

TMMA Executive Council Minutes: September 14, 2005

Attendance:

TMMA Officers:

Gloria Bloom – (Chair Pct 4)
Andy Friedlich – (Treasurer Pct 5)
David Kaufman – (Communication Officer Pct 6)
Darwin Adams – (Clerk Pct 3)

Precinct Officers:

Pct 9: Francine Stieglitz
Pct 8: Melinda Walker
Pct 7: Jim Courtemanche, Pam Hoffman (Appropriation Committee)
Pct 6: Alan Lazarus, Sheldon Spector,
Pct 5: Jerold Michelson, Sam Silverman, Eph Weiss
Pct 3: Darwin Adams (Clerk), Arthur Katz
Pct 2: Alessandro Alessandrini
Pct 1: Joel Adler, Jon Cole

Presenters:

School Committee: Scott Burson (P4)
2020 Committee: Fernando Quezada

Agenda:

Gloria called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm in room G-15 of the TOB.

Treasurer's Report and approval of minutes:

Treasurer gave an informal update stating that little changes occurred during the summer months. The current TMMA balance was \$4253. Since the report was informal, no vote was taken. There was some discussion about \$125 for a new "Town Meeting in Lexington" handbook, and \$29.97 to David Kaufman for website hosting costs.

The minutes of the June 8th meeting were reviewed and accepted unanimously without amendments.

Presentation by Scott Burson regarding School Committee issues:

The primary issue was the unexpected budget shortfall of approximately 1.9 million dollars. Some of these costs were incurred last fiscal year and some will apply this fiscal year. The major contributors to the shortfall were:

1. Special Education costs (approx \$400K)
2. Energy costs (presumably linked to the cost of gas and oil) (approx \$200K)
3. Substitute Teacher costs (remainder of the costs)

The SPED budget underestimated special needs enrollments. In particular there were several students who needed placements outside of the district. Some of these placements were residential and therefore quite expensive.

Energy costs included higher fuel and electricity bills. Scott noted that Clarke Middle School is fully electric (including heat). There are some funds to correct this, but the improvements have not yet taken place.

Substitute teacher costs were higher primarily because of an increase in teacher absences. Also, since we no longer have permanent substitutes on the school payroll, we have hired instead from the Kelly Temp Agency and this agency has an overhead of approximately 38%. The School Committee will investigate the reasons for these increases and, if necessary, press for changes in teacher contracts to encourage fewer absences.

Sheldon Spector asked if the schools negotiate contracts with oil providers or if we simply paid the going rate. Scott indicated that Dana Ham had negotiated very good contracts, but these had come due and new contracts reflected the currently higher fuel rates.

Sheldon also suggested that he has had experience with “consortiums” negotiating good rates for natural gas and that our schools might want to consider this approach as well. Scott agreed that this is a good idea, but these contracts must be negotiated by school administration and not by the board. Unfortunately, Dana Ham left Lexington in July and will not be available to help us.

Eph Weiss asked why so many school officials were leaving. Scott cited a “rocky” 5 year period in Lexington schools and a series of administrative and political transitions in important positions as possible explanations.

Joel Adler asked why we would use Kelly if they charge 38% more than the substitute’s pay. Scott replied that in previous years, there were fewer teacher absences and the Kelly solution worked well. With the increased use of substitutes this year, the extra cost has made the Kelly solution too expensive.

Gloria Bloom asked how much money would be needed to balance the school budget. Scott replied that the current estimate was approximately \$1.9 million.

Andy Friedlich asked if there were monthly budget status updates which would have informed the board about the budget shortfall earlier in the year. Scott replied that due to turnover in administrative positions, our normal monthly status did not occur properly.

Sam Silverman asked if the energy costs included electricity or if it was only heating costs. Scott said the costs were for all forms of energy – including electric. Sam and Eph Weiss made the point that we should be using more efficient lighting such as “compact fluorescents”.

Eph Weiss commented that we need employees whose job is to watch energy costs. Scott replied that we will miss the services of Dana Ham in that respect, but that our new superintendent of schools has been doing a very good job rebuilding the school staff.

Arthur Katz remarked that having good SPED programs encourages higher SPED enrollment and higher costs. Scott replied that in his opinion, more SPED funds should come from the State since SPED is not a local issue.

