

**WILLINGTON BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Thursday, April 23, 2020

Special Meeting Minutes

**Via Online Public Zoom Video Conference**

**7:00 p.m.**

Audio Recording: Yes

Video Recording: Yes

Notes Taken: Yes

**Members Present**

Herb Arico - Chairman

Elena Testa- Vice Chairman

Michelle Doucette Cunningham - Secretary

Ann Grosjean

Tracey Anderson

Donna Cook

(Liz Perry submitted her resignation effective April 17, 2020)

**Members Absent**

**Also Present**

Superintendent of Schools PhilStevens

Members of the Public

**Chairman H. Arico called the meeting to order at 7:01pm.**

**Present to Speak**

Laurie Semprebon: Would like a BOE budget that supports schools and maintains staff during this difficult financial time.

Stef Summers: We need to take care of the budget. Keep in mind the town of Willington is one of the major employers in town and that's an important role to play.

Matt Clark: In this tough environment, 1/3 Americans are unemployed right now. Huge risk in terms of property tax base and reimbursements from state. Largest expense we have in town is education and if we can come up with a way to get a small reduction, that would be beneficial.

Sarah Smith: We have to make sure that cutting the budget isn't creating lasting damage to our programs. Once you eliminate staff, you aren't going to get back the expertise of staff who have

served our community well. This is a tough situation and she respects the Board's ability and concern to come up with the best they can. She appreciates everyone's hard work.

Peter Latincsics: These are extraordinary times and we are all in this together. BOE will work with the community

Jan Castle: We are all in this together. Expressed appreciation to Board members and the Superintendent. A number of us that are staff in town are keenly aware of what's going on on both sides. Utmost importance to maintain what's going on for students.

Randy Belair: What would 3% against the current budget represent in dollars?

Brenda Abrams: Thanked the Board for its hard work. Tough time for everyone, especially students and it's a challenging thing. As long as the budget doesn't make anything worse for them and they can continue to learn, it's something we should talk about.

### **New Business**

#### **A. 2020-2021 Board of Education Budget Discussion**

Superintendent Stevens shared that the Board of Finance requested budget writers to submit what a 0% budget and -3% budget would look like. The -3% budget isn't a valuable exercise because of the Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) which requires towns receiving education cost sharing cannot allocate less funding from the previous year. MBR numbers for 20-21 have not been established by the state yet. Unfunded mandates aren't changing with executive orders at this point. There is volatility of special education costs next year due to the shutdown. Negotiated contracts are still in play. The administrative team and Donna Latincsics worked together to identify a proposal with two options for cuts which were shared with the Board. P. Stevens shared 11 potential cuts by program. The items reviewed included: kindergarten teacher, internet savings, audiometer, diesel credit, summer custodians, superintendent's salary, superintendent's administrative assistant salary, superintendent conference, valuation, retirement payouts, insurance savings, long term sub, and supplies. P. Stevens recommended option #2 and noted cuts beyond this point would be programs and/or people. CIP projects were also reviewed as options to send back to the town to improve the town's cash flow.

H. Arico asked P. Stevens which option he would recommend moving forward on? P. Stevens responded that he would recommend option #2. Herb asked the impact on services to students and supplies. P. Stevens responded that items wouldn't impact programs unless you cut the kindergarten teacher and full long term sub. P. Stevens also referred to the BOE discussion about the limited supply money already available.

E. Testa asked about the financial report from April and recommended using current budget money to pay for positions next year. P. Stevens stated all the positions have been filled and they had been interviewing for the math intervention position. He also noted BOE still has purchases that need to be made this fiscal year. P. Stevens noted concerns with prepaying \$70,000 of items that will recur in 21-22 and the budget will have a large increase. E. Testa

asked about the CIP heating project and when we were going to do it and responded this summer.

D. Cook thanked Phil and Brenda for eliminating their increases. She asked about cutting the budget for the items that would be prepaid. P. Stevens clarified that they were purchased this year, but we would be using savings from the current budget to pay for them for 20-21. Donna asked if we could put the prepaids in addition to the current options. P. Stevens responded that the budget number would come down for 20-21, but the 21-22 budget would be an increase of a minimum of 5%. He reviewed several items that could be prepaid.

