SAU #20 Board Meeting

Thursday, December 12, 2024

Meeting Minutes

Gorham Middle High School Cafeteria

Board Members Present: Dennis Wade, Gina Saladino, Timothy Buxton, Richard Umiker, Benjamin Mayerson, Andrew Mullins, Crystal Labrecque, Peter Donovan, Stephen Michaud, Emma Burnell, Michael Waddell, Tiffani Arsenault, Ashley Devost, and Tammi Dube

Administration: David Backler, Superintendent SAU 20; Cassandra Micucci, Business Administrator SAU20; Jennifer Katz-Borrin, Special Services Director; and Amanda Ramsay, IT Director

Public: Marie Duguay, Mary White, Adam White, Robert Demers, Suzanne Demers, Diane Bouthot, William Demers, Deidre Blair, Paul Bousquet, Judy LeBlanc, Steve Roy, Robert Gargano, Mary Robinson, Eric Cornish, Ryan Lavoie, other members of the public, Lisa Connell of the Berlin Daily Sun, and Shelli Fortin, Minutes

Public Hearing

1. **Call to Order –** Gina Saladino opened the Public Hearing at 6:31 pm.

2. **Hearing Handouts**

3. **Review of 2025-2026 Proposed Budget**

   Cassandra Micucci reviewed the 2025-2026 proposed budget line by line, noting that the total budget is $1,018,516.00. This is an increase of $41,572, or 4%, over last year's budget. Micucci provided information on salaries for the Superintendent, Business Administrator, IT Director, Director of Student Services, Administrative Assistants, Payroll Specialist, and Safety Coordinator.

   Micucci noted that the proposed revenues include $1,000 in interest, and $19,000 in income for handling the grants for the SAU office.

   Micucci provided the allocations by school district: GRS is at 51.11% for a total of $570,507.95, Milan at 25.48% for a total of $237,819.09, Dummer at 7.08% for a total of $66,092.85, and Errol at 6.33% for a total of $59,095.11. The allocations are based on equalized property valuation, average daily attendance, and direct student services.

4. **Public Questions and Comments**

   Mary White asked for a breakdown of the GRS portion by town, and was advised that this will be included in the GRS budget.

   Deidre Blair noted the salaries of the Superintendent, Business Administrator, Director of Special Services, and IT Director, and advised that the median salary for a resident of Gorham is

$55,000. Ms. Blair stated that the SAU employees are getting a raise every year, but others in town are not. Ms. Blair questioned the role of the Safety Coordinator and the need for two different Special Education administrators. Ms. Blair noted that Gorham is not an affluent community, with 20% of the population senior citizens, and 20% of the student population receiving free and reduced lunch. Ms. Blair advised that many people cannot afford to live in Gorham and asked the Board to look at spending and cut back.

Ron Lavoie shared concerns over salaries, the rent for the office space, and that Chromebooks are given to students at the end of their senior year. Mr. Lavoie also noted the travel pay that the Superintendent receives, and the cost of health insurance. Cassandra Micucci advised that insurance goes out to bid every three years. Mr. Lavoie noted that students are charged for damage to the Chromebooks.

In response to a comment asking if there was a cap on salaries, Adam White advised that the taxpayers are the cap on pay. Mr. White also questioned the need for assistants to the Superintendent, Business Administrator, and Student Services Director, and stated he would like to see what the workload is. Mr. White stated that it is not about what people are worth, it is about what we can afford to pay. Mr. White noted that taxes are ridiculous, and it is a problem.

David Backler responded, noting that he is also a taxpayer. Backler advised that it is their goal to have the per pupil cost fall in the middle, and stated that he is proud of the work the SAU does for the students. Backler agreed that taxes are ridiculous in NH in general, which is because the cost falls on property owners. Backler advised that the Board makes hard choices every year to keep the budget down. Backler noted that the State of NH has been sued three times in court, and found guilty for an unconstitutional funding structure each time, and still they have done nothing about it. Backler warned that if we do not pay teachers what they are worth, they will not stay, and we will not have good schools.

Suzanne Demers asked how many students were in the SAU, with a breakdown by Town. Micucci advised she would find this number while other questions were asked.

Adam White agreed that the State was not paying fairly, but stated that we have no say in that, and the only place we do have a say is here. Mr. White advised that he used to be on the school board at WMRHS, and there are things that could be changed with a reasonable outcome. Mr. White noted that everyone deserves a raise, but not everyone sees one each year.

Gina Saladino responded, noting that the Finance Committee met three times before presenting this budget, and they looked at salaries at 12 districts around us. Saladino advised that the big raises last year were to catch up to the average, and they are still behind. Saladino warned that the SAU will not be able to attract and keep qualified employees in positions.

A member of the public noted that many other communities have a larger tax base.

Eric Cornish noted that he has worked for the military, state, and federal government, and if the money is not there, you don't get a raise. Mr. Cornish stated that we want to retain qualified people, but we can't give raises when we don't have the money.

