

Town Council/School Committee Work Session
Discussion of 2015 Fiscal Year Budget Requests from
School Committee
March 31, 2014 – 6 p.m.

Present: President Gary Cote, Vice-President Kerry McGee, Karen Carlson,
Gregory Laboissonniere, Town Manager Thomas Hoover, Town Solicitor
Frederick Tobin

School Committee members present: Chairwoman Kathy Patenaude, David Florio, Ann
Dickson, Judith Liner, Superintendent Michael Almeida, Finance Director Robyn Pelletier

Review of Emergency Evacuation Plan.

Dr. Almeida presented the School Committee's Recommended Budget for FY 2014-15. He advised that Coventry schools have a population of 4,976 students. Coventry ranks in the bottom third in the state of Rhode Island for per pupil spending, with out of district spending for both general education and special education students totalling over \$2.2 million.

In scholastic aptitude tests scores, Coventry scores lower in math, reading and writing than the state median. The school district has a clear vision of student performance objectives and resources that it needs to be effective. Included in the vision for the future is an increased graduation rate along with an increased percentage of students attending college, an increased student performance on state assessments and on the SAT . Dr. Almeida gave an overview of strategic objectives related to improving student performance.

The school's funding sources are comprised of 63% from the Town of Coventry, 33% from the State of RI and 4% from the federal government (which has decreased 43% over the last five years). He noted a five year history of reprioritization, where mandated expenditures have been absorbed and further reductions were taken.

There is a request in the budget projection of an additional \$1.5 million from the town's allocation, mainly due to unanticipated expenses and cost drivers; some of the unanticipated expenditures include an increase in out-of-district tuition, transportation, the certified pension obligation, affordable care act, a loss in state aid and in general school revenue, along with contractual obligations. Coventry is an underfunded district and I don't want to see us join other communities operating with a state budget.

When thinking about cuts, there are several programs and staff to consider such as athletic programs, clubs, an administrator, custodians, behavior specialists, professional development coordinators, a clerk, a reading teacher, high school curriculum coordinators. Other reductions being considered are the ROTC program, two supervisory assistants, a cut in supplies, all day kindergarten, math interventionists, mental health professionals and common core resources. Further discussion took place regarding anticipated and unanticipated expenditures and the impact to schools.

Dr. Almeida gave a second presentation on administrator staffing and salaries. He pointed out the lack of a technology staff, provided information on central office administrators, and noted the employ of only one special education administrator. He included a chart showing ratios of school district administrators to student; a chart of superintendents' salaries in RI, with Coventry on the low end with respect to salary. He noted that the school committee attorney

has absorbed the human resource director position. He talked about school administrators at all schools, their salaries, with Coventry at the median level for elementary; Feinstein Middle School being the lowest when comparing principal salaries; CHS, although the third largest high school in the state, with the principal's pay second from the bottom when comparing salary in relation to administrator to student ratio.

Coventry has not added administrators, in fact is operating with three vacant administrator positions. The superintendent has a three year contract with a flat salary, no incentives or pay raises. Coventry administrators have not had a pay raise in five years, and will pay the highest health care and dental co-pays in the State at 25% effective July 1, 2014. .

Councilwoman Carlson asked where the money went that would have been allocated for ROTC. She believes that program should not be cut as in many cases it gives the students more incentive to do well. Dr. Almeida responded that we are trying to make this program a career path, our State Representatives have made it a priority, but there is an approval process. Current the Air Force has suspended funds for two years, then will reconsider.

A lengthy discussion ensued as Councilwoman Carlson and President Cote had questions about "purchased services", what they are comprised of, as that line shows up everywhere in their budget. Ms. Pelletier replied that the two biggest components of purchased services are transportation and out of district tuition. In order to further clarify, Dr. Almeida will submit an explanation/breakdown of those services.

School Committee member David Florio, 153 Princeton Ave., thinks that ROTC should have funding restored because it is a worthwhile program. It has worked in our town for 41 years and should remain funded. Parents are disgusted as they thought their children would be going through a four year program. If RIDE approves ROTC as a career path, we could be making money on that program, not losing.

A lengthy discussion and many questions followed pertaining to the school budget as far as where potential cuts would come from, questions about academic intervention, truancy, curriculum development; remarks regarding an assistant superintendent increase from \$105,000 to \$130,000; an \$85,300 amount in supplies; professional development educator increase of \$50,000.

Councilwoman Carlson asked about a data management employee being added to the budget (Dr. Almeida advised that they are restructuring). She asked questions about guidance counselors at the middle school and a librarian salary at \$97,000. President Cote asked about funding of an academic intervention position and Dr. Almeida replied that position used to be paid for through a grant and we have since lost grant funding because we could not find a candidate for that job who was dual certified, as the grant required. Councilwoman Carlson asked about an out of district breakdown on purchased services of \$1,006,799 in public, parochial, private and charter schools. Auto allowance was explained by Dr. Almeida as having to do with mileage, as some teachers travel from school to school during the day. Additionally we have maintenance vehicles that travel.

Councilwoman Carlson added that the informational e mail which Dr. Almeida sent out to all parents and school staff was a scare tactic and uncalled for at this point.

