

Town of Freetown Finance Committee
A Joint Meeting with the Town of Lakeville's Finance Committee

Minutes of Meeting Held on Tuesday, January 16, 2024
Freetown Police Station Community Room,
15 Memorial Drive, East Freetown
And Remotely via Zoom

Present: Chair Margaret French, Robert Alderson, Katie Calheta and Kent Wilkins. Emily Anne Dors joins the meeting late, approximately 6:35pm.

Absent: Kara Lees

Also present: Members of the Lakeville Finance Committee (Chair Christopher Plonka & Lawrence Konstant, with appearing Darren Beals), Members of the Freetown-Lakeville Regional School District Committee (Chair Will Sienkewicz, Jean Fox & Jennifer Blum), and Lia Fabian of the Lakeville Select Board.

The meeting was called to order at 6:00pm. This meeting was recorded via Zoom, with these minutes taken from the recording.

Discuss position of both towns financially with regards to the Freetown Lakeville School District

Ms. French says she wants to talk about where our towns are financially and with their budgets. She says Freetown is conservative and leery on what's going to happen with the Bristol-Plymouth building project. We are only paying interest on the debt this year, but next year it's going to fully kick in. Freetown still negotiating union contracts, and has improvements to the Fire Station coming up, along with a Council on Aging/Library building project. Mr. Plonka says Lakeville is in a similar boat, and is looking at a small deficit at the moment they are working to close. They are looking for the school budget to come in at a sustainable number, and the Town is facing a number of other fiscal challenges, like a Fire Station debt exclusion and a future debt exclusion for a new building at Old Colony, along with the reductions in state aid everyone is facing.

Mr. Alderson asks the Lakeville Finance Committee if they have had any contact with the school system. Mr. Plonka says this is his second year on the Finance Committee and his first attempt at working with the Regional School Committee to increase the communication, but has learned it has historically been a challenge; Mr. Alderson describes it as non-existent in his 21 years on the Finance Committee. Mr. Alderson also adds that Freetown's Finance Committee has been requesting a meeting with the Lakeville Finance Committee for 15 years to discuss the school budget. Mr. Plonka says he was very receptive to a meeting, and the communication starts tonight.

Mr. Sienkewicz says the challenges that the Towns are talking about, the schools are talking about as well, but he can recall sitting in Saturday morning budget workshops with both Towns invited and nobody attending year after year. He is surprised the Regional School Committee was not formally invited to this meeting. He agrees the budget process needs to be collaborative, and invites Mr. Alderson and the Finance Committees to reach out to School Committee members to get whatever information they need. He is happy to collaborate.

Mr. Alderson says the school budgets are unsustainable, and the seniors can't take something else added on. He says the towns need to be on the same page regarding the schools. Mr. Sienkewicz agrees, but notes every town in the Commonwealth is facing the same concerns. He says the school's budget is driven by health insurance and contracts with their staff. Mr. Alderson says they will need to reduce cost or increase cash inputs. He isn't sure about state aid, but they seem to be looking at reductions. He thinks the school will need to decrease their budget or find ways to increase cash inputs, which is the why the budgets are unsustainable. Mr. Alderson says the Finance Committee has regularly asked for information the school's E&D figures and never gotten a timely answer on that, until the last minute before we had to vote. Mr. Sienkewicz asks when those requests were made; Mr. Alderson said he personally went over there and asked

them the last five years, and they couldn't give a number or what they were doing with it. Mr. Sienkewicz asks who Mr. Alderson asked; Mr. Alderson says he forgets the person's name.

Mr. Plonka suggests not dwelling on the past, saying it is clear the Committees have questions and needs answers. Tonight's objective is to formulate the questions which will be forwarded to the school system with a date for an answer, and we can go from there. Mr. Sienkewicz says it will be a priority to get the towns the answers they need.

Discuss Concerns Regarding the Change of Financial Personnel at the Central Office

Ms. French added this to the agenda because we all have concerns with the financial staff, just because they are brand new. She recaps that the payroll manager came in April, the part-time interim Finance Director came in July, the accountant in November or December, along with a new Special Ed director and a relatively new superintendent as well. The Finance Committee is concerned with all these new people writing the budget. She wanted to present that and while she is sure they are fine people, the Committee wants to keep an eye on things. Mr. Beals and Ms. Calheta are the representatives to the financial subcommittee, so we can give them information from us to bring back to that committee.

Mr. Plonka thinks we can start the discussion on specific things we want to request. Ms. French asks Mr. Plonka where he received a copy of the General Ledger Report. Mr. Plonka says he received it from the Lakeville Town Administrator, who got it from the school's business manager. Ms. French says it was not sent to Freetown; Mr. Plonka says it was sent to them after a request by the Town Administrator. He thinks the first thing the Committees should request is a copy of this report on a monthly basis; Ms. French says this would tell everyone where they are in the budget to date. The Committees agree to add the General Ledger Year-to-Date Report in the first week of the month for the prior month to the list of regular requests.

