School District Meeting 2014 Results, Article by Article

Meeting approves facilities study

By Charlie Darling, *Beacon* staff

Before the meeting began, Andover School Board chair Don Gould recognized retiring Superintendent of Schools Mike Martin as a quiet problem solver and presented him with a golf club with the AE/MS eagle pointed on it.

Article 1: To accept the reports printed in the School District report. With no discussion, the article passed unanimously.

Article 2: To authorize the School Board to use state and federal aid this year. With no discussion, the article passed unanimously.

Article 3: To authorize the School Board to use private donations this year. With no discussion, the article passed unanimously.

Article 4: $4,654,553 for the school budget, as recommended by the School Board and the Andover Budget Committee. Moderator Betsy Paine explained the two budget formats printed in the 2013 Andover Town Report, one of which is the usual legally-required format, the other of which is a simpler, more condensed format created by the Andover Budget Committee.

There was discussion and clarification about the meaning of the "Adjusted" column in the legally-required format. Andy Guptill pointed out that this year's budget is less than 1% higher than last years and thanked the Budget Committee and the School Board. The budget then passed unanimously.

Article 5: $25K to the Regular Education High School Tuition Expendable Trust Fund.

Toby Locke expressed amazement the meeting didn't go through the budget line by line. Further, he doesn't think we need the trust fund, because most years the school gives money back to the Town.

School Board member Charlie McCrave explained the challenge of estimating the number of high school students each year and how the trust fund allows the Board to cut the budget even closer. "At $13,000 per student, we don't have to be off by much to create a problem."

Article 5 passed.

Article 6: $25,000 to the Special Education Expendable Trust Fund. Charlie McCrave pointed out that this $25,000 would come from any surplus of money already budgeted and approved, not from "new money" added to the budget. "If we don't have any money left, we don't put any in the fund." Having the money in the trust fund lets the School Board do a closer job of budgeting or deal with a surprise.

Article 6 passed.

Article 7: Up to $50,000 for a facilities study. Toby Locke said that it's ridiculous to spend $50,000 to study something. "This is getting out of hand. Let's put it aside and put it into a heating system. We all know what we need. This is ludicrous."

School Board member Kent Armstrong said, "Toby, I kind of agree with you." The last few years, we've been reactive. The building is leaking energy and money like a sieve. We're stuck with this building. The heating system is in bad shape. Let's look at making it more cost effective to run the school, instead of just doing band-aids that ultimately leave you stuck.

Leighton Terwilliger said that throwing $50,000 to an out-of-town architect doesn't give us a return on our investment. Pay it to someone here in town who knows how to fix these things. We've got capable people in this town who can make the fixes.

Toby: We spent money on the study to build the roof, and it's failing. "It's a travesty, it's junk, it was underbuilt." Spend the $50,000 on an actual need like, putting a metal roof on the part that's failing.

Andover Budget Committee member Arch Weathers said that he still hasn't really made up his mind. It requires discussion, and this is the forum to do it. Unfortunately, there are fewer than 100 people here tonight. You've got to start the conversation about this, and it's up to the people here.

Andy Guptill said the Board should consult with some mechanical contractors and some roofers. I don't think we should give the money to an engineer.

Leighton: Ask all the teachers and the maintenance crew – they know what needs to be done. We have the people in this building who know what needs to be done.

School Board chair Don Gould: We have to comply with regulations like ISO 50001, an energy standard. We need someone to make sure we're in compliance with New Hampshire regulations. We've had classrooms shut down because we didn't meet standards. That's what an engineer would do, because they're up-to-date about the standards.

Percy Hill: Most important is the safety of the children. How long before the building becomes unsafe?

Sophie Viandier spoke about the problems caused by poor ventilation.

Bonnie Morris asked where the up-to-$50,000 number came from.

Kent said that the School Board asked around and looked at old studies. They got numbers from about $25,000 to over $75,000. If the cost appears to be more than the study is worth, we won't do it.

Charlie McCrave said that someone says switch to propane. Someone says fix the windows. Someone says add solar. Someone says replace the boiler with three small boilers. We need someone to look at it all and tell us the correct sequence of events. We need a plan for the whole place.

Kent: With a plan, we can give the town some cost certainties over the coming years, because we can plan and prepare.

Superintendent Mike Martin: There is considerable risk to the School District when we do work on a building. The state Fire Marshal wants to see plans with an engineer's stamp. We have to go through an approval process.

Toby: We had a stamp on the roofing project that's failing. Instead of talking about compliance, people are losing their houses.

Paul Currier: Unity just "got by" for years. Now the taxpayers in Unity wish they hadn't just got by.

Article 7 passed.

Article 8: To authorize up to 2.5% of net assessment [roughly, the total budget less state and federal aid and food service revenue] to be retained from any surplus funds at the end of the year, rather than be returned to the Town to reduce taxes.

School Board member Charlie McCrave explained that cities and towns have for years had the ability to retain surplus, but school districts have not. This article takes advantage of recent state legislation that lets school districts keep part of the surplus and put it into an emergency fund.

There are controls built into the legislation. The emergency fund can't exceed about $80,000 or $90,000 in Andover. It can't be used for day-to-day operations – it is only for an emergency, and the Andover Budget Committee and the New Hampshire Department of Education must agree with any proposed use.

We need this fund because state aid used to be a set amount that we could count on and budget for, but now they just give us an estimate, and we don't know what we'll actually get until after the budget is passed. This fund will help any shortfall created by their changing their estimate.

Toby Locke: Is going over budget an emergency?

School Board member Kent Armstrong: We can't use this to make up for our inability to stick to our budget. But if the state gives us less that they'd estimated they'd give us for state aid when we passed the budget, we could use money from this fund to make up the shortfall so we could carry out the budget as planned.

Andover School District attorney John Teague: It can be used for a specific physical emergency or an extraordinary unanticipated cost like the cost of oil suddenly going way up. But it can't be used just because of overrunning the budget.

Katie Keyser moved to amend the article by removing the words "indefinitely until rescinded."

John Teague: You could make that amendment, but it makes this a one-year article. You'd have to act on it every year for the fund to continue to be funded.

The amendment to the article failed. The article passed.

Article 9: Any other business.

Leighton Terwilliger: We need to get more communication between Merrimack Valley High School and Andover Elementary/Middle School. We should be sending teachers, coaches, and kids back and forth. We're getting there, especially in terms of music and sports, but there needs to be more communication and more cohesiveness.

Andover Budget Committee member Mary Anne Levesque made a plea for more people to attend Budget Committee discussions. We could see a different outcome if more people attended the meetings.

Richard Brewster: The acoustics in the gym are terrible. Everyone should speak more loudly during the meeting.

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