

**Shelburne Finance Committee
January 14, 2021**

Minutes

**Joint Meeting with Representatives of Other Finance
Committees**

Shelburne members present: Jackie Walsh
Deborah Andrew

Other Fin Com Reps Present:

Ashfield - Ben Markens
Ashfield – Tom Miner
Ashfield – Lindy Gougeon
Buckland - Paula Consolo
Buckland - Larry Langford
Charlemont - Richard Filoramo
Hawley - Lloyd Crawford
Heath - Ned Wolf
Heath - Alice Wozniak
Plainfield - David Kramer
Plainfield – Roberta Wooldridge
Rowe - Paul McLatchy
Shelburne Selectboard – Margaret Payne

Meeting Called to Order at 6:05

What we can get out of meeting jointly occasionally?

Jackie Walsh welcomed everyone, thanked them for coming and asked: What could the benefits be of meeting as a group?

Responses:

Lindy Gougeon – We have a lot in common, eg the impact of education on our budgets.

David Kramer -- Education is half of our town budgets. Highway is nearly the other half. Education is the area we have the least control over. Other issues in common:

- Things we need but can't afford.
- Public safety is a big thing in Plainfield. I am hoping to get a better idea of how other towns are financing public safety.
- Possible ways of sharing resources so every town does not need the latest fire truck, etc. It is hard to share, due to lines of authority, financing, etc.

Paul McLatchy -- It's not just equipment, personnel. It's shared services as well. We have an agreement with Monroe, accountant agreement. You cannot afford full-time salaries and cannot find people. It's hard to find and retain qualified people

David -- We have a part-time treasurer, part-time building inspector. Had not thought of sharing.

Tom -- Staffing is more of an issue than equipment. We have the same problem. I love the sharing staffing idea. How it might be done, and be beneficial?

Ned -- The Highway Department often becomes quite resourceful. Bob Dean, Buckland, had an idea: a diesel mechanic served a number of towns.

Lloyd Crawford -- Where is state funding going, and what we can expect in the coming year?

Larry Langford -- There is talk of an MMA assurance of level funding.

Jackie Walsh - School budget: We need more information. Shelburne Finance Committee has had the superintendent at one of our meetings last year. It was helpful.

Paul McLatchy -- Education about this is really valuable. He attended the state association webinar.

Mohawk budget

We discussed asking the Mohawk superintendent/budget consultant to meet with the finance committees together, on Zoom. And, to do the same with the Franklin County Tech superintendent and other reps. We decided to do both. Jackie will arrange the meetings for February.

Further discussion regarding budget:

Alice -- Alice has been a 14-year municipal employee in multiple towns. She expressed concerns about the transparency of the Mohawk school budget. The Tech School budget is better in that way..

Ben -- The process with TMS (Mohawk's new business consultant company) has been transparent. The new Mohawk superintendent is terrific; she wants to be successful. We don't yet know expenses or revenue. The transportation issue is still with us.

Paula -- Years ago, the School Committee would give us a very detailed budget. It was too much, too much to look at. It confused people. Over the years it became more and more consolidated. It may seem too little, but be careful what you ask for. I was at the Budget Subcommittee Meeting last night. The meetings are open to all. I encourage others to go. The best way to influence the school budget: go to Budget Subcommittee meetings.

David -- I am in awe of those going to all these meetings. I cannot. We rely on our School Committee members to bring information to us. We can help the School Committee to deliver to Finance Committees what we need in bringing the budget to select boards. If we meet as a group, we can unite as a group as to what we want, what we need.

Alice -- By the time we get to the town budget process, we are getting our assessment, not a 35-60 page document with all the budget lines. We are on our 6th management group. Different ways/formats have been used by each, which creates confusion. If we collaborate, look at the budget, we can go back to our Finance Committees and tell them this is what is happening and why we have this assessment for our community.

Jackie -- Part of the reason I wanted to meet with you all was because I was unhappy that there are buses sitting empty because of Covid and school being mostly online. We are paying 70% of the normal cost of running those buses. The School Committee hasn't provided sufficient information to make me feel

okay about that spending. I was wondering what other people on district finance committees thought. Another thing that upset me was the \$750,000 deficit a year or two back. Former superintendent Michael Buoniconti said normally he had the money to cover that kind of deficit. There shouldn't be \$750,000 in wiggle room built into the school district budget. I feel we should know more about the budget.

Ben --I think (bus company) Kuzmeskus should be sued. I believe we ought to go to the Inspector General. The company received PPT monies. The School Committee has no legal recourse -- we have to transport children. Last night at the meeting we were told there were not enough bus drivers.

Alice -- They have us over a barrel. Some of this ties back to money we get back (from the state) for transportation: I'm not sure how this works. There are some definite challenges with only one transportation bidder.

Has the School Committee ever looked into doing our own transportation?

Fiscal picture for the towns - lots of uncertainty

Paula -- Breaking news from NYTimes: Biden will have a \$9.1 m package, and \$350 billion will go to state and local governments.