On the topic of the General Ledger Year-to-Date report, Ms. French would like to ask what the School Committee clerical funding is used for, which has already gone over budget by 570%. Ms. Fox says the members present are here as guests, not an official meeting, so they are not fully prepared to answer specific questions like that. Ms. French will prepare formal questions to ask of the Regional School Committee at a later date. She notes there are a lot of deficits all over the budget, including salaries, when everything should be somewhere around 50% expended, so she is wondering what exactly is going on. Mr. Alderson thinks the Committees should get together separately to prepare lists of questions, then get back together to consolidate them. Mr. Plonka says he only has a handful and they can probably be done right now; Mr. Alderson reminds him that the Freetown Finance Committee only got the report right now. Mr. Sienkewicz suggests having the school district's business manager at a future meeting to walk the Committee through the budget will be helpful; everyone agrees, and Ms. Calheta suggests sending the questions in advance would be helpful. Mr. Plonka suggests having both Committees review the reports, sending questions to the respective Chairs, and both Chairs will work to combine the lists and schedule a meeting to re-convene along with the business manager. This makes sense to all.

Discussion returns to what else the Committees wish to request. Ms. French says she requested the SIMS Report, which will give us the enrollment figures. She received the in-house numbers of enrollment, but it was not the certified SIMS report. She replied and requested the certified SIMs reports for the last three years and has not heard back. Mr. Plonka says that should be added to the list. Mr. Konstant asks the School Committee members present if enrollment is up or down this year; Ms. Fox says it is slightly up.

Mr. Alderson would like to see the E&D numbers. Ms. French adds the certified E&D figures to the list. Mr. Plonka would like to add to that a projected plan for what the School District will be doing with E&D funds. Mr. Alderson clarifies that he'd like to see both debits and credits to the E&D funding looking back. The Committees settle on looking back for four years and a one-year projection.

Mr. Plonka would like to see a final, detailed version of the FY24 school budget approved previously, as they only see what is proposed.

Mr. Alderson would like to know when the school district was last audited and by whom; Ms. Fox says the School District is audited every year by Lynch & Marini she believes the firm is named, the same firm that has done it for many years. Mr. Plonka would like a copy of that.

Mr. Plonka would also like to see a copy of the School District's budget planning calendar. Mr. Alderson would like to see the School District budget by February 1st, along with all the other departments in Town; Ms. French says the state requires it by March 31st, which is who governs that.

Nobody has any other documents they would like to request.

Mr. Alderson asks the Lakeville Finance Committee is they have an acceptable budget number in mind; Mr. Plonka says they do not. He says they had a meeting with the Lakeville Select Board and Town Administrator in early December to start the budget process on high level placeholders, but nothing official yet. Mr. Alderson thinks everything is going to be tight.

In terms of a timeline, the Committee members will formulate their questions on the December General Ledger Report over the next week, which will be sent to the School District for answers within another two weeks. The Committees will re-convene around February 7, 2024, again at 6pm.

Mr. Sienkewicz says that years ago, the Regional School Committee would hold a budget workshop that would include members of the Finance Committees and Regional School Committees, Boards of Selectmen, building principals and other members of leadership, but the practice was stopped due to a lack of attendance. He says if there is a desire to restart that, he will make it a point to try to get that scheduled as he thinks it will open the door and shed light on the school budget.

Mr. Sienkewicz would also like to respond to the comments made by Ms. French regarding the change in financial personnel, which he says is out of order. He notes the Superintendent has been with the district for almost two years and the Director of Special Education was with the district for many years before leaving and returning; both very experienced. He notes the former Finance Director did leave and took the accountant with her, but the Business Director has been there and is handling the transition towards the new Finance Director, an internal hire, assuming the role July 1st. He says the Regional School Committee has done the necessary planning to ensure there are no collapses and the transition is seamless. He does not feel it was appropriate or the Finance Committee's role to be discussing School personnel in this fashion, especially without the Regional School Committee being a part of the meeting. Ms. French says the Regional School Committee was not invited, as this was to be a discussion amongst ourselves about concerns to bring to the School Committee, it was not intended to be an open discussion or an attack on specific personnel. Ms. Fox says anyone can have concerns, but wants it known the Regional School Committee did their due diligence on these matters and is proud of their staff.

Resident Heather Ashley asks the Finance Committee if it is standard for them to discuss and question new hires at the School District level; Ms. French says the Finance Committee is not questioning the hires made by the Regional School Committee, and thinks she phrased the agenda poorly, as that was not the intent. Mr. Alderson adds the concern is not with individuals, it is concerns with the process. Ms. Calheta thinks the important thing is financial transparency in the budget and budgeting process.

At 6:45pm, motion made by Mr. Alderson, seconded by Ms. Calheta, to adjourn; motion carries unanimously.

Respectfully submitted by:



Timmothy McIntosh, Recordings Clerk

Documents Used by the Finance Committee in this meeting:

- General Ledger Report of the Freetown Lakeville RSD, printed December 18, 2023