

ST. GEORGE SELECT BOARD & ASSESSORS

St. George Town Office

MEETING MINUTES

March 27, 2023

The Select Board meeting was called to order at 7:05 p.m. Present were Richard Bates (Chair), Steve Cartwright, Van Thompson, Wayne Sawyer, Randy Elwell, Richard Erb, Irene Ames, Mary K. Hewlett, Alison Briggs, Chris Polky, Mike Felton, Suzy Kane, and Alane Kennedy.

Via Zoom: Present were Kristin Falla and Sandra Roak.

REGULAR SESSION

Quorum

A quorum was present.

Public Comment

There were no public comments.

Adjustments to the Agenda

Municipal, School and County Budget Issues for FY24 was moved to the top of the agenda.

Municipal, School and County Budget Issues for FY24

Bates

Michael Felton is here tonight. I think it's really important, with the anticipated increases that we expect, to get as much airing of this information as possible. We have increases in the county tax, we have

increases in the school tax and budget, and we also have increases in the municipal budget. There may be some misunderstandings about some of this. I'm sure there are regrets but it's important that we all know what's going on. The more the Board and the public know about this, the better we're going to be in trying to spread the message that this is a well thought out and necessary budget. We have three things to discuss: the county, the municipality and the school. We'll start with a Power Point presentation on the school.

Michael Felton

I will say that in the years I've been here, this is by far the hardest budget we've had. I've talked to a variety of people about it already. The piece that is the most challenging for us is the number of students, especially young students, coming into the school that have really intensive needs, especially in terms of behavioral, social, emotional, and mental health. We've never seen anything like it and the surrounding districts are facing similar challenges as well. We'll talk more about that. When we discuss the budget, we always start with who we are. We're a community school district. The heart and strength of the school is the community of St. George. Our mission is to do whatever it takes to ensure that every single student thrives and to give back and contribute to the vitality and resiliency of the town of St. George. When we focus on students, we look at academic growth, character development, and health and wellness. We break health and wellness into physical and mental health, social emotional wellbeing, food security and basic needs, understanding that unless you meet that health and wellness component, you don't get character development and academic growth. Finally, we believe for a student to thrive, demonstrate mastery and find meaning in their learning, they need to do work that is meaningful to them and to the larger community. So that's where we start. That is the heart of who we are, and the heart really is this town. We put these priorities together a few years ago, and these guide our budget development process. The first one is to improve student's education, experience and outcomes; to increase the district's fiscal sustainability and resilience, and to contribute to the vitality of the town. This is a picture of our pre-K students. That's a toboggan our middle level students built last year at the apprentice shop and that's our first pre-K class on the toboggan.

Elwell

They entered that in last year's Toboggan Run in Camden.

Michael Felton

That's right, they raced this year as well in the US national championships. Why are we here and what makes this budget so challenging? As I said, this is the most difficult budget we've ever had. There are a variety of factors. One is a loss of state subsidy. We lost \$260,000 in state subsidy. I've learned a lot of other districts are also facing similar challenges, especially in the Midcoast. They're getting affected because their valuations are up, so that's cutting into the amount the state is paying. Ours is a little bit different. We will talk more about that. Our special education costs are up about \$370,000 or 27%. That is by far the biggest driver of the of the increase. High school tuition costs are up by about \$81,000. For

high school tuition, for every student, we pay a flat tuition fee that's set by the state and is generally between \$12,000 and \$14,000 and goes up every year. For students who receive special education services, we pay an additional special education rate on top of the regular tuition rate. This year absorbing the full cost of pre-K, we received a \$187,000 grant this year that covered most of the cost and we just found out the other week that we're going to receive another \$33,000, so that cut the total impact of pre-K on the budget which was a positive. We're still waiting to find out what our health insurance premiums are going to be. Lots of information indicate we're going to see a big jump in the premiums. We projected a 10% increase, I think. We'll find out Monday of next week and depending on where that comes in, it could be good, or it could force more hard decisions. Almost all of these increases are in regular education and special education, and we'll talk about what those are. Article one, Regular Education, includes all your regular education classroom teachers, including RP, PE, world language, band, music, title interventions, gifted and talented, regular education and texts, substitutes, our costs for our community partners like Herring Gut and Blueberry Cove, supplies, books and equipment for regular education, furniture, field trips, and also high school tuition. You'll notice we now have eighteen Regular Education teachers, and we have four Regular Education Ed Techs.

Alison Briggs

What is the figure for MCST for?

