



Tuesday, March 26, 2024
Hanson Select Board
Select Board Meeting Room, Town Hall
Open Session

Members Present: Laura FitzGerald-Kemmett, Joseph Weeks, Edwin Heal, Ann Rein, David George

Members Absent:

Others Present: Lisa Green, Town Administrator; Lynn McDowell, Executive Assistant; Eric Kinsherf, Town Accountant; Kevin Sullivan, Finance Committee; Frank Milisi, Capital Improvement Committee

I CALL TO ORDER

Ms. FitzGerald-Kemmett called the meeting to order.

MOTION by Mr. Weeks, seconded by Ms. Rein, to adjourn to Executive Session, to return back to Open Session for 6pm. ***Voted 5 – 0***

Roll call –Rein-Aye; FitzGerald-Kemmett-Aye; Weeks -Aye; Heal-Aye

The Select Board returned from Executive Session at 6:07pm

II PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPCOMING MEETINGS

Ms. Rein read the public announcements and upcoming meetings.

III NEW BUSINESS

1. Discussion regarding possible school override

Ms. Green shared that the School committee met the previous week to discuss it proposed budget and assessments to the towns. After several conversations with both Town Administrators stated neither town would be able to fund an assessment as proposed without drastically editing each respective Town budgets; neither town is able to provide anything above 5%. However, during the School Committee meeting, all of the Superintendent's scenario recommendations were rejected, including the School Committee using its own one-time funding to fill its budget gaps or reducing current staffing. It moved forward with the budget as presented, requiring the Town of Hanson to have an assessment of 10.2%.

Ms. Green met with the Town Accountant to Eric to review numbers to see what this assessment will means to the Town; the cost will be in excess of \$15.532M. The total Free Cash amount is only \$1.486M; the shortfall will be \$1.579M. There will be a need to find \$723,000 to fill the gap. Ms. Green reiterated the Superintendent's suggestion to use about \$250,000 of DESE funding to meet its shortfall, but the School Committee said no to all. The Select Board noted its disappointment of the arrogance to the School Committee to require the Towns of Hanson and Whitman reduce other budget line items, yet not even consider reducing any of the school's budgetary line items.

Ms. Green stated as the Town needs to fill a gap of \$723,000, one of the options is to have a school override. She noted, after her conversation with Ms. Clark, the Town of Whitman Board of Selectmen is having the same conversation.

The Select Board noted it would be a very tight window to set the plan for an override into motion. There will further conversations with all parties, with the hope the dollar amount requested will be reduced. And if it that happens, hard to determine what the amount will be.

Basing the Town's options at the highest mark of 10.2%, if the Board chooses not to have an override, drastic cuts will need to happen. That would include staff reductions for Town Hall, Police and Fire as well as closing the Library; it would be crippling Town operations.

If the Town pushed back on the School and stated it will only provide an assessment of 5%, the Town will need to present a budget of 5% in the 2024 May Annual Meeting warrant, then present the School Committee's budget, contingent upon an override. If override does not pass, and the Town of Whitman presents the same option with similar outcome, the School will need to make cuts. If the override passes, the School has the budget as is and both towns will need to make all cuts across all areas.

The Board noted, it is locked at the 5% assessment; it is all the Town can afford without needing to make additional cuts to budget line items. And that the Town of Whitman is having the same conversation during its meeting tonight, as its budget is also stressed.

And with the emphasis on the 5% assessment, it effects good faith negotiations with the unions as the Select Board cannot give good answers regarding the Town's financial situation next year. The Board was very clear about financial stability with all communication channels.

After the School Committee vote, Ms. FitzGerald-Kemmett reached out to the Whitman Selectmen and School Committee chairs, offering to meet and discuss the possibility of reducing the assessment. The meeting is scheduled for April 1, 2024; the Town Administrators and Superintendent will also be in attendance. It was agreed, Monday after easter, TA, super, and Chairs. Her plan is to listen to the information presented and bring it back to the Board to discuss and evaluate as a board. By keeping the communication lines open she hopes it will bring to a better point.

The Town Accountant created a chart, which will be posted on the Town's website, illustrating the impact on residents' real estate tax for this override. It took the average single family assessed value for FY24, being \$499,873, with the average tax bill increasing about \$179 to total about \$6600 annually. Ms. Green stated this is related only to the override proposed to cover the school budget difference of \$723,000. The chart starts with assessed values of \$250, 000 up to \$1.55M, covering almost all homeowners in Town, to give a good understanding of what the annual increase will be.

Ms. Green stated she will need a Board vote tonight to place an override on the ballot as she need to present to the Town Clerk the exact ballot language by April 12, 2024. The Select Board

office will need to prepare two budgets for the May Annual Town Meeting warrant, each as its own article.

Mr. Sullivan stated it is a repeat of last year, and the School Committee is not working to be a rational partner. He also shared his disappointment in the change of relationships; it is no longer a cordial working relationship. He suggested the Board could wait the School Committee, but it would be a dangerous game of chicken to see if it would actually willing to come to the table and talk. To continue this way, he acknowledged, it will lead to overrides for the next few years. He agreed it would be preferable to have a that meeting prior to committing to an override. He stated if an override is needed, it may be preferable to do one large next year instead of consecutive years; the Town could be burned out for such action.

The final option would be a Super Town Meeting, with a one-twelfth budget to start the year.

There is not a large Town budget to slash. Most departments are two-person offices. And the past few years focused on professional development for staffing as well as awarded grant funding to provide the best services for the Town. Police and Fire are now at the levels needed to ensure safety for residents. Comparing to some of the unreserved accounts Whitman is leveraging, Mr. Sullivan stated over the past years Hanson has trimmed or closed these funds as it was not making sense to maintain through Town Meeting requests; preferable to use as a budget line item. And the Stabilization Fund is directly related to the Town's bond rating; it is best not to touch.

While it is still too early to sign off, if there is to be a budget override, it will be a school override. While the Select Board has not voted yet, the message to the School Committee has been not in excess of 5%. And going to the ballot puts residents in the difficult decision of making choices. The Board did it best with what was presented; it cannot make cuts operationally as there are none to trim.

Previous boards received regular presentations from the superintendent and school committee members. It again stated it would like the school department to interact as every other department in Town, and update the Board with current happenings, especially changes that happen in the budget process. The Select Board works with each department to address one off issues, and would do the same for the school department.

Ms. Green noted both town administrators see how the stress of the unknown from this budget assessment is affecting their respective staffs. They each pushed back with the School Committee and were disappointed with its decisions, especially noting the irony of the School Committee not using its one-time money to meet its deficiency yet encouraging the towns to do just that.

After much discussion, the Board agreed to wait until next week before voting its decision. The Select Board office will post the proposals on the website and social media for residents to view and review, and advocating. Ms. Green will also work to update the fiscal override predictor.

The Select Board would also like to coordinate with WCHA-TV to create something along the lines of a public service announcement or interview with the Town Accountant and Town Administrator discussing the numbers. It also suggested the possibility of having a question-and-answer forum, as well as posting in the Whitman-Hanson Express. Ms. Green will reach out. The next meeting will include further discussion.

IV ADJOURNMENT

MOTION by Mr. Weeks, seconded by Ms. Rein, to adjourn to Executive Session, and not return to Open Session. ***Voted 5 – 0***

Roll call –George-Aye; Rein-Aye; FitzGerald-Kemmett-Aye; Weeks -Aye; Heal-Aye

Respectfully submitted,

Lynn McDowell