

HOLLIS BROOKLINE COOPERATIVE SCHOOL DISTRICT

FEBRUARY 20, 2019

PUBLIC HEARINGS

MEETING MINUTES

Public Hearings were conducted by the Hollis Brookline Cooperative School District on Wednesday, February 20, 2019 at 6:45 p.m. at the Captain Samuel Douglass Academy Library, Brookline.

Amy Rowe, Asst. Superintendent of Student Services presided:

Members of the COOP School Board present: Tom Solon, Chairman

Also in Attendance: Bob Thompson, Principal, Hollis Brookline Middle School

PUBLIC HEARINGS

Citizen's Petition Warrant Articles

Assistant Superintendent Rowe explained the purpose of the Public Hearings was to gather public input on Citizen's Petition Warrant Articles that will appear on this year's ballot.

Tom Solon, Chairman, Hollis Brookline Cooperative School Board, noted articles 2-4 (as presented) were presented to the School District by Citizens Petition; however there was a problem with the posting notifications of the deadline for submission, which resulted in submittal after the due date, as required by State law. As a result, the School Board decided to put these articles on the Warrant as a show of good faith. Technically, they are not citizen petition warrant articles, but they are being handled and processed in a similar manner.

"Because there is the possibility that Article 1 will be defeated, or that other considerations will result in the space created by Article 1 not being adequate or available for the HBHS Robotics Team, to see if the school district will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$550,000 for the purpose of funding a facility for the Hollis Brookline High School and Middle School Robotics Teams. Funds to be transferred to the Hollis Brookline Robotics Boosters for this purpose. (Majority vote required)" (not recommended by the School Board 0-6-0).

Assistant Superintendent Rowe opened the public comment period at 6:50 p.m.

Eric Pauer, 12 Westview Road, Brookline

Noted the wording is subject to being modified at the District meeting. During the Public Hearing conducted on 2-6-19, mention was made the Petitioners wished to withdraw the Petition. It has not been withdrawn and is on the Warrant.

Voters need to understand this is a one-year appropriation; taxpayers would be hit with \$550,000 of tax impact in a single year, which he calculated to be \$150, based on his home's assessed value. It would not obligate the School Board to utilize the funds for this project. It would be half a million dollars added to the School Board operating budget. They could choose to do the project or not.

He commented on his belief part of the project's goal was to address the robotics team and move it back to the High School. Apparently, what was planned wasn't good enough, and that is why they came up with this petition warrant article.

The public comment period was closed at 6:53 p.m.

“Shall we adopt the provisions of [RSA 32:5 V-b](#), requiring that the annual budget and all special warrant articles having a tax impact, as determined by the school board, shall contain a notation stating the estimated tax impact of the article? The determination of the estimated tax impact shall be subject to approval by the governing body.” (not recommended by the School Board 2-4-0).

Assistant Superintendent Rowe opened the public comment period at 6:53 p.m.

Chairman Solon noted the vote by the School Board was split. In the past, the Board has heard discussion around the potential for problems with obtaining the information. However, the information is made known at the Public Hearing and is provided in other areas. The major concern voiced is the concern the information would not be understood if not provided along with an explanation.

The wording of the article states the impact is “determined by the School Board”. Because we are a budget committee district, the Budget Committee would calculate the tax impact. Language in the RSA requires the School Board to validate it in presenting it and placing it on the articles.

Eric Pauer, 12 Westview Road, Brookline

Provided a presentation, which can be viewed [here](#) (beginning at tape counter 13:12).

A slide was displayed with the language of the State RSA, which reads: *“Any town may vote to require that the annual budget and all special warrant articles having a tax impact, as determined by the governing body, shall contain a notation stating the estimated tax impact of the article. The determination of the estimated tax impact shall be subject to approval by the governing body.”*

Mr. Pauer stated this could be done now, but the current School Board and Budget Committee don’t want to do it. Passage of the article would make it mandatory. He provided an example of how the language would appear/read based on this year’s warrant article for the proposed FY20 budget.

Asked if the wording used in the example depicts what would be required or if it is based on his expectation, Mr. Pauer indicated it is based on what he has seen other towns use. There are slightly different formats that could be used, but they provide the same information. Chairman Solon questioned specifically the language “tax rate impact” and whether that is a mandatory term. Mr. Pauer indicated it is not. There is flexibility in how it is stated.

Mr. Pauer remarked what it does is provides clarity on the impact of each article. He stated agreement the information is available in other forms, but he has been at meetings where people can’t see slides, etc. If the information is included in the warrant it will be printed in the Town Report, etc.

Chairman Solon noted the impact is an estimate. Mr. Pauer commented it will increase transparency. Mr. Pauer remarked if moving to SB2, people will see it when they go to the ballot box as it will be part of the warrant article. They will have context when voting on a warrant article.