Michael Felton

That's for Midcoast School of Technology. Article Two is Special Education. This includes eight teachers. Again, we've seen a dramatic increase in the number of especially young students with very severe needs. I'm going to share this. We had a period of time where teachers were going home with bruises every day, and they were getting those bruises from kids who were in kindergarten through third or fourth grade, a really challenging situation, which led to the increase, and is part of the reason we have more staff. It also includes the Special Education Ed Techs, and substitutes. We have a Clinical Supervisor to oversee our intensive programs, a Special Education Director, an Admin Assistant and then their PD supplies and books. The extended school year is for certain students, who if they lose too much over the summer, we're obligated to provide services through the summer months. That's the extended school year services evaluation. If they're referred to Special Education, they need to be evaluated and that evaluation is anywhere between \$1,200 to \$3,000, and students need to be reevaluated every three years. We also have Occupational Therapy. Some students need special transportation if they can't be on the bus and there's a Special Education high school tuition charge. The total budget increase is about \$455,000, a 6.7% increase. By far, the largest increases are in Article One and Article Two. Article One- Regular Ed is up almost \$250,000 and article two-Special Education is up almost \$370,000. To put it in perspective, if you look at the pie chart, almost all of the entire budget is Article One and Two. The remainder of the expenses include sports, student activities, administration, buses, and facilities and is \$2 million. 70% of your budget is Article One and Article Two, so if those rise it's really hard to offset them, but you'll see we cut throughout the budget to try to absorb as much of this increase as we could. This graph shows the rise over time in those two articles. I'll point out the line

on the bottom which shows the Special Education expenditures, and you'll see in FY 20 there's a big jump, and that's because we added staff to create intensive programs for what's called day treatment and life skills for students with severe behavioral and functional needs. Prior to that we had to do out of district placements which can cost between \$100,000 to \$200,000 per child per year, sometimes less. This year, we almost had a district placement, but we were able to avoid it. That one placement would have cost the district \$124,000 per child per year. So, you can see with that investment, we've flattened out our Special Education costs for three years, but you're seeing the curve sneaking up again and that's because of the number of kids coming in with severe needs. It's like nothing any of us have ever seen. It's not just us. If you talk to any other district in this area, they're seeing the same things and there's some big work right now to think about. Our Special Ed Director, Assistant Superintendent Jessica Berry, is a big part of this. We are trying to figure out how we address these needs of families and students on a more comprehensive scale because if this level of growth of need continues, I'm not sure how schools in general are going to be able to meet it, given the resources it takes. I don't like all the gloomy news and graphs, so I threw in some pictures here too. This is the middle level team during the community meeting before winter break. Each team gets up there and one person has to volunteer to be the Christmas tree. Everybody decorates that person and that's Josh as the Christmas tree. They all look pretty happy. All right, there's your happy moment. Let's go back to the budget. Next, I'm going to talk about state subsidy. Richard and I have had some good exchanges on this. You'll hear the state will often say they fund 55% of public education but that's a little misleading because it's 55% of the aggregate cost, so for some districts it might fund more than 55% and for some districts like ours, they fund less than 10%. It's also not the total cost of education, it's what they say the cost of education is and they have a formula that comes up with a minimum amount to run a school. They fund 55% of that. They don't fund 55% of the total cost of what all schools pay or all taxpayers pay as I as I understand it. To put that in perspective, what they say our minimum amount to run the school is this year, is less than how much we spent in 2015-2016.

Alison Briggs

What did they say that number is?

Michael Felton

I think it's \$4-4.5 million. It is online, under essential program programs and services. It's the state funding formula. If you email me, I'll send it to you. A vast majority of schools pay more than EPS, the amount that was recommended by the state. You'll see we get about \$147,000 from the feds. Now the irony here is Special Education is controlled by a federal law called IDEA which mandates we provide the services that we provide, however, the federal government is 2% of our total budget, \$147,000. How we got hit on the state subsidy is our Special Education allotment or subsidy went down slightly in part because our cost a couple of years ago went down. But what really hurt is we lost our economically disadvantaged student subsidy and how they determine that is they look at the average number of students in the state who qualify as economically disadvantaged and this year it was 39%, which is down from past years. If you're above that you get all the money. If you're below it, you get nothing. We

came in at 37%. We were five students short; that cost us a quarter of a million dollars. I've been talking to some of our legislators about it as that really needs to change. It should be a sliding scale or a hill not a fiscal cliff. Right now, it's a cliff. Five students should not cost the district \$250,000. We did a huge outreach, and we probably had more responses to the forms we sent out than we've ever had before. Last year, it was only 23%. With that extra outreach, we got up to 37%. Again, we were two percentage points short. That hurt a lot.

Erb

It depends on who responds. I mean, they can either hurt you or help you.

Michael Felton

If they don't qualify, they assume they're not economically disadvantaged. They take the total population and if they don't fill it out, they're assumed not to be economically disadvantaged. We encourage everyone to fill it out, just in case. It's a little tricky how it works. Essentially based on where our assessment is, 91% is paid by taxpayers for the cost of education in St. George, 7% by the state and 2% by the Feds. The next slide is about Special Education costs. There are two parts of of Article Two Special Education. I want to focus on personnel. As I said, we've had to add personnel this year and in past years to provide students support. Many of our students need one to one adult support throughout the entire day. Many of the students need to be in classes of five to six kids to be able to function and have their needs met. There is natural salary increase. We have some staff who move from lower levels of current coverage (single or two persons up to family). Personnel costs, including salary and benefits, jumped up \$284,000. For Special Education tuition, those costs went up \$76,000. If you take just those two areas alone, Special Ed personnel and Special Ed tuition costs, that accounts for 76% of our total budget increase. Special Ed is really the primary driving factor of this budget.

