustigian stated there will always be needs. The town is doing all the maintenance now.

Ms. Hannant how big is a kindergarten class?

Dr. Kustigian said 77, this is the smallest class they have had. He wondered if this is part of the tumultuous year last year. Head Start is taking kids from other districts and that could be helpful.

Ms. Wilson asked could you go to the clerk when they get the census to see how many you have lost?

Dr. Kustigian stated Covid increased home-schooling throughout the Commonwealth. In talking to the families, there is some trust built up. There is a new charter school opening in Worcester and we are trying to see why they are going there.

Ms. Hannant asked if a lot of students lost knowledge during Covid and if they were catching up?

Dr. Kustigian replied they are, and there is still a lot of work to do. The other piece is that it is not all academics. Socially and emotionally it has had a significant impact. They learned a lot of lessons from Covid. One of the really positive things was a reading grant that they got for 1st and 2nd graders with small group instruction. It is very expensive, but it is very beneficial. He asked how do you replicate that for other schools? It is so expensive.

Mr. Menard made a motion to adjourn the Select Board meeting. Ms. Provencher seconded. Motion carries. (3-0-0) 9:44 PM

Ms. Hannant made a motion to adjourn the Advisory meeting. Seconded by Ms. Wilson. Motion carries. 9:44 PM. (5-0-0)

ADJOURN