Nancy Dulac, 151 Old Milford Road, Brookline

Was pleased to see the cost identified as “per thousand” as it provides for ease of determining the impact for the individual.

Peter Walker, 57 Pepperell Road, Brookline

Stated his support of the article and his belief it adds transparency and better informs the voters of what they are undertaking. He is hopeful everyone can agree the best course of action is to provide as much information as possible.

Brian Rater, 20 Meetinghouse Hill Road, Brookline / Member, COOP Budget Committee

Remarked it was stated earlier the Brookline School Board and Budget Committee have opposed doing this in the past. Speaking from his personal position on the Budget Committee, he does not recall the subject ever coming up. He is uncertain the committee has a position on it. It is an interesting idea, and one he is open to.

He spoke of a concern with putting the tax impact on the article, which focuses on what is occurring this particular year. Some of the proposals are multi-year issues, particularly when it comes to contracts. Typically, the first year's impact is significantly less than succeeding years making it a bit misleading. That is one of the advantages of not being an SB2 community; when we have a meeting and discussion, information on total impact is presented.

Eric Pauer, 12 Westview Road, Brookline

Stated his recollection, before Mr. Rater's time on the Budget Committee, this was considered, and the decision was reached not to add the information. He stated multi-year impacts can be and should be included in the warrant.

Abe Hartman, 51 Mountain Road, Brookline

Stated his support of the article and additional transparency. He believes it would help ensure informed decisions, and could prevent misinformation. A lot of times presentations are painful and difficult to follow.

The only thing he ever sees when costs are broken down between the towns is people from Brookline feeling they are paying twice as much for an item. It is not that way because a \$300,000 home in Brookline might be a \$600,000 home in Hollis, they have more commercial property to share in the tax burden, etc. He encouraged Brookline residents to understand what the numbers represent and not take it as an us against them thing when broken down that way.

The public comment period was closed at 7:09 p.m.

“Shall we adopt the provisions of [RSA 32:5-b](#), and implement a tax cap whereby the governing body (or budget committee) shall not submit a recommended budget that increases the amount to be raised by local taxes, based on the prior fiscal year's actual amount of local taxes raised, by more than 2%?” (not recommended by the School Board 0-6-0).

Assistant Superintendent Rowe opened the public comment period at 7:09 p.m.

Chairman Solon remarked, although the intent is understood, the School Board does not support the article. In the volatile environment in which we operate, it is very easy for items to change the budget requirement from year to year much more dramatically than 2%; specifically in times of increasing enrollment or with unusual requirements for student services coming into the District. It may not have a dramatic impact on a taxpayer's overall expense, but it can produce very large swings from an elementary district up to the COOP District. There are many variables the Board tries to capture in the budget in terms of maintenance and other items. Two percent does not represent a large amount of money when you consider you are budgeting 18 months in

advance. This would be extremely harmful should it pass and create a situation where it restricts the ability to present a budget that truly represents the needs of the District. Although it can be changed from the floor, the fact remains if you must build a budget to a number, it makes it very difficult for someone in the community to knowledgably amend the budget to an appropriate number. He does not believe it to be necessary, and fears it could be very harmful to the District.

Eric Pauer, 12 Westview Road

Provided a presentation (can be viewed [here](#) beginning at tape counter 29:05) on the proposed tax cap.

Mr. Pauer stated the Petition proposes a 2% tax cap. The Article requires a 3/5 majority to pass and a ballot vote of a minimum of one hour.

Language in the law states the “legislative body may override the cap”. It is really a starting point. In the case of the COOP District, the Budget Committee is the one that proposes the budget; must stay within the cap. The School Board could come up with their own number. It would not be the official number that would come out, but they could provide it to the legislative body for consider.

He provided a listing of towns and cities as well as school districts across the State that have adopted a tax cap since the law’s inception in 2013; information he gained from the New Hampshire Department of Revenue Administration.

Mr. Pauer commented the COOP District is on an unsustainable trajectory in terms of spending. There is a level to decreasing student population. This year there will be a large increase, if all articles pass in the COOP; taxes of 9.5% in Hollis and 12.1% in Brookline.

A graph was displayed depicting enrollment and budget history trajectory in the COOP District. Mr. Pauer reiterated the budget is on an upward trajectory while enrollment is decreasing. The graph also showed a comparison of the budgetary increase based on the current trajectory in comparison to the rate of increase were the tax cap in place.

The reason for a tax cap is to get back to zero-based budgeting; method of budgeting where all expenses must be justified for each new period. He commented on discussion around non-discretionary items, and remarked there is always some discretion with anything. Regarding affordability, we have rapidly increasing “uncontrollable” costs per staff member. Through budgeting, we do control the number of staff members. With a decreasing student enrollment that is one thing that needs to be considered. The tax cap provides the School Board with a baseline from which to negotiate future Collective Bargaining Agreements. He reiterated, the tax cap can be overridden at District Meeting.