Van Thompson

You don't have any control.

Michael Felton

No. What we've done to try to control it is build our own programs so we can educate our kids in our school, keep them here and not pay out of district placements, because each out of district placement can be \$100,000 to \$150,000 per child, per year. If you do that when a child is in pre-K or kindergarten, you're paying that every year until they are 22 or 23. It is a long time.

Alison Briggs

What percentage of the kids are in Special Ed?

Michael Felton

I think we're at 20%. One in five students. It's not the total number of kids in Special Ed. It's the number of kids who have really severe needs. It's not kids who necessarily have a reading disability alone. It's

students who also have really severe issues. They've experienced a lot of traumas; have severe behavioral needs; or have severe mental health, social or emotional needs. Those are the challenges that we're seeing more and more of and, together with our staff, we've done some really good work. You see kids who come and really struggle; they show tremendous amounts of growth, but it is very resource intensive to do that. As those numbers climb, it gets harder and harder to deal with that.

Cartwright

What's in the best interest of the child as far as having them here and treating them here as best we can versus placement somewhere else? It seems to me sort of obvious that it would be better if you can keep the student in the community.

Michael Felton

Every student has an individual education plan or IEP team that meets to make those decisions. We absolutely try to keep our kids here. It's very possible that we could have a student whose needs are just so great, we can't meet them, and they need an intensive, almost clinical setting. Thankfully, we've had some close calls. We've been able to adjust things to make it work but as I said, we had weeks there with teachers going home with bruises every day. It's not easy work and it is not just our school. For high school tuition or Regular Ed tuition in Article One, we'll have five more high school students next year. We're projecting a 4-5% increase in tuition rates, and we do have more students going to Midcoast, which I think is great for students educationally, and financially for us. If a student goes to Midcoast, we only pay two-thirds of the tuition rate, so that saves us money. Because we had more students going to Midcoast this year than we anticipated, we had a big savings on our high school tuition, which is good because we needed that for Special Ed. You can see the need for building a contingency into that obviously because kids move into the district frequently, so we have to be prepared. So that's up about \$81,000. We have zero control over high school tuition. I just want to give people a sense of what we are paying to the other districts. We're sending \$647,000 to Camden next year, where most of our students go, \$290,000 to Oceanside, where 23 students go, \$263,000 to Lincoln Academy which has been inching up every single year. Oceanside has been decreasing. Dominic has two students. That sort of gives you a sense of the money that's going out.

Elwell

The cost of the economy right now must be driving a lot of the tuition rates well.

Michael Felton

It definitely impacts it. We got hit hard on our electricity cost with a big jump last year on this year's budget because of CMP's rate increase. I think they were up by 80% so that was absolutely a piece of it but the biggest piece is special education because you essentially need to hire people to be able to do it. That's your most important resource and it is resource intensive.

Bates

In the arrangement that St. George has where we have a choice of choice of high school, are high schools only allowed to charge the marginal cost of having an additional student? That is, you don't simply take the total school bill and divide it by all the students. You look at how much it costs to have that extra St. George student.

Michael Felton

The state looks at prior year costs and they come up with a per pupil cost based on that and they have a formula.

Bates

If I was selling widgets, I wouldn't do it like that. It's the cost of one more widget, or in this case one more student.

Michael Felton

That is not how they do it. What I argue, and the other superintendents don't always appreciate this, is it not a bad deal to have a \$647,000 revenue stream or \$290,000 revenue stream when you have no strings attached. You can spend that however you want. Other superintendents sometimes push back, and say, their residents pay more. That's another discussion. I just heard it today from one of the other districts. I asked if they had to add any staff and the answer was, they didn't. If they must add more staff, it's one thing, but if it's an empty seat and we're paying for everything, that's revenue for them. They don't see it like that, and some of them are going to continue to push on us to pay more. The School Board has talked a lot about this and is very adamant that we're not going to do that.

Alison Briggs

Who pays for transportation to Camden?

Michael Felton

We transport the kids to all those places and it's one of the challenges we have and why we are stretched thin.

Alison Briggs

Are transportation costs included in these numbers?

Michael Felton

No. They're providing the school and the cost to run the school but they're not paying to transport them there.

Bates

They aren't adding a building, and they aren't hiring an extra teacher.

Michael Felton

And if they have construction costs, they can pass a portion of that on to us.

Alison Briggs

How about school lunches, who pays for that?

Michael Felton

It's built into our tuition rate. They come up with a per pupil cost each year and every January or February, they release the rates.

Alane Kennedy

Just for clarification, that doesn't necessarily include lunch. School lunches are provided by the state and have been free since around the beginning or middle of COVID, so that's not actually a factor in that number currently. If a student were to go to Camden, they would have to purchase their lunch.