Vice-President McGee is concerned about the ROTC program, that it needs to be maintained and we have to do whatever it takes to save it. He mentioned that he also felt that

the e-mail notice that went out to parents was a scare tactic. He asked how/why you would consider a cut in math intervention, when math scores are low. Doesn't seem to be a good choice. It seems that the school has had an open checkbook for a long time, the administrators are paid well, and we cannot afford to be number one on that list.

In addition, you say there were no raises, but there was a \$15,000 increase when you (Dr. Almeida) took over the position of superintendent from Mr. Convery. Your salary went from \$130,000 to \$145,000; Mr. Convery stayed at \$130,000 with a superintendent's salary rather than go to an assistant superintendent salary. Our town manager makes \$129,000, yet the superintendent makes \$145,000. Your assistant superintendent still makes \$130,000, same as when he was the superintendent. The high school principal makes \$116,000, with our finance director making only \$92,000. The police chief is the only employee on the town side who makes six figures at \$105,000. I know you are very educated, but we also have educated people not making that kind of salary. There are some teachers making \$560.00 a day. I know people who don't make that in a week. The taxpayers just cannot afford to keep paying this. I realize that in the past, politicians and negotiating committees have given away the farm and this has to stop. These employees all do a great job and are paid well for their work, but the taxpayers just cannot afford this anymore. It's going to be hard to get a budget to pass.

School Committee member David Florio thinks that the school may be rushing into things with the purchase of Chromebooks, as Google will track these students throughout their school careers until they graduate from the 12th grade. We should step back and look at this before we proceed.

President Cote needs more time to review the budget and looks forward to a clearer explanation on purchased services as it is confusing and is a very significant cost in some departments. Dr. Almeida remarked that most of the purchased services are mandated expenses. President Cote agreed, but added that with a \$1.582 million increase to the school budget, you buy what the taxpayers in this town can afford.

Manager Hoover added that in many respects the school and town have the same problem with increases in pensions as well as health care. This is what is really driving the town side, that pension and health care have really gone out of sight.

Dr. Almeida advised that the certified pension increase is \$735,081, more than expected, and didn't expect there would be increases to the employer at 16.81% this year. The health care increase is due to the affordable care act. What you are seeing is about \$125,000 across the district.

Manager Hoover asked if he would look to cut anything that is not mandated, but contractual. Dr. Almeida said he would look at contractual obligations outside of state mandates, but it will be tough.

Kathy Patenaude, Chairperson of the School Committee, disagrees with Manager Hoover's recommendation to level fund the schools. The School Committee has things to fund and we have our own ARC as well as contractual obligations. We will be in trouble if we don't get any new money. I asked Dr. Almeida what kind of cuts we are looking at if we are level funded. He spent a lot of time figuring out what kind of cuts could be made, and we will make the cuts, but we will be in trouble. No one wants to raise taxes, I understand that, but I believe that the reason most of the people in this town who lose their houses is because they lost their job, not because their taxes went up by \$200. Cuts would involve people who live and work in

this town, and I would hate to see that happen. I certainly hope you do not take the manager's recommendation and level fund. You never get to make that up, but just keep falling farther behind.

In addition, our administrators' salaries are market driven. The cuts that you saw on that list are real and would be devastating to the school. I want to get sports off the list and I want ROTC to survive. I am asking you to reconsider the manager's recommendation for level funding. I know that Dr. Almeida would be happy to sit down with you. When you actually look at this budget and bring it down to brass tacks, there is nowhere to cut.

Judy Liner, School Committee member, doesn't feel that Dr. Almeida's notification was a scare tactic, but informational. It gives the public an opportunity to become better informed. While not mandated, it is essential for academic achievement not to cut services, that would be a travesty. I know people are concerned over salaries, but these people are charged with the very important role of shaping the future of our children. The children need a top notch education and I ask that the Council support our budget. We need to provide our children with everything possible to promote their success.

School Committee member Ann Dickson commented that the School Committee voted to approve the purchase of chromebooks and also voted to approve this budget presented to you. There are no scare tactics; the superintendent listed all potential things that could be cut. It is simply a list of possibilities. The real question is what value the town places on education. What is important for the town and its' children. We may not be number one, but just want to be better than we are now, not worse. It is not acceptable for 1/3 of our juniors to fail the NECAP, not acceptable to not offer services to the middle school students who are having problems with behavior or math. The bulk of the budget has to do with the value that the community places on education.

Mr. Florio added that ROTC is vital to our community, but the bottom line is that we have great administrators, superintendent and staff. Anything you can do to help the school department with this budget, we would all appreciate.

Kelly Erinakes, CTA President, pointed out that our administration salaries are at the bottom one third of the pay scale in Rhode Island. In addition, schools should not be funded with property taxes. However, in your own household you are not level funded, your gas, electric, oil bills go up. You have to figure out a way to pay the bills, some people get a part time job or work extended hours, but level funding cannot happen. You are not doing the schools any service and it is shameful for those of us who do not put our kids in our public schools. Good schools retain good property values. We are all taxpayers, we are all strapped.

A motion was made by Councilwoman Carlson seconded by Vice-President McGee to adjourn work session. All voted Aye.

A motion was made by School Committee member Dickson seconded by member Florio to adjourn School Committee work session. All voted aye.

Town Clerk