Mr. Pauer stated the desire to preserve the future of the Hollis Brookline COOP by bringing spending in. Brookline spends more per household, in general, than Hollis does. At some point, this COOP may not survive if the increases remain this way.

Nancy Dulac, 151 Old Milford Road, Brookline

Stated agreement there is the need for some sort of a tax cap as a starting point for the budget. She, and many others she has spoken with, are getting closer and closer to not being able to absorb another tax increase. She spoke of the reassessment and all the other increases coming. She stated she and others are very close to the tipping point where they cannot stay in their homes. She has lived in her home for 40 years and sent all three of her children through the school system.

Abe Hartman, 51 Mountain Road, Brookline

Stated he has not reviewed all the articles to understand where the rate increases cited originate from. He questioned if the 12.1% is based on the school district portion of the tax impact.

Chairman Solon clarified that is not the tax increase, but the expenditure side of the budget. It does not consider the revenue side of the budget. You cannot translate that directly to the tax rate increase.

Mr. Hartman commented on the graphs shown depicting inflation. He is uncertain how inflation is always calculated; there are things you need that increase in price and things not needed that lower, with technology they factor in different aspects, etc. He stated his assumption a lot of costs are either fixed or necessary that would drive the school district never to be quite at the same point of inflation unless something drastic happens where costs go down. He referenced the 2-3% range, which on average we might be at overall. He commented the COOP seems to have big expenditures every year.

Regarding inflation, he suggested individuals dig deep into that when trying to analyze it as it could be misleading based on what we must purchase versus how it is calculated.

Eric Pauer, 12 Westview Road

Displayed a slide used in another presentation to provide an example of tax impact. The slide displayed information based on his personal taxes. He has resided in Brookline since 1994. Since 1995, Brookline property tax increases have averaged 3.47% annually. The CPI-U (inflation) has averaged 2.17% annually. His personal property taxes are up 127% since 1995. If property taxes tracked inflation, annual property taxes would be up only 67%, and if under 2% tax cap, 61%. Taxes paid in Town, which includes the schools, has been almost double the rate of inflation. A graph was shown depicting this historical trend.

The public comment period was closed at 7:27 p.m.

“Shall we adopt the provisions of [RSA 40:13](#) (known as SB 2) to allow official ballot voting on all issues before the Hollis Brookline Cooperative School District on the second Tuesday of March?” (not recommended by the School Board 1-5-0).

Chairman Solon stated the School Board did not support the article. The discussion both for and against it related to the current structure of the annual meetings. Last year was a difficult one. Some revisions have been made to the process, and it is hoped this year it will go more smoothly and effectively.

A major concern with SB2 is the fact that voters can only vote up or down whereas during a district meeting amendments can be offered/made. Another concern raised was relative to the Deliberative Session. The experience in Brookline has been that many present appear to be very frustrated by the fact that a great deal of discussion occurs, valuable information is exchanged, and at the end nothing happens.

If the district meeting can be made more efficient, the majority of the Board believes it to be a preferable way of supporting the District. For those things that may warrant having all-day voting, the option exists. The volatility of the SB2 process itself creates some concerns. The Board is told by its representatives every year how many bills are active in the House to make changes to SB2.

SB2 (Official Ballot Referenda) is a form of town meeting that has two sessions. The first session (deliberative session) is for explanation, discussion, debate and amendments to the proposed operating budget and warrant articles. The second session (voting session) allows voters to cast their votes for local elections and all warrant

articles. Voters would have the choice between two budgets, the one approved at the Deliberative Session and a default budget, which is calculated by a State approved formula.

Passage of this article to adopt SB2 as the form of governance requires a 3/5 majority vote of those voting (at the polls), and if passed, would take effect at the next annual or special meeting.

Eric Pauer, 12 Westview Road

Provided a presentation (can be viewed [here](#); tape counter 47:00).

Mr. Pauer encouraged voters to support the article indicating it helps increase voter participation. He went on to explain the SB2 process. The Deliberative Session is conducted in February. The discussion that occurs allows for amendments to be made, and results in those present finalizing the warrant for the voting session. The final vote to approve or disapprove the warrant articles occurs during the ballot voting on Town election day (2nd Tuesday in March). It is a private ballot vote on each warrant article from the Deliberative Session. The polls are open from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., and voters can obtain an absentee ballot if traveling, etc.

Voters would have the choice between two budgets, the one approved at the Deliberative Session and a default budget, which is calculated by a State approved formula. The proposed operating budget can be higher or lower than the default budget. This year, in Brookline, the proposed budget is lower than the default budget so if you want a lower budget you vote yes.