Audience question

Do these enrollment numbers include the Special Ed students as well?

Michael Felton

Correct. For pre-K, we had some good news this last week. We received an additional \$33,000 we are going to be able to use this year, so that pushed it down. It's covering a chunk of the Ed Tech that's in the pre-K classroom, as well as supplies and equipment and a couple other things. Pre-K receives an initial \$44,000. I'll say that has been an incredibly successful program. We have 17 students in there. Everyone in the school loves them. I would say part of the reason we started that is because we're seeing all the students come to us with such high needs that we wanted to get to them earlier, so this is one of our essential interventions to get kids the services they need that much sooner. I think that program has been very successful.

Health insurance - We're projecting a 10% increase. We've added some staff on the Special Ed side, and increased the staff level and coverage but just to give a sense of what it costs the district, family health insurance cost the district \$25,000. Two adults are \$21,000, child/adult is \$17,000 and single is \$11,000. So those are the costs of the district depending on the level of insurance.

Photo- In August, Colby let us take all the techs and teachers out to Allen Island to do one of our workshop days. After going through COVID where people couldn't easily interact with one another, and it was a stressful two and a half years. This really focused on bringing people together and it was a huge success and a beautiful day.

These are just an overview of where we've made cuts over the course of this budget since the first request that came in until today. You'll notice we made a lot of cuts in transportation, including taking out a couple of buses, and cuts in some of the facility projects. Throughout the entire budget, there were a lot of reductions that we've made. At one point, we thought we were going to have the out of district placement, and for a minute we took out all our PD and all our field trips, and that still was only \$50,000 and the out of district placement is \$124,000. We figured out a way to avoid the out of district placement, so it wasn't as challenging as we thought it would be. This just gives an overview. We've really tried to work to get this down and to try to minimize the impact on the kids.

Cartwright

What's the status of field trips? Are they in there?

Michael Felton

They're in there. We reduced some costs but they're in there.

Cartwright

They're such a valuable experience.

Michael Felton

We had to cut things. Our goal was to not cut people. We were really trying to avoid that and luckily, we were also able to keep the fieldtrips in there. The total cuts were over \$400,000. We have a school fund where we raised money over the years, understanding that the needs of Special Ed will continue to grow. We wanted to make sure we could do innovative projects, so we moved about \$18,000 out and we'll ask the teachers to make requests to the school fund for a variety of things including a partnership with the print shop for kids do boat building, supplies for EL and other items. We reduce supplies, equipment, field trips, professional development across the budget, we didn't eliminate it, but there were reductions, and that's, pretty much every sector of the budget that was cut or reduced. Like I said, we avoided the out of district placement that would have been a \$73,000 tuition charge and \$49,000 for transportation because we would have needed to hire a van driver for the for the student. We took two buses out. I talked about the additional pre-K grant money, and we use the federal grant for rural communities that we receive each year to cover some of our technology costs and reduce those. This is just a snapshot of all the articles and expenditures. A variety of areas were caught or remain relatively flat. The increase you see is all driven by Article One and Two, so total expenditures were up about \$455,000 or 6.72%. These numbers are probably going to change again. We're still waiting on health insurance but that's where we are as of today. For revenues, there is a loss of the \$240,000-\$250,000 in economically disadvantaged students, so the assessment is up \$613,000 or 10.6%. That's a number that none of us are happy with. We'd love to get into single digits. We've really struggled to push that number down. To try to push it much lower, I think you start cutting into some pretty important things, essential things. The School Board will vote to approve the budget on Wednesday, April 12th. We'll ask you to sign the warrants for the district budget meeting and the referendum, so we'll come to you on Monday, April

24th I believe. The district budget meeting is Monday, May 15th and the referendum, I believe is scheduled for Tuesday, June 13 and Cassie and Ted Taro work all those things out to make sure we're legal. This is a picture of the first-grade class. Camden National Bank donated \$5,000 to the CTE Makerspace building. We've raised over \$1.6 million privately and through federal grants, most of it just through donations of about \$1.1 million. We're doing that project, which we believe is really important, for the future of the school outside of the budget to try to reduce impact on taxpayers and we've been very successful in that fundraising. We have some work to do, but we've made good progress. That's it.

Wayne Sawyer

Richard and I are going off the board between April 24th and May 15th. If we approve this budget, can the other two people who come on change our votes?

Bates

No. Listening to some of the budget workshops, I'm really impressed by the thoroughness of Mike and Cassie and the School Board and all the staff who have contributed to this budget. This is not a gold-plated budget.

Wayne Sawyer

It's bare bones.

Bates

Importantly, they're addressing the issues which, for the health of the community must be addressed. We can't ignore the special needs. I take the point about having the children earlier in preschool, because hopefully you can avert problems which might otherwise arise in that year when they're not at school. It's a tough problem but I think I think the school is doing everything they can.