David Kaufman noted that even a single residential placement could easily cost over \$100k, so a few could account for almost the entire amount the SPED budget was short. Scott outlined 3 steps in controlling these costs:

1. Budget for the known SPED cases.
2. Look at suspected cases which might require placement during the year.
3. Save contingency funds for people who might move into town during the year with a student having special needs.

Sheldon Spector asked how we were going to fund the budget shortfall. Scott suggested that the Selectmen might choose to use Free Cash, but that they were considering all funding alternatives.

Andy Friedlich noted that the Town had received some unexpected Chapter 70 funding and perhaps this could help. He also noted that a \$1.8 million dollar contingency fund had been held in reserve during the Harrington School construction. Now that the project is completed, these funds might also be available.

Joel Adler commented that, at the upcoming Special Town Meeting, the School Board needs to have good explanations for the shortfall. This is especially an issue since nearly 60% of the Town budget is for schools and we must be professional about how we manage those funds.

Scott Burson suggested that people interested in our schools should find an opportunity to hear Paul Ash (our new Superintendent of Schools) speak about his plans for the Lexington Schools. Scott expressed great confidence in Paul Ash.

Lexington Vision 2020 – presented by Fernando Quezada:

Fernando gave a short history of the Vision 2020 process which began in 1998. He noted that a complete report was presented at last year's Town Meeting and so he was just giving us an update. Hank Manz, in the Fall of 2003, suggested a set of 9 Precinct meetings to discuss the Vision 2020 plan and to help reduce the number of items on the plan from 27 goals to approximately 14 goals. The meetings were a great success, although turnout in some precincts was small. The Board of Selectman and the Planning Board then met and established 3 task forces which were charged with finding ways to reach the 2020 goals.

1. Sustaining Community Discourse (report exists on the Town website)
2. The Budget Process and Communication (report exists on the Town website)
3. Economic Development (no reports yet from this group)

Other Business:

Gloria reported that a Special Town Meeting would probably be scheduled for November 7 and, if necessary, continued on November 9.

Andy Friedlich moved that we have another TMMA Executive Council meeting on Wednesday, October 5, at 7:30pm in order to prepare for the Special Town Meeting. This motion was approved unanimously.

Eph Weiss suggested that we have an open informational meeting for all TMMA members and the public. Gloria noted that this might be difficult to schedule due to time constraints. However, she

volunteered to investigate having our next Executive Council meeting in Cary Library so that more people could attend.

Andy Friedlich announced that there will be a “Summit Meeting” of the Boards and Committees to discuss the strategy for the Special Town Meeting. The “Summit” will be held in Estabrook Hall on Monday, September 19 from 5:30pm to 7:30pm.

Gloria volunteered to send a notice regarding the Special Town Meeting and the warrant to the TMMA list server.

Gloria said that during the June meeting of the Executive Council, Margie Battin had asked for a poll of the TMMA members regarding the preferred starting time for Town Meetings (7:30pm or 8:00pm). David Kaufman agreed to set up a special email account on the list server that would help take such a poll from the TMMA members.

David Kaufman gave a brief summary of events which took place at the recent Selectman’s Goal Setting Meeting. These included:

1. How the Board of Selectman should communicate important events to the Town citizens.
2. How to manage improvements to the School Administration Building
3. How to enhance the Town web site
4. Improving Town records management including Town resources such as buildings and trees using a GIS system (computerized Geographic Information System -a kind of database).
5. Siting of the Senior Center
6. DPW site improvements and “sustainable” design
7. Swing space for the School Administration staff during construction.
8. Grace Chapel acquired space (at Militia Drive) which could probably be leased as swing space by the town for the School Administration during White Building repairs, since Grace Chapel did not need the space immediately.
9. The Community Preservation Act
10. Cary Hall and Kline Hall uses and rental issues
11. Traffic issues and what has happened to the TSAC
12. Center parking, a parking garage, a parking garage with Senior Center combined
13. Economic Development
14. Lexpress
15. Disability issues and access
16. Environmental issues including recycling

David Kaufman took a photo of the Executive Council members present for display on the TMMA website.

Meeting adjourned at 8:29pm.
Submitted by Darwin Adams, Clerk