E. Testa suggested using current budget money for prepaid items. P. Stevens responded that the BOF may want to see whether they want money back or for prepaid items. H. Arico noted that the BOF needs to understand that the BOE will do the best they can.

A. Grosjean - Concerned about the supply line and the constant cuts there. Can some of that be ordered this year? Could vacation days be offered to Brenda to offset the salary increase? H. Arico noted that the BOE can make those decisions. H. Arico asked if we would have money to prepay items and P. Stevens responded he thought so because of the open positions. P. Stevens also noted that we may need to order chromebooks for next year.

M. Cunningham asked about the process and what the BOE needs to do. P. Stevens responded that the BOE needs to provide direction for what to send him with to the BOF.

T. Anderson asked if the CIP and \$10,000 savings was the same on the options paper as it was listed twice. P. Stevens shared they are not the same as one accounts for the monthly savings and the other accounts for the \$10,000 no longer needed for the project. T. Anderson supported option #2 because it did not impact positions or programs.

D. Cook asked if the heating project could be done for less or at a different time. P. Stevens didn't believe the BOE would see savings by being moved into May and thought it could be put into a bond into the future. H. Arico also referred to the contingency fund and P. Stevens confirmed it has been around 14%, though the auditor recommends 8-12%.

M. Cunningham shared her concern about eliminating the \$31,000 for the long term substitute line. She noted the Board was trying to identify actual expenditures and recommended leaving that money in the budget. She did not want to cut the budget where it hurts kids.

E. Testa asked about the April budget summary and about savings in substitutes. P. Stevens said he would present the savings and needed purchases in May.

H. Arico thought P. Stevens brought in a reasonable option.

A. Grosjean asked what percentage of the budget is contracts? P. Stevens shared that about 97% of the budget, but we continue to try and negotiate savings. A. Grosjean asked how much our budget would go up this year if we just looked at teacher contracts? P. Stevens responded that

just under 3% increase this year in salary alone. P. Stevens also shared the potential for charging for preschool, transportation, sports, though it may not be the best time to start charging.

M. Cunningham shared she could live with option #2 without the \$31,000 long term sub and supplies.

D. Cook - we agreed the long term sub could be cut if BOF came back with cuts. P. Stevens said the agreement was to go back to \$20,000 from the \$31,000 should the BOF cut.

H. Arico - we could go back to \$20,000 in the long term sub and reduce supplies but keep it in there.

E. Testa: Suggest going with option 1 which cuts the most. We do expect significant savings. If we have those significant savings left over, then we can keep the position. P. Stevens said the BOE can't prepay a position out of this budget money. It would have to prepay several items enough to make up for the cost of the position.

A. Grosjean: Would like to see option #2 put forth with modifications because the BOF could send it back to us again.

T. Anderson: If money is left, it might be better to give it back to the town now rather than a year from now. If we use it to prepay, we aren't giving it to the town and they won't have it as cash flow. BOF should use the savings fund to bring down the budget a little bit. T. Anderson supported option #2.

M. Doucette Cunningham made a motion for option #2 with an adjustment to the long term sub cut as \$11,000 and the cut to supplies as \$5,785.

H. Arico made a motion to go with option #2 in the amount of \$148,002.

D. Cook seconded the motion.

M. Doucette Cunningham made a friendly amendment to add \$5,000 to supplies, and \$20,000 to long term sub back to the budget.

A Grosjean second.

Vote on the amendment:

<b>Vote:</b>	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
H. Arico	X			
M. Cunningham	X			
D. Cook		X		

T. Anderson	X			
A. Grosjean	X			
E. Testa		X		

Motion passes.

A vote on the original motion for option #2 as amended:

<b>Vote:</b>	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
H. Arico	X			
M. Cunningham	X			
D. Cook	X			
T. Anderson	X			
A. Grosjean	X			
E. Testa		X		

Motion passes. Superintendent Stevens was given direction to bring to the Board of Finance.