Alane Kennedy

The Budget Committee asked for details on the school's budget this year, but I don't see any Budget Committee members here. Will this information get relayed to them?

Bates

I will make sure of that. Mike gave me the presentations earlier this evening. I know Mike is going to put them in the town newsletter. I think people will know to go to the school website to get the school budget. I don't think we need to duplicate that on our website.

Michael Felton

Once that is finished on April 12th, we can post it and if people have questions, they are always free to reach out to me or to Cassie.

Alison Briggs

This is a question for the Select Board really. If this budget is approved and outstanding, what does it mean to the taxpayer?

Bates

There are three parts of the budget, and I've made a few notes, so why don't I go to the next slide, and Rick can chime in if he thinks I have an error. Let me just go through the accounting of what the consequences will be. We have a county agency, which is increasing their budget by 17.3% and there's two parts to that. The first part is about the increase in the valuation of St George in relation to all other towns in the county. It goes back to COVID, when more people wanted to come and live in St. George than all our other neighbors. Isn't that a good thing? Well, it's also a bad thing as consequently the house prices have gone up, and therefore when the county comes to apportion, the county budget, we ended up getting charged more. Last year we were being charged 11.08% of the county budget and now we're going to be charged 11.5% of the county budget and that's because our valuation of the town relative to everyone else in the county has gone up, so that's factor number one. It's not the biggest factor; that factor is only about 4% of the increase. The rest of the increase, over 13% of the increase in the county budget, comes from the sheriff's budget and the prisons. Those two things, the valuation of our town, and more importantly, the increase in the sheriff's costs and the corrections cost, put the county budget up by 70%. The reason that the town budget is going up is because we absorbed the ambulance into the town budget and that's going to increase our expenses by about \$650,000. The Budget Committee encouraged us to try and not have one big step increase in the town budget, so what we're doing is we're going to take more money out of our fund balance, and we're going to use some of the ARPA funding that came from government during the pandemic to reduce this year's increase. Our costs are going to go up, but we expect the total net increase in the municipal tax will be about \$290,000.

Erb

I thought it was a little lower, but you are in the ballpark.

Bates

We have increases from town, the municipality, and the county.

Alison Briggs

How much is the county?

Erb

\$167,000.

Bates

Next year, I anticipate that 64% of our property taxes will go to the school, 23% will go the municipality and 13% will go to the county. There are still some uncertainties in doing that calculation

because we can see all these cost increases but then you have to decide what the current value of the town is. We won't know that until new houses have been built and people have applied for homestead exemptions. There will be changes there. Let's assume there are no new houses and no change in the number of people that are applying for homestead exemption, and the same tax base that we've had this last year. We have extra costs and can then figure out how we're going to be sharing this extra cost over the same tax base. That's a very conservative approach, because we know that there have been ups and downs but if you do that, the mill rate increase, which is currently \$10.10, will be less than 90 cents.

Alison Briggs

I just want to make sure I understand. It's going to be \$650,000 more for the ambulance. \$455,000 more for the school, \$290k more for the municipality and \$167k more for the county?

Bates

I missed a couple of numbers. As I mentioned, we will have income from the ambulance which we estimate to be about \$129,000. We're going to be taking more out of our fund balance than we did in the past and that will reduce things by \$125,000. Then we are using some ARPA money which we presently think is about \$100,000. You have the \$650K minus \$129K minus \$125K minus \$100K.

Alison Briggs

Let's just say \$350K to be safe?

Bates

No. We're not taking the fund balance money and giving it to the ambulance; you have to think of it as the total. For the ambulance alone, there is a \$650,000 increase in costs, but we expect \$129,000 in revenue from the ambulance. If we're looking at the overall budget, then we can also factor in the issues of the of the extra money from the fund balance.

Alison Briggs

Did we have revenue from the ambulance last year?

Bates

No. That went to the association. The net increase for the municipal budget I reckon is \$290K.

Alison Briggs

And also \$167K for the County and \$455K for the school. Sorry, \$613K.

Bates

That's not the net number, is it?

Michael Felton

That's the net because the expenditures are up \$490K I think. Our expenditures went up, and our revenues went down. That's the gap. We're using \$300,000 from our fund balance to help offset that. We're using \$300,000 of our fund balance to get to a \$600,000 increase and we're, concerned about using more fund balance because if you do eventually you can run out of it, and then all of a sudden you have a giant increase.

Alison Briggs

Factoring in what you said before about that, 90 cents on every \$1,000.

Erb

It's easier for everybody if you round up to the dollar, and being hopeful that it's better than that, \$250 for \$250,000 piece of property.

Bates

I understand Rick's reluctance.

Alane Kennedy

Did I read in the minutes that we're getting ready to do another assessment in the town?

Bates

A revaluation of properties which will take at least another year or so.

Alane Kennedy

A driving factor of School Board negotiations of contracts with staff, with the ambulance service, and with Knox County, EMA and the Sheriff's Department, is that living wages have gone up so high, it plays a really big part in all of us being able to continue to provide services and fill those spaces, especially if you lose one staff member. You're probably stressing out five to six additional staff members and run a chance of losing them as well.

