

Town of Northbridge
Finance Committee Meeting Minutes
March 20, 2024 at 6:30PM

Committee Members in Attendance: Plato Adams, Jim Barron, Sean Ferry, Steve Gogolinski, David Graham, and Chris Thompson

Finance Committee Member not in Attendance: None

Town of Northbridge Administration and Department Managers, etc., in Attendance:

Adam Gaudette, Town Manager, Town of Northbridge, MA

Amy McKinstry, Superintendent, Northbridge Public Schools, Town of Northbridge, MA

Melissa Walker, Director of Business and Finance, Northbridge Public Schools, Town of Northbridge, MA

Brian Paulhus, Board of Selectmen, Town of Northbridge, MA

Heather Alden, School Committee Member, Town of Northbridge, MA

Jill Leonard, School Committee Member, Town of Northbridge, MA

Taxpayer(s) in Attendance: Barry Gallant

Finance Committee Meeting:

At 6:30PM the Finance Committee Meeting was called to order by Plato Adams.

NPS Budget Review / Discussion

Amy McKinstry, NPS Superintendent and Melissa Walker, NPS Director of Business and Finance Reviewed / discussed NPS's budget for the next fiscal year as outlined below:

School Enrollment and Class Size SY 2024-2025

- NES: 911
- NMS: 390
- NHS: 491

Since the 2019 – 2020 FY, the following increases have occurred in NPS

ELL – Increased from 2.1 to 3.7, a five year increase of 27

SWD - Increased from 16.1 to 20.9, a five year increase of 71

Low Income - Increased from 29 to 38.4, a five year increase of 136

High Needs - Increased from 39.6 to 50, a five year increase of 145

EL – An English Learner is “a student who does not speak English or whose native language is not English, and who is not currently able to perform ordinary classroom work in English.

SWD – A Student With Disabilities is any student with a disability that, as a result of their disability, requires specially designed instruction and/or one or more related services (i.e. speech) to access and make progress in the general curriculum.

LI – A Low Income student meets one of the following criteria: participates in state public

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assistance programs; is reported by the district as homeless; or, is certified as low income (185% of Federal Poverty Level – which is \$31,200/year for a family of 4).

HN – A student is categorized as High Needs if he or she is designated as either low income (prior to 2015, and from 2022 to present), economically disadvantaged (from 2015 to 2021), EL/former EL, or a student with disabilities.

Focus for the FY25 Budget

- Maintain the additional positions acquired with ESSER funding that support student mental health and special education.
- Maintain a strong core academic program that focuses on providing students with engaging and varied learning opportunities to set them up for success.
- Maintain appropriate levels of support for our students identified as high needs (SWDs, LI, or EL.).
- Maintain a staffing level that will allow us to develop and implement new strategic goals and initiatives aligned to a new vision for our NPS students.
- Ensure a safe and healthy teaching and learning environment.

Potential Challenges

- Financially supporting the goals and initiatives of a new three-year District Strategic Plan that reflects a new Portrait of a Graduate, and a new vision . . . as well as a mission that includes meeting the evolving needs of our 21st century students and provides the necessary foundation and support to ensure their engagement in the academic process and their success after high school and beyond.
- Unknown OOD costs (due to potential incoming students/families or changes in student placement)
- Unknown costs associated with upcoming contract negotiations.

FY25 Expense Drivers: Level Services

Category, Increase and Contributing Factors

Salaries \$103,896

- Salary grid step increases
- Negotiated collective bargaining % increases NTA/IA (1.5%)
- Offset by FY24 replacement hire savings carrying forward
- Due to current year vacancies & replacement savings, budgeted level services salaries for FY25 compared to projected actual salaries for FY24 (vs. original budgeted FY24) is closer to \$1M

Out of District Tuition & Transportation

\$ 605,513

- 34 students budgeted in FY25 vs. 28 students budgeted in FY24
- 4 less placements (3 graduating, 1 returning to district)
- OSD set inflation rate at 4.69%
- Tuition Increase: \$395k
- Transportation Increase: \$210k (24 vs. 18 runs)

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Made Up of:

Grants:	\$	1,165,701
Revolvers:	\$	4,850,122
FY 2025 Appropriation from the Town:	\$	26,321,630
In-District Per Pupil Expenditure*:		
Northbridge:	\$	16,813.24

The FY 2025 Total Operational Budget increased from \$32,086,703 in FY 2024 to \$32,337,452 in FY 2025 an increase of 0.78%,

*Per pupil expenditures are the expected cost of educating each student in the district; calculated by dividing a district's operating costs by its total enrollment.

Budget Gap

FY 2025 Level Services Budget:	\$	33,045,173
Less:		
Appropriations:	\$	26,321,630
Grants:	\$	1,165,701
Revolver:	\$	4,763,567
FY 2025 Deficit:	\$	(794,275)

Options to Close the Gap:

- Increase the appropriation
 - Unlikely as initial proposed appropriation increase needed to be reduced to cover fixed cost/indirect cost increases FY23 and FY24 Chapter 70 minimum per pupil adjustments made in July/August from \$30 to \$60 per pupil minimum ~ \$57,540
 - Utilize additional funds from revolvers
 - Reduce balance below projected \$1M safety net
 - Increases the deficit for future years as less revolver funds will be available
- Budget reductions
 - Reduce the increased cost to offer the same level of services by reducing services
 - Majority of reductions will be reductions in personnel

Reorganization of Positions

- Currently have 1.0 Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) & 1.0 Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst (BCaBA) to support the District
- BCaBA is required to be supervised by a BCBA, resulting in the BCBA being pulled from another building being supported
- Due to significant increases in behavioral needs at NES, it would be more beneficial for NES to have a full-time BCBA assigned to, and housed in, their building to allow for consistent, on-going support for the Rise and Connect programs