## **B. Appointment of New Board Member**

H. Arico stated that Liz Perry resigned effective April 17, 2020. The BOE now has a vacancy and has to appoint someone to fill that vacancy, who would serve until the next election in November. Customary practice normally would appoint a republican candidate to replace a republican vacancy. The BOE has until May 17 to elect a replacement. The Republican Town Committee sent a letter dated April 21, 2020. He read the letter endorsing Brenda Adams, Elaine Newcomb, or Peter Latinsics.

He read a letter from Elaine Newcomb accepting the nomination and introducing herself.

A letter from John Blessington was read stressing the importance of appointing a republican to a republican spot.

H. Arico summarized the Board's responsibilities and bylaws surrounding the appointment of a new member. Herb stated Robert's Rules do not supplant the bylaws.

M. Cunningham made a motion to table the appointment at the next regular meeting.

A. Grosjean second

<b>Vote:</b>	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
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H. Arico		x		
M. Cunningham	x			
D. Cook		x		
T. Anderson	x			
A. Grosjean	x			
E. Testa		x		

Motion fails.

E. Testa nominated Brenda Abrahams, Peter Latinsics, and Elaine Newcombe.

D. Cook seconded the nominations.

M. Cunningham: Made a point of order that you can't have 3 candidates for 1 open position.

The BOE discussed the process for voting and the need for the winner to have a majority vote per their policy as read by Chairman Arico.

E. Testa withdrew her motion.

M. Cunningham moved to table for the next meeting.

T. Anderson second.

(Vote: E. Testa no, D. Cook no, M. Doucette Cunningham yes, T. Anderson yes, A. Grosjean yes, H. Arico no)

<b>Vote:</b>	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
H. Arico	x			
M. Cunningham		x		
D. Cook	x			
T. Anderson		x		
A. Grosjean		x		
E. Testa	x			

Motion fails

E. Testa made a motion to nominate Brenda Abrams.

D. Cook second.

<b>Vote:</b>	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
H. Arico	x			
M. Cunningham		x		
D. Cook	x			
T. Anderson		x		
A. Grosjean		x		
E. Testa	x			

Motion fails.

E. Testa motioned to nominate Elaine Newcomb.

D. Cook second.

<b>Vote:</b>	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
H. Arico	x			
M. Cunningham		x		
D. Cook	x			
T. Anderson		x		
A. Grosjean		x		
E. Testa	x			

Motion fails.

E. Testa motioned to nominate Peter Latincics.

H. Arico second.

<b>Vote:</b>	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
H. Arico	x			
M. Cunningham		x		
D. Cook	x			
T. Anderson		x		
A. Grosjean		x		

E. Testa	x			
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Motion fails..

### **Present to Speak**

Laurie Semprebon: Point of order. Motion that you didn't allow comment on, you should allow comment. Second point as an 8-year former BOE member is T. Anderson is correct that you can't set up a vote and not allow people to say no. You need a quorum for anything that you do.

Elaine Newcomb: This Board clearly has an inability to function.

Matt Clark: Questioned P. Stevens about math intervention, has that person been hired, if they haven't, don't know what that salary is. Switching gears to the board. Willington elected 4 repubs and 3 dems. Appears as though dems want to take control of the board overruling the will of the people. Looks like that to an observer. 3 very qualified candidates. Ask that the board get along. Vacancies are going to happen more and more as people get busy, so boards will have vacancies. We have to get along. Ask everybody to think about it. Don't get heated.

Christina Mailhos: Stated she is speechless too. Haven't witnessed anything like that in all her years of service to the town. It's sad to see and stems from some sort of distrust. Distrust starts with games. Matt hasn't been to a lot of meetings. People trying to change rules at the last minute, and that causes distrust.

Sarah Smith: Seek legal opinion. Is there such a thing that says if you had any majority, that you can't have a good person from either party to fill this vacancy. I know about custom. I'm glad we could all watch this. No matter what our party is, we're coming away with sadness that there are games and obstructionist types of behavior. I'd like the games to stop. I'd like to know if we have something written legally that we must select someone from a specific party. Should come from the lawyer. I'm very concerned about money. Don't want to spend the town's money on bickering. So disheartened because all of you are good people. Doesn't matter who you are, dem or repub, I know you, I have a lot of respect for you, and I'd like for us to answer that question. Is what you're saying legal. I'd like for people not just to read Robert's Rules. People need to listen in the meetings. To have board members not know what is said. Some members are so intent on forcing their will that you don't listen to each other. I hope we can get this sorted out. Would personally like to see anyone who is a suitable candidate be brought forward. Party doesn't matter, who is the best candidate that you have.