In response to Suzanne Demers question about the number of students, Micucci advised there are 375 students in GRS, 91 in Milan, 15 in Dummer, and 11 in Errol.

Robert Demers asked about the number of students in first grade and the senior class, and was advised there are 21 in first grade and 37 seniors. Mr. Demers noted that in 12 years, the graduating class will be about 20 students, and they will no longer be able to afford to operate the building. Backler advised that if the school were to close and students were tuitioned to Berlin, it would cost more than what they are paying now.

Robert Demers asked how many trips to Berlin they take each day, and was advised two trips per day for CTE. Most students drive themselves to classes in Berlin. Mr. Demers noted that this is a liability.

Benjamin Mayerson made a point of order, noting that the Public Hearing this evening is for the SAU budget, not the GRS budget. The GRS meeting will be held next week in Randolph.

William Demers asked about the turnover at the SAU office, and how many employees have left due to pay, and was advised they did have a high turnover for a while, but now this is better with quality work.

Two members of the public both suggested looking for office space at the school.

In response to concerns about salaries, Dennis Wade noted that the SAU office is in charge of four buildings, staff, 500 students, and $12-13 million dollar budgets, and that not many of us are in charge of that much personnel and property. Wade reminded the public that this is what we are paying for.

Ryan Lavoie asked again about Chromebooks for students, and Amanda Ramsay stated that the students do keep them when the graduate. The Chromebooks are purchased for students in ninth grade for $270. Families are required to purchase insurance for $40 to cover damages. Ramsay advised that they are not worth much after four years, but advised she will check to see if there is a trade-in value. Suzanne Demers noted that having the Chromebooks saves the schools money on books.

Paul Bousquet advised that we elected people to positions in Concord who voted for the Education Freedom Act, which gives parents money that would go to public schools to use for private schools or to homeschool. Mr. Bousquet advised that this takes $4,500 away from the school for each student. Mr. Bousquet also advised that these people vote no to an income tax or sales tax, which could help with funding education. Mr. Bousquet noted that the $4,500 given to families to homeschool requires no accountability for how that money is used.

Benjamin Mayerson advised that voters do have control over who is serving in Concord, as we vote for the people elected to the State house. Mayerson pointed out that the Interest and Dividends Tax will be gone next year, after being phased out over the last few years. This has lost millions in revenue for the State that could have been used for State programs. Suzanne Demers stated that we cannot change what happens at the State level, so we need to work locally to bring the taxes down. Mayerson advised that the State is pushing expenses onto local taxpayers because year after year the revenues from the State are being cut. This is not just happening in Gorham, but everywhere in NH.

Steve Roy advised that everyone is here tonight because of the taxes, and asked that the Board not give raises this year and find a way to move offices to the school to save money.

Michael Waddell noted that Special Education is the responsibility of the district from age 3 to 22, and that out-of-district placements can cost about $250,000 per year for each student, with some being even more costly than that. Waddell noted that students who require ESL services cost the schools about $100,000 per student. Waddell advised that Special Education costs are about one-third of the budget, and when children move into the area needing these services, we are responsible. Adam White noted that this is an SAU Business Office budget hearing, not a GRS Board meeting, and Waddell advised he was trying to explain why there are two Special Education Directors. Mr. White stated that what it boils down to is the taxpayers cannot afford it.

Mary White stated that she was offended by Michael Waddell's comment that we are stuck with children with disabilities. Waddell noted that what he meant was that when children with special needs come to the district the Town has to pay, and should pay, but the local towns have a hard time carrying that burden. Waddell noted that it would be difficult for a small town especially. Crystal Labrecque noted that this recently happened in Errol, and their budget increased by 57%. The goal is to raise children with a good education who can get good jobs and make careers for themselves.

Steve Roy noted that what it boils down to is that taxpayers cannot afford it. Mr. Roy stated that his son received a great education, however he will keep saying that the Board needs to see what they can do to save money.

Robert Demers noted that they have had the same buildings for years, and the student population has decreased, so it seems as though space should be available for the SAU offices at either GMHS or EFS.

A member of the public noted that renters are also taxpayers.

Stephen Michaud noted that the State needs to find a different way to fund education, and Adam White agreed but stated that it will take years. David Backler noted that they are in touch with State Representatives from the area, and are planning to meet with them so that they understand the challenges School Boards are facing. Backler stated that if they were to get rid of the schools, and tuition the students elsewhere, it would cost more than it does now. Judy LeBlanc agreed that the Representatives need to hear it in person, that their inaction is affecting us individually and collectively.

Mary White spoke again, noting that taxpayers cannot afford the budget as presented tonight, and stating that she appreciated the work that is done by the administration and Board.

Steve Roy spoke again, asking how often the stage is used. Backler advised it is used often for play rehearsals, plays, and by classes.

5. **Adjournment**

On a motion by Dennis Wade, seconded by Crystal Labrecque, the Board voted to close the Public Hearing at 7:42 pm.

Regular Meeting

1. **Call to Order–** Gina Saladino called the meeting to order at 7:45 pm.

