

Board of Finance

Town of Essex
29 West Avenue
Essex, CT 06426
Via Remote & In Person- 7:00 p.m.
Conference Room A

MINUTES

Thursday March 30, 2022

In Attendance: Keith Crehan, Campbell Hudson, Mary-Louise Polo (via Zoom),
Ethan Goller (via Zoom)

Also In Attendance: Jim Francis, Treasurer
Danielle Sanso, Board Clerk
Tracey Celentano, Finance Director
Kelley Sterner
Lon Seidman, Essex Board of Education Chair
Brian White, Superintendent of Schools
Robert Grissom, Finance Director
Norman Needleman, First Selectman

The meeting was called to order at 7:03 pm by Board of Finance Chairman Keith Crehan.

Campbell Hudson made a motion to amend the agenda to include action upon the selectman's and Essex Board of Education budget and take potential action upon the capital improvement sinking fund request. Seconded by Keith Crehan. Passed unanimously. Motion carried.

Keith Crehan turned the floor over to Lon Seidman to go over the Essex Elementary School budget. Lon greeted the board members and introduced superintendent Brian White and finance director Bob Grissom. He started by saying that this has been a very challenging couple of years and that this budget reflects these challenges and recovery. This is going to drive a lot of the discussion on budget and class sizes. The current number is \$8,144,643 which represents a 3.6% increase (\$283,000). The region 4 portion has reduced by 1.55%. The total education increase with these two components in place is 0.86%.

Our budget drivers this year are reductions in contractual salaries due to retirements, a new contract starting for teachers for the next 3 years, increase in health insurance contribution, and increases to salaries (in line with what we have seen in the past).

A couple of things we are adding to the budget is custodian time (some COVID funds helped for extra hours). These hours were reduced a number of years ago as the population declined. We are finding that these hours probably shouldn't have been cut in the first place.

On the recovery side there is an increase in paraeducator salaries to meet emerging student needs. These needs are almost entirely recovery related. There are challenges within the buildings and a lot of learning loss due to school being shut down.

State, local, and national data shows a difference between students that were learning in person versus students that were learning remote. We are doing a lot of catching up with social development. This year everyone is starting off in different places with a lot of stress and there are a lot of challenging behaviors.

Students in school had complications due to quarantine. Staff also had to quarantine either for themselves or their children. Getting everyone back on the same page is the story of this year's budget.

Employee benefits are reducing this year in large part because our insurance pool is catching back up. We had the issue where the reserve had been totally cleaned out. The last two years we have been funding extra to get that reserve built back up. There was a concern that people who had delayed medical treatment would rush in to catch up but this was something that had been planned for. This year we are not going to fund that extra amount. We are being conservative for normal funding, putting more in than less for the self-insurance pool.

Course reimbursement is going up slightly. We do fund continuing education classes for teachers (as part of their contract) and we anticipate that need going back up again.

In terms of out of district transportation and tuition we have done a lot to keep kids here as much as we can. We have more and more programming to be able to keep them here. Sometimes there are needs that are too much for us to handle.

With field trips we are expecting kids to go places again. The PTO does fund some of those field trip.

With travel and conferencing we are expecting people to get out and learn with their colleagues and other districts again.

Various includes textbooks and supplies, odds and ends, a lot of materials we did not replace in the past 2 years and now that the kids are back in school and using them again, they need to be replaced.

Brian White spoke about the increase in behavioral needs across all 3 elementary schools. There is a proposal for program in district, supporting all 3 elementary schools, for students that have higher level behavioral needs than what we currently support in our schools. This will allow us to meet the educational needs of the students here in town and prevent us from having to rely on outside services (out of district services). There are certainly some cost benefits, including tuitions and costs and it is an educationally superior option.

Lon Seidman said that this new program is similar to what we do for autism and our clinical needs areas. These programs reduce the need for out of district placements. Having supervision district allows us to do this across district collaboration.

Lon went on to talk about class sizes. Because of the recovery from learning loss we feel that there should be a smaller teacher to student ratio. We feel that we are adequately staffed for the next year but will continue monitoring.

In terms of enrollment, special education numbers have been relatively stable despite the fact that the student population is about half of what it used to be. There are more students in special ed, but we are paying less. We are doing more in house to prevent out of district tuition.

The Coronavirus Relief Fund (March-December) bridged the canceled school year through the beginning of the next one. This funded daily building subs (Essex elementary has a certified building sub) which was helpful because it was difficult to find substitute teachers. This also funded additional custodian hours and PPE.

The initial grant was called ESSER I (January-end of year). We received \$14,000 (January-June) which was used to fund the building subs and custodians.

ESSER II, which was \$62,000, is what we are currently using for this school year. This is being used to continue the building subs and temporary custodians. We also have a summer school program that we will be using some of the ESSER funds for (from all 3 towns).

Over the past 2 years, the cafeteria has been in the best shape it has ever been in financially. Every school meal is paid for by the government provided it has all of the nutritional components. The Seamless Summer program includes breakfast, lunch, and meals available at the schools over the summer. This will continue for the duration of the pandemic, until further notice. Now the cafeteria funds are paying for supplies and equipment that are needed. We are allowed to roll 6 months of operating costs back into the budget.

For the 2022-2023 school year we have ESSER 3. This will continue helping with salaries for custodians, field trips, and supplies. It will also be helping with funding for a few new positions (Over a 3-year period). This is including a math interventionist, adding an additional social worker, and increased custodial support.

In terms of capitol, we are still putting \$60,000 into the sinking fund.

We have 4 items, 3 of them are for this year. The fourth is the air handlers, which is a heads up for something that will need to be done in the near future. This is a fresh air exchange system which would be eligible for some of this grant money coming out. We have been running these units really hard. The state's recommendation was to start them up at a higher rate of air flow before you open and leave them running a certain amount of time after everyone leaves. The ask for this year is to put it on the radar, and we are going to work on getting grants and reimbursements.

The current floor machine (auto scrubber) is still functioning, but we are not sure how much longer it will continue. The new machine will use same consumable and same parts. When the old machine dies, we can harvest parts out of it and won't have to buy new consumables.

The current wall mats in the gym are approximately 20 years old. The cost listed includes the removal and installation.

These Minutes Have Not Yet Been Approved

Campbell Hudson made a motion to submit for review and discussion at the Public Hearing the 2022-2023 Board of Selectman's Budget in the amount of \$9,076,622 and the Essex Board of Education 2022-2023 budget of \$8,144,643. Seconded by Ethan Goller. Passed unanimously. Motion carried.

Campbell Hudson made a motion to approve and recommend to Town Meeting an appropriation from the EES Capital Improvement Sinking Fund in an amount not to exceed \$48,900 as requested by the Essex Board of Education. Seconded by Ethan Goller. Passed unanimously. Motion carried.

Ethan Goller made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:20 pm. Seconded by Keith Crehan. Passed unanimously. Motion carried.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Danielle Sanso".

Danielle Sanso
Recording Clerk