



Natick Finance Committee

Pursuant to Chapter 40, Section 3 of the Town of Natick By-Laws, I attest that the attached copy is the approved copy of the minutes for the following Meeting:

**Town of Natick Finance Committee- Education & Learning Subcommittee
Meeting Date: February 16, 2021**

The minutes were approved through the following action:

Motion: XXXX
Made by: xxxx
Seconded by: xxxx
Vote: x – x – x
Date: <date>, 2021

Respectfully submitted,
Bruce Evans
Clerk
Natick Finance Committee

Time: February 16, 2021 @ 05:00 PM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

Agenda:

- KT Budget review

Attendees:

Education & Learning Subcommittee:

Jim Scurlock
Bruce Evans
Jeff DeLuca
Richard Pope

Keefe Tech:

Mr. Jonathan Evans, Superintendent Keefe Tech
Ms. Dolly Sharek, Director of Finance and Business Operations, Keefe Tech

Mr. Evans moved to open the meeting, seconded by Mr. Pope, voted 4 – 0 – 0.

Mr. DeLuca = yes
Mr. Evans = yes
Mr. Pope = yes
Mr. Scurlock = yes

Presenter:

Mr. Jonathan Evans, Superintendent Keefe Tech (KT)

Mr. Evans said this is the preliminary budget for KT and, until we have our public hearing next month (March 8, 2021), we would not be in a position to finalize either our budget or the assessment requests for our member communities. However, we want to take this opportunity to let you know where we stand at this point. As always, we strive for full transparency to discuss our budget, identify some of the moving parts, and to give you the opportunity to questions about our operation or the budget that we are in the process of preparing. Natick is well represented by two members on KT's school committee - Ruth Mori and Elizabeth Smith-Friedman who, over the past couple of years, have really contributed a great deal to the well-being of our district and are representing your town well. I would also like to acknowledge the support and partnership with Dr. Anna Nolin and NPS for allowing families in Natick who are considering career and technical education to learn about us so that they can make an informed choice and to support those families when they decide that career and technical education might be the best fit.

Typically, when you invite us in for our preliminary budget presentation, we can provide you information on the initial operating budget, but we are typically waiting for the Governor's budget and don't usually have a sense of how the assessment might shape up. In this case, we actually have some projections for our chapter 70 funding and some of the state revenue that might be coming our way. But we're still operating with our preliminary budget. So this is our snapshot of the budget as it stands now and I hope is it would only get better in terms of a lower figure when we come together with you again following our March meeting with our member communities. We met three times to where we reviewed all budget areas. At the end of that process, in January, our School Committee voted a preliminary budget for FY 22. And on January 11th, that was approved in the

amount of \$22,176,527. And that figure represents an increase of 4.95% over FY 21. This represents the highest point that we will have in our budget process, because we're currently working on efficiencies and ways to get that to a lower number for the benefit of our communities.

The areas that had the most significant change or increases from the prior year (those that increased by 25,000 or more).

- Health Insurance - as a preview, we believe we're getting a rate that is lower than what is projected in this preliminary budget. But until it's voted by our committee, we don't have that change to provide before you but rest assured that number will be lower than what's presented.
- Transportation increase (+\$48,125). This is the second year of our transportation contract
- During the pandemic we have needed to adjust in our technology infrastructure when we shifted to remote learning, and we are now pleased to be able to support a one-to-one Chromebook initiative for our students that has been necessary for remote learning, and we believe when our school is able to open up even more, that will continue to be a benefit. So the cost and building technology and district-wide supplies, those increases reflect that transition in technology.
- Contracted services grounds (+\$52,500) – this is the cost of snow removal for our district. Over the last several years, we've been transitioning from a staff model to a contract services model for our custodial services. When we had our own custodians, they did the snow removal through overtime hours, so we now need to contract with a company that does that for us. The transition to contracted services saves us about \$140,000 each year, so it is definitely a net benefit.
- Asset acquisition (+\$29,326) is an infrastructure upgrade for our Siemens energy contract (we have two more years on the lease)
- Four FTE teacher positions (ELA, Math, Science, & Carpentry) (+\$240,000) – This increase is included in the salaries line item, but we wanted to flag it so you know exactly what we're looking to do. This is the result of the increase in overall student population and enrollment, moving from 800 students last year to 817 students this year. Our classes are getting pretty full, with class size in our academic subject areas averaging between 25 students and the high 20s. This is a pretty substantial number for us, especially in light of the fact that 43% of our students are on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). To best serve our students, we need additional academic faculty members who will allow us to decrease those class sizes going forward. For that reason there is an in there is a staff increase in English Language Arts, Math, and Science, The Social Studies Department on does not meet both weeks in the freshman year so we can make do with what we have. Also, in the past couple of years, we've had more students interested in carpentry than we could serve, to enable them to do outside carpentry education projects and adequately supervise those students. This teacher will allow carpentry to become a three person program as with electrical and plumbing to allow us to move forward and give our students the best experience.
- Overall staff salary increases (+\$295,120) based on a 2.25% COLA increase, steps and column shifts for our faculty members. These additions total \$1,052,733 and the increase of our operating budget is \$1,045,527. We hope that demonstrates to you that we try to be prudent and responsible in other areas of our budget while being transparent about where the increases are.

