

Monday, February 3, 2021

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held February 3, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:15 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Joe Sokolovic, Sosimo Fabian, and Sybil Allen. Albert Benejan joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

The sole agenda item was discussion and possible approval of the 2021-22 budget request and the food and nutrition services budget plan.

Supt. Testani said even though the board is scheduled to receive significant funding from COVID grants, that is not to replace or provide a substitute to the local contribution that needs to be made. He noted the funds to be received are specific to certain categories and subject to regulations and do not relieve the local government from making the contribution to the MBR. He noted the timing of the additional funds was not the best due to the onset of the budget season. He said the budget request was reasonable and what was owed to the children in the district.

Mr. Sokolovic said he has read the Bridgeport municipality is going to receive significant funding as well, which means they can afford the board's ask.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, presented on the 2021-22 budget request.

Ms. Siegel displayed a slide showing the district's enrollment, with percentages of ELL students(20.20) and special education population(17.84).

Ms. Siegel said the net current expenditures per pupil is the lowest in Bridgeport among peer districts, and is ranked 155 out of 166 districts in the state. She said this also impacts the cost on out-of-district placements, with the cap rising over the past five years.

Ms. Siegel said the district's goals are a structurally balanced budget, a school-based budgeting model, fiscal accountability, and comprehensive fiscal management. The allocation model consists of a position allocation built on equitable and uniform staffing formulas, with consideration for school-specific needs.

Ms. Siegel said the fiscal challenges are utility costs, legal services, transportation, special education, absence coverage, and benefits due to rising costs each year.

Ms. Siegel said the current budget, 2020-21, consists of \$256 million in the operating budget, with the city's share of 26.9 percent and state ECS of 73.1 percent.

Ms. Siegel described the state and federal grants.

Ms. Siegel said \$2.3 million was added to the state Alliance/ECS in the current year. It is expected that the district would receive an additional \$2.3 million in 2021-22, but that has to be finalized by the state legislature.

Ms. Siegel said the city contribution in the current year was an additional \$2.25 million to the MBR. In 2019-20 there

was a \$1.4 million credit for bus transportation from the city in order to allow the board to maintain the transportation limits. In 2021, the city contribution for bus transportation fell short by \$650,000. The shortfall was compensated for by savings in transportation due to the reduction in the school calendar from 182 days to 177 days.

Ms. Siegel said the growth factor in the current year, 2021, was 1.82 percent. She said the growth factor in the last six years has been an average of 1.14 percent. She said this revenue is insufficient to keep pace with escalating costs even after ongoing efforts at cost control and management.

Ms. Siegel displayed a slide with cost controls.

Ms. Siegel said the 2021-22 operating budget request is a \$17.4 million request, divided into \$2.3 from the state, \$6 million from the city, and the gap plan that will amount to \$8.7 million. The \$17 million includes \$4.8 million in collective bargaining; as well as health insurance; MREF pension costs; special education; transportation costs.

Ms. Siegel said it is hoped that the full \$2 million in the Internal Service Fund(ISF) built into the budget plan will not be needed. In 2021, \$3 million from the 2019-20 surplus in the ISF is being applied in order to balance.

Ms. Siegel also described turnover savings and the effects on step movement in the teachers' contract.

Ms. Siegel said the \$6 million request from the city is fair and reasonable because it includes \$500,000 to maintain the direct payment by the city to We Transport and includes \$650,000 to compensate for the funds that the city did not allocate in 2021 to maintain the \$1.4 million credit. The

balance is \$4.8 million to contribute to the non-discretionary costs, which include salary increases, health insurance, and MREF growth.

Ms. Siegel described how the remaining \$8.3 million gap will be closed. There is a surplus on reserve in the ISF of \$3.5 million and there is a potential surplus in 2021 of about \$1 million, as well as the \$2 million pre-2018-19, if not used in the current year, would be available next year. She said it will include an increase in Title I revenue.

Ms. Siegel said the gap resolution plan includes, as in prior years, position consolidation where appropriate, position conversion after attrition, program adjustments, and the use of grants for curriculum and technology renewal, and deficit prevention mode.

Ms. Siegel said the district office is streamlined with 94 fulltime employees

Ms. Siegel displayed a graph which indicated 70 percent of the budget is dedicated to instruction and 22 percent to administrative support of schools.

Mr. Benejan joined the meeting.