Advantages of official ballot voting were identified. An increase in voter participation with two opportunities to participate; Deliberative Session and ballot voting session. A large advantage is the opportunity for a 30-day period to discuss and understand the warrant articles. Mr. Pauer commented he has been in meetings in the COOP where articles are discussed followed by a vote, and people are uncertain on what they are voting on, what the arguments are, etc. It provides increased visibility of the warrant articles to the public. It provides the privacy of ballot voting. Although that can be requested with five voters, over the past few years there has been an effort to shame people into not doing that. He reiterated the opportunity to vote any time during the day or by absentee ballot.

He spoke of the 14 hours of meetings that took place last year in the COOP; five sessions including one all-day voting reconsideration session, a meeting that ran to 2:30 a.m. voting on million-dollar bonds. He does not see that as democratic and inclusive.

The School Board, Budget Committee, and proponents of warrant articles need to communicate the merits of the warrant articles, and would have 30 days to do that. Another valuable aspect is that articles cannot be tabled. All warrant articles are placed on the ballot and are voted on. Reconsideration of warrant articles is not permitted. Some think of this as an advantage and others a disadvantage.

Mr. Pauer provided a slide depicting the history (# of sessions) of the annual meetings beginning in 2014.

Mr. Pauer noted the adoption of SB2 in Brookline in 2016. He provided graphs showing voter participation between 2013 and 2019 at both the Deliberative Session and District Meeting. He would rather have 800 people voting on an issue than 47 people voting in a narrow, one-night opportunity. He remarked, the example provided showed 1-3% of people attending the Deliberative Session, but when time for the final vote, there is great turnout; nearly 21% last year, 18% the previous year.

Mr. Pauer encouraged voters to support the official ballot voting for the COOP. He provided lists of the towns/cities and school districts that have adopted SB2, and stated his belief there has not been a single town that has adopted SB2 that has later rescinded it.

Mr. Pauer noted this is not decided at the District Meeting, it is on the ballot for March 12th.

Peter Walker, 57 Pepperell Road, Brookline

Noted he was at the Deliberative Session, and saw a turnout that was at or above what it has been in some years (before SB2). He spoke of having attended the COOP sessions last March and commented some of the ballots were designed a little differently; some had a perforation, there was dispute over what some of the ballots represented, etc. He believes this would add some real commonsense change to the system. He is hopeful this will be adopted.

Abe Hartman, 51 Mountain Road, Brookline

Stated his support of SB2. He has been to a few of the COOP meetings, and found them to be very painful. Because of the length of the sessions some were unable to vote. Voices are not being heard. He spoke of the difficulties of the timing of votes and the challenges of residents, e.g., child care concerns. When moving here, he was taken aback by the fact that there is not ballot voting. As towns grow, there is not the ability to stick to the old ways.

Nancy Dulac, 151 Old Milford Road, Brookline

Commented she has not always supported SB2, but believes its time has come. She understands the efforts to make changes to the meetings to make them more efficient, and avoid going too late into the evening, but it will likely add another day to the process because we just don't get through the issues quickly enough. She is concerned it will impact turnout.

Brian Rater, 20 Meetinghouse Hill Road, Brookline

Stated he continues to oppose SB2. Yes, we want to do everything possible to have as many voters as possible participate, but both systems have had problems with that. His concern with SB2 is when simply voting on a ballot, the information most people are going in with is not necessarily from a reputable source. In past years, it has been seen voters receive information in the mail or are handed flyers at the transfer station with information that is sometimes highly misleading and sometimes flat out incorrect.

With a ballot, there is no way to challenge that. All you have is the information that may or may not be right. When you have a traditional district meeting there is an opportunity to pose questions, and receive an official response from the best source. That way when you vote you know the information you have is solid.

Abe Hartman, 51 Mountain Road, Brookline

Remarked he does not believe either process will ever solve voters not being educated prior to voting. He does not see that as a true negative of SB2. He attended the Deliberative Session where he was able to pose his questions and receive responses. He reiterated concerns with people not being able to attend meetings due to other obligations, and the inability to vote or be able to understand when voting would take place.

Eric Pauer, 12 Westview Road

With SB2 there could be uninformed voters, but there are also many who are informed. If the stakes are high on an issue people will become informed. It places the onus on the School Board and Budget Committee to advocate their position, to educate the community.

Another aspect of SB2 is the requirement to be able to pass a bond article; requires 60% majority instead of 66% (lower threshold). It is likely a result of the expectation there are more people voting under that scenario.

Brian Rater, 20 Meetinghouse Hill Road, Brookline

Stated one of the rule changes being made, because of the situation that occurred last year, is that no new business will be accepted after the 10:00 p.m. hour. At 10:00 p.m. you finish up whatever is already being worked on, and then move on to the next day.

The public comment period was closed at 7:51 p.m.

The Public Hearing was declared closed at 7:51 p.m.

Date _____

Signed _____