

Minutes
West Tisbury Finance Committee Meeting
February 23, 2011
Howes House

Present: Sharon Estrella - chair, Greg Orcutt, Jonathan Revere, Joe Gervais and Katherine Triantafillou. Richard Knabel, Skipper Manter and Cynthia Mitchell, BoS; Jen Rand, Town Administrator.

Guests: Bruce Stone, Town Accountant; Dr. James Weiss, Superintendent of Schools; Laurie Halt, Asst. Superintendent; Amy Tierney, School Business Administrator; Dan Cabot and Perry Ambulos, members of UIRSD school committee; Donna Lowell-Bettencourt, Interim Principal of West Tisbury School; Susan Stevens, Principal of Chilmark School; Jim Hickey, MV Times.

Citizen guests: Kathy Logue, Ernie Mendenhall, Janet Bank, Barbara Day, Robert Day, Gary Montrowl, Bob Post.

As this meeting was a part of the BoS meeting, at 4:30 Richard Knabel called the meeting to order for the BoS, after which, Sharon called the meeting to order for the FinCom

Dan Cabot began the discussion by stating that at the February 8 meeting the FinCom commented on the inefficiencies of the Chilmark School. He said the letters sent to the papers and the schools had misconceptions concerning the formation of the district. Dan said transportation costs were not the only consideration, but that the region was formed to also develop cooperation between the two towns academically and collegially, and to include Aquinnah. He added that there was never any question as to the existence of the Chilmark School. He felt the WT FinCom has always opposed the district even though the town has always supported. He also felt there were misconceptions about any potential savings to be had by closing the Chilmark School.

Sharon clarified the standing of the FinCom by stating that there was never a suggestion to close the Chilmark School by the committee.

Dan acknowledged that there would be more efficiency by closing the school, but not as much savings as thought as the debt of the Chilmark School would still remain. He went on to explain that the school committee and Dr. Weiss had looked at reducing the administration, but due to the distance between the two schools, Dr. Weiss felt it necessary to maintain a principal at the Chilmark school. Dan stated that the main consideration is not about the money, it's about the kids. He explained that each year at the beginning of the budget process the mandate is to keep services the same. If something is added, something else is taken away to maintain a level service.

Greg noted that there is more that brings all entities together than separates them. His concern is with understanding the budget and the student/teacher ratio. He wondered how it could be easier to glean information from what is presented to the FinCom.

Amy handed out a budget revised to look more like the MVRHS budget. Dr. Weiss explained that the formatting couldn't be exactly the same because the high school budget is structured departmentally, whereas the UIRSD is structured by site. When Dr. Weiss worked on the budget with the two principals they had arrived at a .9% increase. The Chilmark School is looking at a 2.3% increase in enrolment. The .9% increase keeps the

same services and same people and reflects the superintendent's significant increases including SPED and a physical therapist. Dr. Weiss added that the class size has traditionally been small: 14-18 at most. This is valued by island parents and attempts to increase class size were not successful.

Cynthia questioned expenses in relation to declining enrollment.

Dr. Weiss responded that in the last 4-5 years the enrollment had not decreased enough to have any significant impact on the budget. While the enrollment has declined, so has the staff through attrition and lay-offs. The number of classes had been reduced. Amy added that FY11 saw a decrease of \$200,000. Also, that with a lot of retirements health insurance costs are rising to cover both retirees and new hires.

Katharine had questions regarding reimbursements and state funding. Amy explained that state funding is very fluid. She hopes to see an increase in transportation reimbursements. When reimbursements don't cover expenses then the undesignated fund balance is used. Dr. Weiss added that with a \$300,000 shortfall last year principals and their staff and the business administrator and staff didn't spend.

Greg questioned the student/teacher ratio to which Dan responded that the pattern on the island is to have one teacher and one aide per classroom. This is mostly to cover state mandated coverage for SPED students. The aide is in the classroom to work with SPED students. Dr. Weiss added that there would be one fewer aides in WT for FY12.

Jonathan asked about the financial consequences of school choice and what percentage of students is in the SPED program. Dr. Weiss explained that in the school choice program students can move anywhere on the island. Each student brings \$5,000 from her/his town to cover costs. A SPED student brings \$10,000-15,000. The state has determined \$5,000 to be a fair amount. Each school decides at the beginning of the year whether or not to be a school of choice. Once decided, a student can only come from another school if there is a space available. Adding students would not require additional classes. This year \$245,000 was received to offset school choice students.

Joe asked Dr. Weiss how health insurance expenses were mitigated. In response, Dr. Weiss said during the bargaining process teachers can't take indemnity plans. This saves the school and the individuals a lot of money. Only Harvard Pilgrim and Blue Cross HMO and PPO plans are offered.

Katharine asked Dr. Weiss what, as an educator, he considered the benefits of the UIRSD. Dr. Weiss said there were economies of scale and size and gave an example of sharing resources of one Spanish teacher for both schools. Another advantage is the region's control of decisions for the schools versus town control in the down-island towns. This allows each elementary school to have its own character as long as it meets state-mandated curriculum and students are on a level playing field when they reach the high school.

In answer to Katharine's question regarding the fairness of the contribution formula, Amy responded that it has been studied and this formula is pretty even with no one town benefiting or losing more than any other. The town that owns the school pays 80% of the debt. The rest is based on enrollment. Kathy Logue added that the region can manage unfunded liability and that managing health insurance has been a great benefit.

Sharon noted there will be a new classroom in Chilmark next year and wondered how many students for that classroom would be school choice. Susan Stevens said no school choice students were slated for that classroom. It is needed entirely for Chilmark students.

Richard wondered what percentage of UIRSD students were SPED students. He added that the 25% that it had been is twice the state average. Dr. Weiss said at present it has dropped 18-19%. Island percentages are higher due to a lack of outside services that students off-island have access to. Richard asked if there was a way to figure total SPED costs for the UIRSD. Dr. Weiss said they could be added up.

Greg commented on how grateful he was for the turnout for this meeting. He said the FinCom is charged with the financial care of the town. In these hard times, they are looking to find a way to provide a quality education for the young people of the town, but to make it financially right in order to benefit the whole community. Going forward, are there ways to save? Dr. Weiss answered yes. Given the confines of the UIRSD they have presented the budget the school committee asked for.

Jonathan asked to have spread sheets that would provide a scenario of WT being out of the district while maintaining the quality of education.

At this point, the BoS needed to continue with other items on their agenda. The FinCom meeting was recessed at 5:50.

Moving to another room, the meeting was resumed at 5:55.

There was some discussion about the possibility of recommending a reduction in the UIRSD budget at the ATM, how much to delete and what would be the ramifications. A vote of at least two towns is needed to make an adjustment. It would fall back on WT to make up any difference they vote to delete if another town does not vote with WT.

Since the discussion at the BoS meeting had to be cut short with still unasked questions, Greg will draft a letter to Dr. Weiss asking for further discussion at the March 15 meeting.

Future meetings

Tuesday, March 8 and 15, 4:30 at the Public Safety Building. There being no other business, a motion for adjournment was made and seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 6:35pm.

Respectfully Submitted,
Nancy Rogers, Administrative Clerk