Erb

All those entities that you mentioned, are all competing for the same people.

Alane Kennedy

Right. I met with Tim Carroll at Knox County about four years ago and he was telling us that he couldn't keep corrections officers because they were offering pennies for a job that is incredibly taxing. Our teachers are leaving with bruises. Our corrections officers were making \$20,000 a year to be in fights daily. It's a matter of starting to pay people for their value and so they can sustain themselves.

Bates

Do we have any more discussions about this whole budget issue?

Erb

As the numbers are refined, we'll be able to do a better job of estimating where we really are but I think you're in the ballpark with what we've talked about tonight.

Cartwright

Have you looked at all into the program for providing electric school buses?

Michael Felton

We applied for the free electric buses, and we didn't get them. If they offer free buses again, we'll apply again.

Alane Kennedy

I don't even think it's that. I think that a lot of these programs, like the solar programs that I've looked into, when it comes to getting grants for schools, they are for school districts with multiple buildings and places on campus to use those things. The larger districts with multiple schools did get buses, at least one or two, but because we're a small independent school, we don't fall into the guidelines. We don't even qualify for a lot of the grants I've looked into for the school. We don't fit in because we're independent from a district.

Michael Felton

I don't know why we got denied on the buses. The issue with the solar panels and heat pumps was that you couldn't be a municipal school district. You had to be multi town district. I asked them about that, and no one could explain to me why that rule was the way it was. I asked them to change it.

Erb

I just want to correct something that Alison had asked about, when absentee ballots are available. It will be a week from this Friday, April 7th.

Minutes

A motion was made by Elwell, seconded by Thompson, to approve the Select Board Meeting Minutes of March 13, 2023, as modified, and by a 4-0 vote, the motion carried (Wayne Sawyer abstained).

Communications

There were no communications.

Warrant

Bates

Irene, I noticed the warrant included the transfers to the reserve accounts. That is a lot of money there, but it still doesn't equal the school money. Do we have any questions about the warrant?

Cartwright

Anything out of the ordinary in there.

Irene Ames

No.

Van Thompson

What was the \$1,700 for Hammond Lumber?

Irene Ames

The description that Tara has here is Gerber multitools.

Elwell

Oh, that was for the firemen. They issued each fireman a multitool.

Town Manager Report

Erb

We had some disconcerting news. The EDA was concerned because we only had two bids on the 10 Cold Storage Rd. project and advised their minimum requirement is three bids, where I've been happy to get two. The manager we dealt with was questioning it and indicated that if we can't resolve this, we have to rebid. I advised that I think that's a really bad idea and we were able to convince them to waive the three-bid requirement. I think the key was giving them the names of all the people we've contacted and advertisements we've done. In particular, there were contractors who inquired about the project, asking for more information. They were very interested in talking to them to ask them why they didn't submit a bid. After those conversations took place, they backed off, so we now have approval.

Elwell

I think they saw what the reality of this world is right now.

Erb

We presented the notice of award to the CPM contractors and expect to sign the contract any day now. I'm sure we're going to want to have some meetings with the Select Board and others when they're ready

to move ahead. Dave Schmanska came in with an interesting idea. Channel Six had a program about a firewood bank that was being mined in Boothbay harbor. They call themselves the Woodchuckers, and Dave is very big into firewood, and one of the leaders in this. They're looking for a site where they could cut the wood and split it. They may have a place to do it but if that doesn't work out, he was asking about the possibility of using land down by the fire station. I spoke earlier about the same area as Ben Vale was talking about it for a potential skateboard park, but the land wasn't big enough for that. We don't have any kind of formal request yet, but I thought I would pass it along. It sounds like a great project to me. We talked about how to leave the property in good condition when they left and if I need to get more details from them, I will.

We had discussion here about some of the traffic problems down in Martinsville and I was contacted by a woman who puts on a market called the High Seas market. They would like to come back but they recognize that there were problems with the traffic last year. She spoke to me about ideas that they had for satellite parking and transportation. The two places they spoke about were the parking lot on Drift Inn Beach, which is very close, and the other if needed was the lot at the big ball field. I spoke with Richard about this. We should be dealing with the Grange I think which is Larry. I just want to let you know, because it was a concern to the Board. They would like to come back and work with us. It looks like there are about 10 or 12 parking spaces; that's all they've got there.

There are a couple of other things coming through the agenda for the MMA issues. The policy committee that I that I sit on is meeting fairly frequently now because it is right in the middle of legislative session. There were 2300 bills a session which was just insane. They really need to get a hold on that.

Bates

Isn't this the short session?