Peter Tanaka: Republicans brought 3 very good candidates forward to a seat that was won by a Republican. Gamesmanship was an attempt to give all 3 equal opportunities. Probably not an available option. He cannot believe that of those 3 candidates, the Democrat members couldn't find one of them acceptable. I find that amazing.

Erika Weicenski: We are in the middle of a pandemic, and it seems that trying to win a seat on the BOE is more important than doing the right thing and paying attention to the rules. Speechless that this board behaved in this manner.



Peter Latincsics: I have complete faith in our 6 elected members to come to a fair and equitable outcome. All good people will serve us well. Especially confident because H. Arico is our Chair. And is a distinguished citizen in Willington and was an educator of over 50 years, and believes he is more than able to lead through the process. Return to budget discussion, which is far more important. Thanked the Superintendent for working hard on this first step from the BOF. All heavily engaged in the process. Making an assumption. Will leave to the BOF what level they decide. Agree with M. Doucette Cunningham that we should favor the k-8 budget over the town budget and every effort should be made to do that. Asks that we contact bargaining units for k-8 if we can hold salaries for the current level which seems appropriate. Second point is that the capital reserve is a couple hundred thousand dollars for the school building committee that has not been appointed, so I'm assuming that might be something that's available for the BOF to consider. Point on the process itself. Concerned beyond a single year, reviewed the 19-20 MBR for our town. Couldn't find it on the town website but did locate on the Department of Education website. We're well above it, not an issue, appears in the worksheet you complete to arrive at the MBR, there are categories that seem relevant to us including efficiencies, closed school deduction, and catastrophic loss deduction, and these should be reviewed.

Janice Castle: Thank you to everyone for thoughtful consideration about budget. Refreshing to see everyone working together to come up with a solution to represent education for students in town.

Jim Bulick: Point out it's not unprecedented to appoint the same party. A republican left the board and a republican was nominated. The Town has a long history of doing this. Save the fighting for where it needs to be at election time. Disappointed that we can't move on and get to the business at hand. I am glad for the seriousness of this financial situation and hard work to move forward.

Brenda Abrams: Thank you for the nomination. I appreciate everyone's hard work. The people of Willington gave me 658 votes and we should listen to the people of Willington.

### **Board Comments**

H. Arico: Interesting evening, accomplished a lot with the budget. Reiterated that BOF has final authority as an executive order and hope they'll be reasonable and thoughtful when they look the budget over when they work with P. Stevens in that respect. Part of the meeting was contentious but civil. We have a lot of respect for each other. Can't always agree on everything that comes in front of the board. Remember that it's just one issue we're having. Goal of providing the best education that we can.

M. Doucette Cunningham: Thanked Superintendent Stevens for coming up with options for us to discuss and working 24/7 since we got the word to redo some numbers. It is not easy to do when you're not face to face and she appreciates the help with the process. She looks forward to future discussions to fill the seat with our bylaws and will be happy to take it up at another meeting.

T. Anderson: Thanked P. Stevens and B. Weber for the hard work to give us budget options. She hopes we can work out the Board member appointment in a legal and civil way.

A. Grosjean: Echoed a thank you to Administrators and Donna Latinsics. So much easier for us to make hard decisions when we know directly how it's going to impact the schools and children. Also looks forward to Board member appointment resolution too.

D. Cook: Wished everyone good health and safety during these incredibly challenging times. She hopes and prays that the people of Willington stay safe, and that things get back to normal as soon as possible.

E. Testa: Stated that she is extremely disappointed and heard so much tonight that we are playing games and it was disrespectful. This has been taking place for the last 3 years, playing politics. Customs were ignored, respect disappeared and there was no honor. You should be ashamed of yourselves.

**Chairman H. Arico adjourned the meeting at 9:50pm.**