2. **Pledge of Allegiance**

3. **Public Comments**

There were no public comments.

4. **Approval of Minutes**

On a motion by Benjamin Mayerson, seconded by Peter Donovan, the Board voted to approve the minutes of November 21, 2024 as presented. Labrecque – abstain

5. **Discussion of 2025-2026 Budget and Board Adoption**

A Board member asked if they could form a committee to look at space available for the SAU offices. David Backler agreed that they could do a study, however they are currently in a long-term lease and GRS owns 11% of the FRC building. Backler advised that each school pays a percentage of the cost of rent, maintenance, and insurance. Backler advised the current lease runs through next year. The portion of the office rented includes the HR, payroll, IT and Special Services Director offices, along with the conference room. It was noted that SAU36 moved their offices back into the school in Littleton recently. Board members willing to be part of the committee to look at office space were: Andrew Mullins, Benjamin Mayerson, and both the Errol and Dummer Boards advised someone would attend. A Board member advised that the Town owns the remaining 89% of the FRC building, and that several people have inquired about purchasing it, so this may be a time to sell. However, a Board member noted that with renovation costs to move the offices, they probably would not save any money.

A Board member asked if there was a deadline for approving the budget, and Cassandra Micucci advised it will need to be approved before January 1, 2025.

Crystal Labrecque made a motion to approve the budget as presented, which was seconded by Benjamin Mayerson.

A Board member noted that they have received a lot of input from the public tonight, and suggested the Board could move to cut 2% or 3% from the budget, and then leave the administration to decide where that money should be cut from.

So moved, the Board voted not to approve the 2025-2026 budget as presented. Mullins, Donovan, Labrecque, and Arsenault were in favor, with the remaining members opposed

A Board member noted that 1% of the budget would be approximately $10,000. It was suggested that the COLA increase could be cut down to a lower amount. A Board member noted that the cost of insurance is going up for employees, so not providing an increase will leave them making less each week than they are now. Micucci advocated for Renee Stewart, Deb Dupuis, and Lisa Sankiw to not lose their increases. A Board member stated that they were not in favor of cutting the increases completely. The total increase in wages as presented is $41,570. A Board member suggested that increases could be kept equitable to the position, as salaries are not the same across the board.

Micucci noted that the fund balance at the end of last year was $65,000.

David Backler cautioned against not giving increases, as pretty soon the wages are out of whack, and the pay scale has to be adjusted to keep up.

Micucci noted that the COLA in September of last year was 3.7%. Judy LeBlanc noted that Social Security received 2.7%.

A Board member asked about retirement contributions, and was advised that this is for the NH Retirement System, and the amount is mandated by the state.

A Board member suggested cutting the COLA increase to 3% for the three office employees, and another Board member suggested flat amounts, such as $1,000 each. Micucci advised that part of the adjustment was to cover the increase in health insurance costs. A Board member noted that at the last meeting, the Board had decided that the proposed increase was the minimum suggested, and that the part of the budget they have control over is very small.

On a motion by Dennis Wade, seconded by Timothy Buxton, the Board voted to approve the 2025-2026 budget as presented, in the amount of $1,018,516.00. Mayerson-opposed, Dube-opposed, Buxton-opposed.

6. Technology Director's Report

A Board member asked about Erate, and was advised this is a Federal program from which they receive money for internet services based on the Free and Reduced lunch numbers. Amanda Ramsay stated that they must go out to bid every three years, and Gorham and Milan will go out to bid this year.

The Chair reminded members to finish the KnowBe4 training.

A Board member noted that Parentsquare has been going very well and is being used.

7. Superintendent's Report

David Backler requested that the committee that met to review the Superintendent's evaluation meet again to consolidate the process. Members involved were Andrew Mullins, Gina Saladino, Benjamin Mayerson, and Ashley Devost.

Backler noted that an AVEC update was included with the report.

Backler noted that the Business Office group would like to get a perspective from the school boards as to what they would like to see when a Superintendent leaves. Options would include hiring another Superintendent, or hiring an Assistant Superintendent and sharing the Superintendent position. Although some members were undecided, after discussion the Board came to a consensus that they would prefer hiring their own Superintendent, and an Assistant would be the backup plan if they could not fill the position. It was noted that the SAU20 office is currently working well, and the Board would like to see that continue. Concerns included the lack of any real savings from combining, and the different trajectories the districts are on right now both financially and academically. Backler stated that it would be a challenge to be in charge of both districts, and it would not save money, however it would give them an opportunity to work on curriculum. A Board member noted that although curriculum work would be worthwhile, things have changed dramatically since the last study was done.

8. Business Administrator's Report

Cassandra Micucci noted that she included the monthly report in the Board packet.

9. Public Comments

There were no public comments.

10. Non-Public Session

There was no non-public session needed.

11. Next Regular Meeting – Thursday, May 8, 2025 at 6:30 pm Errol Consolidated School

12. Other

13. Adjournment

On a motion by Benjamin Mayerson, seconded by Peter Donovan, the Board voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 8:39 pm.