Erb

No. 1300 out of 2300 have been printed, so there are 1000 that nobody has even seen. They've seen the titles, which can be very misleading. One bill, which should be interesting to us is the affordable housing law that was passed last year that impacted density and accessory apartments. There has been some discussion about possibly exempting smaller towns from that. Probably somewhere in there is a bill that does that but there's another one that has been filed that would postpone the effect of those laws for another two years, so we'll see what happens. I noticed that Ann Matlack was one of the co-sponsors, so she probably is in support of it. I don't know what kind of chance it has. Other than that, there is strong commitment from MMA and bipartisan support for doing something to fix the tax gap. There are bills filed right now, but the one that MMA is supporting, probably has the best chance, putting guidelines in place. If you are below 80% of the mean average income, you qualify for a certain amount of tax relief exempting part of your value.

Bates

This is an alternative to the system implemented last year where everyone gets a tax write-off if they have ten years of residency and are a senior.

Erb

This will expand the homestead exemption that all homeowners receive now. This would be an additional exemption. You must be age 65 or over and fall within certain income guidelines. There are people on both parties that are coming to their senses on this issue, and I think there's a lot of optimism right now. So those are the big issues and there's many other ones out there. Some of them don't make much sense. My favorite is to turn failed shopping centers and shopping malls into housing.

Bates

Thank you. Do you have any questions for Rick about all these issues? It's great that you have the inside track on what the MMA is thinking about.

Committee Reports**Bates**

On March 14th, when they were to meet, there were electric supply and internet routing issues due to the snowstorm, so they didn't have a Planning Board meeting on March 14th.

Van Thompson

The Budget Committee approved the budget.

Bates

Also, the warrant articles and that will make Tara very happy. I did learn something about GRIZMO which could be troublesome. There's a meeting on the 13th of April at the Thomaston Town Office, and it's going to have a presentation from an organization called Protect Maine's Fishing Heritage Foundation. One of the leaders of this lobbying PR group, is somebody called Crystal Kenny. It's going to be a presentation on the Aquaculture Emergency Moratorium. It has all the characteristics of a restriction of trade, frankly, and some towns have already voted this emergency ordinance in place. I assume that they're coming to GRIZMO to try and persuade them to also have all the towns in the area sign up for this emergency ordinance. Its intention is to put a block on the culture of finfish, nets, pens and other enclosures, perhaps like in Belfast, but just as important is the suspension of all of the marine organisms. My sense is that in the long term, agriculture is going to be a really important part of St. George, recognizing what's happening in the industry. I think this is going to be an important issue.

Elwell

They want to stop the oyster growers.

Cartwright

And what will they allow?

Bates

If you go to the website, this organization, which is called Protectmaine.com, you'll see that they've both the emergency ordinance as well as a regular ordinance which basically tries to restrict all of this. It's going to be difficult because I understand the concerns in the lobster industry about the immediate future, but I'm concerned that in the long term, aquaculture is going to be really important.

Elwell

It gives a lot of your lobsterman something to fall back on. Keith Miller and Zachary, when he was alive, went to Rhode Island as they were selected to start that kelp program. A lot of the fishermen have fallen back to that because there is no guarantee in the lobster industry right now.

Bates

There will be a meeting on the 13th in Thomaston.

Erb

The Solid Waste and Recycling Committee is going to be doing their annual roadside cleanup the first week in May.

New Business Action Items**Approve Draft Land Use Ordinance for Town Meeting Ballot**

A motion was made by Elwell, seconded by Thompson, to approve the Planning Board Land Use Ordinance for Town Meeting ballot, and by a unanimous vote, the motion carried.

Bates

There were very minor changes after the public hearing. The main thing is it rationalizes the land ordinances, contains a single set of definitions, a logical index, clears up some ambiguities and clarifies the meetings. Michael Jordan in particular, deserves commendation for all the hours that he's put into this, as well as the rest of the Planning Board.

Approve Draft Emergency Medical Services Ordinance for Town Meeting ballot

A motion was made by Elwell, seconded by Thompson, to approve the Draft Emergency Medical Services Ordinance for Town Meeting ballot, and by a unanimous vote, the motion carried.

Sign Warrants for Town Meeting

A motion was made by Elwell, seconded by Cartwright, to accept the warrant for the Town Meeting on May 8th and 9th, and by a unanimous vote, the motion carried.

New Business Discussion Items

Building and Planning Fees Review

Bates

I sent a note out about that over the weekend. The fees that we're charging are quite a bit less than neighboring communities. They haven't been reviewed for a long time. In anticipation that you'd agree to this, I spoke to Anne Cox on the Planning Board, and Susy Ellis on the Budget Committee, and they put forth volunteers. Anne is going to volunteer from the Planning Board, and Jerry Hall and Scott Vaitones have prepared to volunteer for the Budget Committee. The plan would be, if you're agreeable, that they would go and meet with Terry and they would talk about the fees that we have right, the fees in other towns and review the fees.

Elwell

That is a great idea. I'm sure they haven't been reviewed in a long time.

Bates

One argument is it would start to bring the costs that are involved in having a Planning Department to the people who are incurring those costs because right now if someone wants to build a house, we charge a very small amount.

Cartwright

I really liked your fuzzy estimates. There's a loophole that we can close.