District enrollment has increased to 817 students (812 in our district plus five other students from our non-resident communities and upper class years), so this is an overall increase of 17 students or 2.1%. As of October 1, 2020 Natick has a slight decrease in enrollment, going from 60 students to 56 students, a 6.7% decline. This in no way reflects any negativity or lack of support in our relationship with NPS. It just happened this year that four fewer students expressed an interest in KT. In looking specific numbers, last year we had 16 graduates and this year we have 12 freshmen resulting in the net change of four students,

Chapter 70 Update

In March 2020, just before the state shutdown, we had an optimistic picture of the Chapter 70 funding and built our budget based on a favorable projection.

Actual Chapter 70 funding in 2020 was \$302,692 less than we projected. When I came to you last March, we were beginning to go into uncertain times and I said that if there was a change in Chapter 70 funds, we do not have a plan to go back to our member communities for additional assessment funds and would make it work out from within our district.

We were able to absorb that shortfall within our operating budget from areas of surplus that existed last year. We weren't paying for buses and weren't paying as much for substitute teachers, coaches, and some of the supplies and consumables that don't get used in a closed building generated some surplus for us. Were we able to accurately predict the Chapter 70, which nobody could do facing the year we've all had, we would actually have had a higher assessment request for Natick because we would have had less Chapter 70 funding (+22,844)

Current Natick Assessment

In our preliminary budget, the Natick assessment request would be \$1,269,137, which represents a decrease of \$65,261, 4.89% decrease. Without last year's Chapter 70 shortfall, Natick's assessment would have been a larger decrease of 6.49%. Once again, this is the initial cut of the budget and is the high point. We will be looking for efficiencies within our budget, looking to reduce operating budget costs while looking for additional revenue loss offsets. So we likely will be asking Natick for an assessment that is lower than this figure. The next step for us is to continue to look at our preliminary budget and prepare for our March 8 public hearing where we will come in with the most efficient number that we can. We'll have our public school committee hearing and a final vote on the budget on March 8, and then we will be able to communicate our final assessment requests. And then I'm after presenting to the various towns' Finance Committee's and the Framingham City Council. We will then go to our municipalities for Town meeting and the Framingham City Council to seeking approval for our FY 22 budget

Questions from the Committee.

Mr. B Evans asked what the duration of the transportation contract is, noting that NPS is in the process of negotiating another three year contract and going out to bid. Mr. J Evans said it's a three year contract with two one year options.

Mr. B Evans said this was very encouraging because what we're hearing through our NPS contacts is that the transportation companies are being very guarded about contracts and potential shutdowns, so this is good news. You

Mr. B Evans noted that you mentioned that many students are on IEPs and asked whether KT using paraprofessionals and other special educators. Mr. J Evans said KT has a full complement of special

educators, each of whom has a caseload of approximately 25 students where they oversee the plan, and the progress reporting for students. We have a number of ancillary service providers, speech and language therapists, people adjustment counselors and the like, whatever components are in an IEP, we provide those services. We do have a number of paraprofessionals who we deploy into Regular Ed settings to make sure that accommodations and services are being met for our students in their academic and career and technical environments.

Mr. B Evans said NPS has told us that, in the post COVID world, they expect an uptick in enrollment from kids that have been outside public, some going to private schools, others being home-schooled, and asked what trends KT is seeing. Mr. J Evans said he hopes that students who expressed an interest if we have room to take in students, we're always happy to maximize the services we could provide. We are a little different in terms of what we've been experiencing when compared to a K-12 district like NPS since we don't have on the impact of kindergarten enrollment in a pandemic. We don't have parents deciding whether or not to send their child and maybe waiting a bit longer until the world is a little bit more normal before they do. Also, a number of the families that choose career and technical education aren't necessarily weighing that against a private school option, but are instead interested specifically in the type of education that we provide. So I hope that there's an increase, but I do not expect a surge like you might see in some other communities.