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- A second BCBA would support the behavioral needs at Middle School and High School
- Health grant requires full-time nurse leader when enrollment is greater than 2,000 or a half-time nurse leader when enrollment is less than 2,000
- As enrollment has dropped below 2,000, a nurse can serve as nurse leader half-time and directly support students half-time
- The permanent sub nurse was a half time position at MS that was increased to full-time with ESSER funds to also help support NES. With the loss of ESSER funds, the half-time NES perm sub nurse will be absorbed in the budget, but the half time perm sub nurse position at MS will be reduced, and those services will instead be covered by the other half of the school nurse leader (who may also help cover at the HS or elsewhere in the district as needed.)
- In a recent survey of all MS and HS students, there were three prominent requests for courses across the board: financial literacy, wood shop, and culinary
- MS/HS schedules have been revised for next year to have a non-rotating last block to allow for MS/HS collaborations, as well as HS internship and capstone Opportunities
- The Dean/Vocational Coordinator will work with community partners and the BV Ed Hub to develop internships, shadow opportunities, work/school schedules, and effective oversight and programming for same
- The Vocational Coordinator side of the position will also work with the middle school to create opportunities for the middle school students to participate in HS activities and audit classes to ensure they are aware of all the great opportunities we have available to them at the high school, as well as to provide a smooth transition to high school

Reorganization of Positions

- Title I funding is allotted to each school district based on the number of students who are Low Income, as well as the overall population at each Title I school (NMS and NES).
- NES will have 911 students, and NMS will have 390 students, therefore, in order to provide more equitable services according to needs and population, app. 70% of Title I funds should be allocated to NES and 30% to NMS
- NMS currently has a two Title I intervention positions (teachers), NES has four intervention positions (tutors); however, the NMS positions total over 50% of grant
- The NMS positions will be reorganized to the tutor model (like NES), one ELA and one math, to provide intervention support to MS students during next year's RAMS blocks
- The remainder of the current NMS Title I funding will be transferred to NES to support a Title I Academic/Instructional Coach that will collaborate with teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders to design and implement effective instructional and intervention strategies, assess student progress, and provide targeted professional development with a primary goal of improving student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap

Additional Needs:

Not Proposed in FY25 Budget

- Athletic Trainer
- MS Guidance Counselor (scheduling, HS transition, college and career prep, speakers, etc.)
- Full-time Dean – HS
- Full-time Vocational Coordinator – HS
- Culinary/Home Economics (MS/HS)

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Budget Gap – FY 2026 – Estimated Shortfall (\$2.7 Million Dollars)

Based on the discussion a shortfall of \$2.7 million dollars in the Northbridge Public Schools is projected to occur in FY 2026.

A discussion took place as to why additional cuts weren't made in FY 2025 to mitigate any extreme cuts that will need to be made in FY 2026 to balance the NPS budget.

Per Amy McKinstry, Superintendent, Town of Northbridge, MA, additional cuts in FY 2025 would exacerbate the problem, and once taxpayers realize that immediate cuts are being made to various programs, etc, additional students would School Choice Out of the school district, that would cost the Town of Northbridge additional tuition monies that will need to be paid to other towns.

A discussion took place on the options available to offset the projected large shortfall of \$2.7 million in FY 2026. Going forward, options available is to make additional cuts in FTE as well as the potential for a Proposition 2 ½ Override.

It was noted that a Proposition 2 ½ Override has never passed in the Town of Northbridge, and to address this issue, notification and public awareness programs needs to begin now with a consistent message. Waiting until the Fall and/or next Spring's Annual Town Meeting to notify taxpayers of a potential Proposition 2 ½ and the rationale / reason for the Override would impact the passing of the Override.

It was noted by Heather Alden, School Committee Member, Town of Northbridge, that the quality of education in the Town of Northbridge would benefit everyone, and therefore a Proposition 2 ½ Override would be an option available and needed to maintain the quality of education in Town.

Town Manager FY 2025 Budget Update

- a. FY 2025 Budget Outlook
- b. FY 2025 Preliminary Budget
- c. Spring Annual Town Meeting Warrant Draft

New Revenues Available:	\$	1,061,657	
Less Expenses:			
Insurance (Health Insurance):	\$	-----	
Workers Compensation:	\$	16,927	
Retirement System:	\$	42,673	
Liability Insurance:	\$	53,114	
Unemployment:	\$	100,000	
Benefit Expenses:	\$	212,714	7.24%
NPS Budget:	\$	432,777	1.67%
BVT	\$	243,820	13.20%
Trade School	(\$	25,000)	-7.14 %
School Funding	\$	651,597	2.32%
General Govt Offices	\$	197,346 (1)	2.04%

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(1) General Government Increase	\$ 197,346	
Less:		
o Elections	\$ 15,653	
o Landfill	\$ 26,120	
o Playground / Recreation	\$ 17,000	
o TOTAL	(\$ 58,773)	
 (2) Total Available Gen Govt	 \$ 138,573	 1.43%

Other Upcoming Finance Meeting Discussions

- a.** March 27th: Public Meeting and Vote Positions

Prior Finance Committee Meeting Minutes – 03/13/2024

A motion to approve the 03/13/2024 Finance Committee Meeting Minutes was made by Chris Thompson, seconded by David Graham, and unanimously approved.

Adjournment

Since no further business was to be transacted, a motion to adjourn the Finance Committee Meeting at 8:23PM was made by Chris Thompson, seconded by David Graham, and unanimously approved.

Respectfully Submitted,

/s/ James P. Barron, Clerk, Town of Northbridge Finance Committee