

Somers Public Hearing on 2019-2020 School Budget
Somers Elementary School Auditorium
March 11, 2019
6:00 PM

1. Public Hearing on 2019-2020 Budget

Rationale: Public Hearing at 6 p.m. in the Auditorium at Somers Elementary School on the 2019-2020 School Budget

Discussion: Chairman Devlin started the Public Hearing in the SES auditorium at 6:03 p.m. and introduced Superintendent Czapla to the audience. Superintendent Czapla presented the proposed 2019-20 budget focusing on recent budget history, challenges and priorities, proposed budget impacts, and comparisons structure.

Recent budget history included school years 2017-18 and 2018-19. In 2017-18, there was a fiscal crisis in the State without an approved budget until November. The BOE voluntarily gave back \$200,000 to help with the crisis. In 2018-19, SPS went out to bid for insurance health premiums and acquired new health insurance with a one-time 0% increase in premiums last year. This will not be achieved going forward. This resulted in a \$220,000 savings. The BOF cut the budget further in the amount of \$181,500 totaling \$401,500 in reductions.

Superintendent Czapla discussed the challenges and priorities as identified by the leadership team. The proposed budget reflects these priorities. The budget focuses on two major challenges: academic achievement and mental health issues. Analysis of data over the past several years found that academic achievement as measured by Smarter Balanced Assessments have been stagnant and declining. Last year's Language Arts scores in Somers were compared with DRG-C scores (the district reference group that Somers falls in along with other towns with similar socioeconomic status). Somers performed below DRG-C in Language Arts and Mathematics. This analysis was necessary in order to reverse the trend. Mental health concerns are another challenge that every school system in the State and nation need to address. National percentages include 20% with a mental health disorder; 11% with a mood disorder; 8% with an anxiety disorder; and, 10% with a conduct disorder. The proportion of the population dealing with these issues significantly impacts learning not only for the individual but for the class as a whole. Somers has had a 74% increase of 504's since 2015-16. Since 2009-10, Special Education has had a 370% increase in ADHD, 93% increase in autism, 69% increase in emotional behaviors, as well as increases in DCF/Foster placements and homeless students. The proposed budget will address mental health issues.

Superintendent Czapla proposed a budget of \$23,914,137 which is a 4.78% increase from last year. He presented the budget breakdown under nondiscretionary categories which contain contractual obligations (salaries, insurance and benefits, tuition, transportation, and utilities) and discretionary expenses (maintenance, equipment, instructional

resources, extracurricular activities, and administrative overhead). Nondiscretionary expenses make up 92.6% of the budget, and discretionary expenses make up 7.4% of the budget. The \$1,091,626 increase from last year will go towards:

- Contractual Obligations--adding a mental health professional at SES; insurance and benefits projecting a 9% increase; tuition with Special Education and Magnet schools; transportation contract; and, utilities totaling \$889,816.
- Instructional Resources--implementing Fountas & Pinnell LA Resource program at SES (\$50,000); applying \$20,000 towards supplies which had been previously reduced last year; increasing equipment for technology; supporting the long-range facilities plan for maintenance; upgrading security systems; administrative overhead for legal costs; and, implementing a social emotional curriculum as well as teacher and administrator training.

Superintendent Czaplá presented a PPE (Per Pupil Expenditure) comparison of the State, DRG-C, and Somers. PPE is a statistic representing the rate at which it costs a town to educate a student. For the entire State, the average cost to educate a student is \$18,243 representing an increase of 3.68% from last year. For DRG-C, the average cost is \$18,762 representing an increase of 9.6% from the previous year. For Somers, the average cost is \$15,855 representing an increase of .6% from the previous year. From a cost perspective, Somers is doing a good job; however, a low PPE may indicate problems. Somers is in the lower quartile of DRG-C. If Somers assumed a PPE of DRG-C, the budget would be increased by \$4.3 million. If Somers assumed a PPE equal to that of the State, the budget would be increased by \$3.6 million. The proposed budget took a lot of introspection but covers things in the district that need to be turned around to improve student learning.

Chairman Devlin opened the floor to the audience for questions/comments:

- Chris Thiesing, a 10-year resident of Somers with three daughters in the school system, addressed his concern over the declining test scores in relation to DRG-C. He was happy to see that the budget addresses this issue. He is also pleased with the school environment, staff, and superintendent. He encouraged the BOE and BOF to approve the budget.
- Roy Slater, educator at SHS for 43-years, commented on past maintenance concerns and sees the budget as addressing them and appreciates the bonding process. He commented on the NEASC process that the school underwent 20 years ago and that the town of Somers was ranked 147 out of 169 towns. He stated we are improving at 127. He appreciates the technology investment and the 5-year plan. He applauded the superintendent for identifying areas of weakness and applauded the proposed budget.
- Michael Clarity, Kindergarten teacher at SES and parent, commented on the rise in emotional and social problems of students. He participated in a workshop for the social wellbeing of children. He has noticed children experiencing more anxiety, anger, sadness, and depression. He also noted that mental issues also lead to physical symptoms. He stated that the SES school psychologist has a

working lunch and is constantly addressing the needs of students. Although there are initiatives that are being utilized, he believes a Social Worker will be helpful.

- Chairman Devlin stated that the proposed budget focuses mostly on SES because that is the foundation of SPS and where the changes need to begin. He also stated that Superintendent Czapla started a Strategic Planning Committee. Jeremy Anderson described the committee as involving community members, BOE members, administration, and teachers who are working together in subgroups that focus on a particular task. The committee will provide a mission statement for SPS. This committee will help to bring a tight alignment and provide good direction for future budgets.

Chairman Devlin listed important dates:

- 3/25/19--BOF Meeting to set the budget for the public hearing
- 4/23/19--BOF Public Hearing (usually held at SES)
- 5/7/19--Annual Town Meeting
- 5/14/19--Budget Referendum (vote)

Roy Slater also asked the superintendent how the budget would be impacted if the town has to take pension plans from teachers. Superintendent Czapla stated that there is a proposal as part of the governor's budget that they would want towns to assume 25% of the normal cost of the pension which would be phased over a three-year period. SPS would have to pay 8.3% this year, next year, and the following year which is roughly a \$70,000 additional expense to the BOE. This budget does not cover this proposal. If the proposal passes, there will be some hard decisions in order to meet that challenge.

The public hearing ended at 6:45 p.m.

Rick Lees, Board of Education Secretary Date

Shannin Burns, BOE Recording Secretary