Erb

I think most people are shocked when they find out what a building really costs.

Van Thompson

I just want to say congratulations. I appreciate you looking into it and laying it out for us.

Bates

Thank you. Anne, Jerry and Scott are ready to take this on and I hope they'll come back within four weeks.

It may be something that you want to postpone until the new Board comes in. It would be nice to have something done in a timely fashion so that Wayne and I could be responsible for it.

A motion was made by Elwell, seconded by Cartwright, to approve the study of the building and planning fees, and by a unanimous vote, the motion carried.

Bates

I thought about this for other departments. Perhaps every year, we should ask the Harbor Committee to look at mooring fees and we should ask the Solid Waste Committee to look at transfer station fees and so on.

Elwell

We're still lower than a lot of places.

Erb

If fees had been increased in the immediate prior year, it would probably be a pretty quick review and we could just increase those, but if you don't review them for years, it's harder.

Managing Scholarship Funds

Bates

This is an issue that Irene and I have been looking at. I sent a summary to you earlier in the week and it's not something that will be resolved before the end of Wayne and my term. Irene has it under control, but I think you really need to know about this, and the issue is, in a nutshell, there is over \$420,000 in these funds. Admittedly, although this year was a very difficult year for financial bonds and stocks, it turns out that even though there are \$420,000 in the fund, the scholarships that the Scholarship Committee is actually going to be allowed to dispense, according to the terms of all the agreements, is less than 1%. The rules are probably not as clear as they could be. Irene is going to talk to Alison Wilson and his daughter about their fund. We have First National Bank helping us to understand what these other trust documents or fund documents allow. The main thing the Board needs to be aware of is this will not be settled quickly. I think we need a different way of managing these funds. When the stock market has a great year, we don't want to give away all the money and when the stock market has a hard year, we don't want to give away nothing. We would like to have some interpretation of these documents for a fairly steady number of scholarships while at the same time maintaining the funds in perpetuity. That is the intention of the donor.

Cartwright

I don't know how this factors in, but when those were set up the scholarship amount would really help, but now the costs have soared to the point where it's a drop in the bucket.

Bates

There's that factor, and then there's another factor which Irene has identified. If I understand correctly, in those situations where the student is getting some aid from the school, and the aid from the school is for example \$10,000 and they receive a scholarship for \$1000, then the aid drops to \$9,000.

Irene Ames

The second semester it will drop.

Bates

Then you start to wonder.

Cartwright

How much are we helping?

Irene Ames

There are students that apply but because of the parent's income, they're not eligible for any financial aid whatsoever. \$1,000 for those people helps.

Bates

The intentions of the organizations or the individuals who set up these funds are great for St. George. This just needs a bit of work, sorting out the conditions, so that the banks adhere to them properly and they become valuable solutions. But anyway, stay tuned.

Realtor RFP for Selling Tax Acquired Properties

Bates

Rick is proposing a realtor RFP for selling the tax acquire properties. Do you want to talk about that?

Erb

I talked about this before. At the meeting after next, I'd like to have our RFP responses in with the real estate agents that you'd be interested in, to list the tax acquired property that we plan to dispose of. I'm thinking of contacting the agents I'm familiar with in the area, and also putting something on the town website. We'd be asking for proposals that demonstrate their familiarity and experience in St. George, their plan for marketing properties and what their commission would be. Apparently, it is up to the selling agent to determine the commission, not only for them, but also for the buyer's agent. As far as who to contact, the ones that I'm familiar with are True Hall, Katie Miller and St. George Realty.

Cartwright

There is Callow.

Erb

It may not be the easiest decision to make but I think if we have some basic criteria, we should be okay.

Bates

I think it's a good idea. We probably ought to go ahead.

Elwell

Irene would probably be my choice.

Bates

If we put an RFP out there, they don't have to respond.

Van Thompson

Are you going to research it and come back to us with a choice about how to proceed?

Erb

Yes.

Plans for Town Meeting

Bates

The last thing on the regular agenda is the plan for the town meeting and we have two issues. The first is the moderator. In the past, we had Mike Mayo, but he's declined. Rick is making inquiries to see what other options we have. The other issue is the location. Last year, we had the meeting over at the school gym. The two previous years we had it in a tent outside, and in past years we've had it in this room at the Town Office.

Elwell

The school would probably be best just in case we have a large crowd.

Erb

I agree.

Cartwright

I think it would fit in here.

Erb

I reached out to Allison Briggs. It's common where I've worked before for a local attorney to do it. They usually have all the skills and don't mind. She was interested, but she is going to be away. When I spoke with Michael Mayo, he had suggested John Spear who may or may not be available. He's going to get back to me. If that doesn't work out, I'll welcome any suggestions.

Adjournment

A motion was made by Cartwright, seconded by Thompson, to adjourn the Select Board meeting, and by a unanimous roll call vote, the motion carried, and the meeting was adjourned at 8:40p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Tammy Taylor
Recording Secretary
Town of St. George