Jackie -- I listen to Cuomo/Baker press conferences. Cuomo says the feds need to bail out the state.or there will be 20 percent cuts to departments, including education Baker is saying he can level fund the state budget. I don't understand the discrepancy in the two states.

Paula -- The School Committee can promise a 2.5% increase in the budget, but the assessments for each individual town are all over the place year to year. For example, the Heath wealth factor (used by the state to determine what the town will pay for education) increased incredibly, because a business was sold. The wealth factor is an issue. The school committee does not have control over individual town assessments. Be cautious about assuming this. We don't know the number of students in the district. Many dropped out, many are being home schooled. This could change everything. Paula is hoping the School Committee and towns encourage the state to use enrollment numbers from last year. This Oct count is not fair. Next October, we might have double that number. Keeping the budget at a 2.5% increase over this fiscal year may not affect town assessments.

Ben -- There was a really good Informational mtg at MTRSD. Paula is correct.

Alice -- If you have a wealthy community, that wealth factor can impact services.

Ned -- I also attended the training at Mohawk. (The speaker) was highly competent, articulate: There will be a shift from hold-harmless funding to SOA. I do understand that Mohawk benefits from hold-harmless policy.

Paula: If they take away hold harmless we would lose \$1 million -- probably more now.

Jackie -- Are there minutes from the Mohawk training?

Ben -- It was recorded.

Tom -- He will send us all a link to a recording of the training.

Jackie -- We could write letters to the governor about not basing next year's allocations on this year's spending (eg for transportation) since this year has been atypical.

Managing public safety (police, fire, EMS), including staffing, expenses, mission. Ideas for sharing public safety coverage and other services across our towns

David -- In Plainfield, we have a voluntary fire department and one part-time police officer. Then a few years ago, a police officer left, and the board of selectmen decided the department was not up to code/requirements. The fire department was very on the ball. Police department was just one person working part time. Some things required were not being done. The town hired a ½-time chief and two other ½-time officers (I'm not absolutely certain.) We brought them in at \$16.01/hr. After two years, the chief said, we need more hours, as we get an incredible number of 911 calls. We voted in 90 hrs. Next there was a request for an increase in wages. We had a lively town meeting, with some objections to so much policing. The town voted not to raise the police department pay. The chair of the select board resigned.

Fire Chief -- it's a volunteer fire department. Some wanted to pay the firefighters, but the volunteers wanted to stay volunteer. The chief is paid \$5,000.

For the police, the big issues are: what kind of department do we want, how much do we want, what can we pay? We as a town are starting to take a look at this. We are very much in need of knowing what other towns are doing.

Roberta --: Policing Plainfield: if we go back to the old ways, one person at \$5,000, it's not feasible. If we want young people, we need to invest in our communities. People are at the ready but not adequately paid. They need to live in the community to be on call 24/7.

Paula -- Years ago, Buckland and Shelburne talked about joining together. one police force. Two chiefs at the time were not a good match. It's something I favor. Why not have one police force cover Plainfield/Ashfield? Maybe Buckland, Shelburne, Charlemont? It could save money, be more efficient.

Larry -- Maybe a straight-up transaction, services by fees? Might be simpler.

Richard -- In Charlemont, a major concern is the ambulance force. We used to have a four-town ambulance district. Now it's two towns. Charlemont pays for ambulance & pays for EMTs. EMTs are getting on in years. Due to the distance from the hospital, we need the ambulances in a central town. Down the road, we may not find enough EMTs to meet the need. And then there is the cost. Could we find ways to share resources? Share EMTs? Ambulance chiefs and select boards need to be involved. This is probably not unique. We are all drowning in attempting to meet the costs of services.

Alice -- We were a participant in the ambulance service at one point. The ambulance in Charlemont was not always available. We ended up dropping out of agreement. I wear about 5 different hats in Colrain. We pay for EMT training, continuing education, and they get it as long as they commit certain number of hours to Colrain. This is a problem throughout municipal governments. We are an aging population. Jobs have gone elsewhere. We are going to have to focus on how to attract young people for municipal jobs, and be able to pay them so they can live in the community. Benefits and competitive pay are huge.

Richard -- I don't think any one town can do it. We need to find ways to work together. I don't think any one town can pay a living wage for these services. It's a dilemma. I see it coming down the road, that it is going to collapse. It will require a lot of working together.

Spending by towns on Covid-related expenses -- Any ideas for how Fin Coms can help fight Covid?

Jackie -- There will be a mass vaccination site in the Mohawk district, according to FRCOG health agent Randy Crochier. It will be either in Hawley or Charlemont, most likely. Jackie is curious how towns have spent their CARES money. And: how can individual towns help out? By the way, the state has changed the rules so now EMTs can give vaccinations.

The Finance Committees meeting again

Ben-- He suggested we look for a date with the superintendents to meet with them.

The group decided to meet in February with the superintendents. For Mohawk, they want to meet before the School Committee holds its public hearing on the budget on February 10..

Meeting adjourned at: 7:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Deborah Andrew, scribe for the evening

Next Meeting: TBD