Ms. Siegel described core curriculum renewal, which are generally on a six-year cycle. She noted digital services typically expire after six years.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said if Bridgeport was funded like Hartford the district would have an additional \$100 million. She said net current expenditure per pupil(NECP) includes the operating budget and all grants

received. She noted New Haven and Hartford have more magnet schools due to decisions made many years ago.

Ms. Siegel said she provided a document to the Finance Committee in October which reviewed the city contributions across the peer districts. She said Waterbury contributes a significant amount to their schools as well funding all the benefits of district staff.

Supt. Testani said the municipality in Hartford contributes significantly more to the school district than Bridgeport does.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said schools are instructed and reminded during the year that parent involvement funds must be expended in the current year. Unexpended funds will be forfeited by the school, but they are not forfeited by the district. Those funds go into an unexpended balance, and they can be rolled into the next year.

Supt. Testani said the parents should not be spending time on asking where the money goes, they should be taking the advice that Mr. Benejan and he have given them on how to spend it.

In response to a question about potential union concessions, Supt. Testani said Bridgeport teachers and employers are severely underpaid in comparison to neighboring districts, particularly in areas considered shortage areas such as math and science. He said it will be even harder to attract good talent coming out of the pandemic. He added that the collective bargaining agreement was just signed a year ago and it would be very bad for morale to even raise the issue.

Dr. Fabian agreed and said he wanted to make sure that was considered and eliminated for the reasons articulated by the superintendent. Supt. Testani said this year our teachers have done a lot more, given we have so many students split between in-person and remote learning.

Mr. Sokolovic said as a fiscally conservative Republican it would be penny-wise and pound foolish to request concessions. He said it would be devastating to morale when the great majority of teachers are cooperative in the pandemic conditions.

Mr. Sokolovic said compared to New Haven and Waterbury, Bridgeport gets about the same funding per pupil from the state ECS. However, the difference is the New Haven and Waterbury municipalities contribute more than Bridgeport. He said the board was asking for an additional \$301 per student. He said our students are worth that much, particularly since the city passed a resolution to redirect funding from public safety towards social services and education.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested the information on page 26 be broken out by per-pupil amounts for the board's talking points.

Ms. Siegel presented the food and nutrition services budget plan. She said each year the district enters a projected number into the city MUNIS system that enables us to set up the budget. The amount of revenue that will be generated is projected at the beginning of the school year, but revenue can vary. She said the budget is set up at \$20.43 million.

Ms. Siegel said the projection is made on the expectation that 2021-22 will represent a return to some degree of

normality, with usual revenue generated. She said in 2020-21 a shortfall in revenue is anticipated of between four and five million dollars, which is being covered in the operating budget.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the employee costs of food and nutrition employees in past years are in the document. She said expenditures to date in the current year are posted in the financial condition report every two months. She said through attrition the food and nutrition department has not been replacing fulltime employees unless absolutely necessary. She added there was a curtailment of the use of hourly employees that were not needed under the pandemic situation.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said state ECS/Alliance funding flows directly to the district as a grant via a bank wire, and does not go into a city account. Mr. Sokolovic said the city's budget indicates the city contributes 41 percent of their budget to education, which is inclusive of the state ECS.

Mr. Sokolovic said if the state funding was removed the city's percentage devoted to education would be somewhere between 18 and 19 percent by his last calculation. He said this should be made clear when we speak to people about the budget.

Ms. Siegel said, after calculations, the city contribution is 29.6 percent of the district's total budget without Alliance included.

Mr. Weldon said Mr. Sokolovic is saying that the city is purporting that they are giving 41 percent of their budget,

which includes the state ECS, and thus they are inflating the number.

Supt. Testani said the mayor's budget last year was \$571 million and it contributed \$69 million to education. Ms. Siegel said the \$571 million includes the ECS share. The superintendent said the \$69 million is about 17 percent of the city's budget with the ECS funding excluded.

Dr. Fabian said the conversation demonstrates the reasonableness of the ask that is being made with the budget. He said as a city taxpayer what he is left with is that the funding being asked for is extremely reasonable, and is supported by equitable principles and as well as good business sense.

Mr. Weldon said Mr. Sokolovic is saying we need to clarify that the ECS is a pass-through and the city's budget based on its own tax revenue is the correct way to look at the city's budget.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *"to approve and endorse the 2021-22 budgetary request of the City of the Bridgeport and the food and nutrition budget as well."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The superintendent said he was in the works of scheduling a meeting with the state legislative delegation. Ms. Siegel said the City Council's Budget & Appropriations Committee typically convenes in April.

Ms. Allen moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:28 p.m.



Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the board on February 22, 2021*