Mr. Pope asked if there were any significant increases below the \$25,000 threshold. Mr. Evans said KT has been doing some contract service work for our IT department, so there are some decreases in some of our salary line items there. But by and large, we've tried to remain level-service in this budget

Mr. Scurlock asked how the transition to Chromebooks has gone and how KT is your IT support. Mr. Evans said all schools in Massachusetts were in crisis response mode when we all shifted to a remote model last year. We looked at the resources we had available and we had been using static computer resources and had a number of laptop carts that were shared by departments where there might be 20 Chromebooks or laptops. We deployed those devices to students and had pick-up days where families came out to pick up laptops for use at home. And then, through some CARES Act money and some of our own budget surplus to purchase additional devices so all students could utilize that technology. It was used specifically in a remote learning model not only using the technology in our school, but it was using the technology in a home learning environment. Our students did really well with it and our teachers did a good job in kind of transitioning their approach to education. There's a big difference between utilizing computer resources in a classroom and depending on it as your mode of communication with students and your instruction tool, so there was a learning curve and that is generally gone now. Our re-opening plan focused on getting students back into the building over the last few weeks and we focused our career and technical education for in-person learning. In September, when we thought we were starting the year in person, we had put together a hybrid model that blended academic, career and technical instruction. Unfortunately, Framingham remained a COVID red community for longer than most other communities in MetroWest and we were unable to safely open. And by the time we were, we found that the greatest deficit for our learning was the hands-on instruction we provide. So we were doing pretty well with remote academic instruction, but wanted to get our students into the building, so they could use tools, get hands-on training, and not just watch the teachers or do activities that simulate their trade or craft, but actually do it in the building.

Mr. Evans said he has a contract service model for IT support. We had a staff member in the past, but with the departure of that staff member, we wanted to find the best fit for our school. As we

looked for it, we developed a relationship with a contract service provider, where we have two staff members who are actually our contract service providers on site doing IT support. We have a budgeted position for a Tech Director. So we have somewhat of a hybrid support model within the IT department as well where we have our Tech Director and contract service support for the execution of tasks. We're looking to hire for the Tech Director position and staying afloat with our contract service staff at this time.

Mr. Scurlock asked whether remote learning may / may not play a greater in the next academic year. Mr. Evans said that there is no replacement for in-person instruction, the dynamic that you can see in a whole classroom as opposed to students on-screen and the ability to work together in a more organic way than a Zoom breakout session. Having said that, we want to make sure that the public health circumstance permits us to get to that point, we are budgeting and planning for a more typical year in FY 22, but we will always be prepared to pivot if there's a need for the safety of our school community.

Mr. Scurlock noted that much of the career instruction is hands-on and asked how KT overcame that on a remote basis. Mr. Evans said KT tried to overcome it, but I'd say we didn't fully succeed. To be honest, I would not want to hire an electrician from my house who watched videos on how to do something, but would want one who actually did it. So I would say to you that there was more of the code and theory work than our students would have liked or our instructors would want to do. There's been a lot of demonstration, a lot of videos, and a couple of our teachers who, even when they were home and the building was closed, set up professional resource workstations in their own homes to show students how to do stuff. We've had instructors take cameras out to work sites for demonstrations to show students how to do things and we've collaborated with other career and tech schools to "divide and conquer" the curriculum by each videotaping components and demonstrating work being done. Now that the students are coming back into the building, we are focusing our energy on the in-person, hands-on component and doing less of the related theory, We're getting the students using tools, getting safety awareness training in, and having our sophomores in carpentry smell what cut wood smells like in a shop and get the full experience of being at our school. It's been a challenge and instructors have done the best they could, but we're really ready to get going hands on now.

Mr. Scurlock asked if this is a downward trend for Natick in the past few years. Mr. Evans said over the last few years, there's been a slight downward trend, but we've also had some high points in the 70s for students from Natick. We are at the mercy of 13- and 14-year olds making decisions. Dr. Nolin and I participated in a workgroup and she has helped me with aspiring Career and Technical Superintendents in something called Leadership Academy to demonstrate an exemplar of a relationship between a municipal community and a regional vocational school because that is not necessarily what exists all across the state. Her focus is on what's in the best interest of students and providing a full menu of options and our work with NPS is a model for others to see. So, it's more a matter of preference and Dr. Nolin would agree that there are some students within NPS who could be better served by KT.

Mr. B Evans noted that he had wondered how KT had pulled off the remote learning and realized that it was through your collaboration and the extraordinary efforts of your teachers, so kudos to them for reaching out and getting creative. Mr. J Evans said he appreciates this pat on my staff's back and noted that KT has well over 400 applications for next year's freshman class, so there is renewed interest in our school for next year. And I think we do a pretty good job talking about the school and what a great place it is. But it's really the testament of students who chose us that drives others to come to us. And that's going very well.

Mr. Evans moved to adjourn, seconded by Mr. DeLuca, voted 4 – 0 – 0.

Mr. DeLuca = yes

Mr. Evans = yes

Mr. Pope = yes

Mr. Scurlock = yes

MEETING ADJOURNED 5:45 PM