

- Belmont Warrant Committee Meeting Minutes
- FINAL
- October 28, 2009, 7:30 p.m.
- Chenery Middle School Community Room

- Present: Chair Curtis; Members Allison, Brusch, Epstein, Hofmann, Libenson, Lynch, McLaughlin, Millane, Smith; BOS Chair Leclerc, SC Chair Rittenburg

- Town Administrator Younger, Town Accountant Hagg

- Members Absent: Callanan and Paolillo

- The meeting was called to order at 7:33 pm by Chair Curtis.

- Chair Curtis began by noting that two items did not make it on this evening's agenda: Mike Widmer was invited to speak to the WC this evening to give an update for FY10 from the State perspective; and there will be a report from the WC's Nominating Committee.

- ***Role of Subcommittees***

- Chair Curtis noted that this agenda item began at the last WC meeting. The discussion will focus on how to help the subcommittees in reviewing department budgets and in drafting reports.

- Member Allison: There are many alternatives for structuring this process and addressing the question of "What should we be doing when we draft the WC subcommittee report?" The primary purpose of the subcommittee report is to inform Town Meeting members and residents about the choices they are making when they vote on budget. The subcommittee report can give them a more informed view of what they are voting for when they vote. There are two categories: the required information (e.g., the description of a department's mission) and an assessment of the dollars in the town budget being spent in this area.

- At this time, Member Allison suspended reviewing her "Role of Subcommittees" memo as Town Moderator Widmer approached the WC table.

- ***Town Moderator Mike Widmer – FY10 State Budget Update***

- Mr. Widmer noted that there are people in town who are interested in joining the WC; he will make a decision in the next two weeks.

- The Governor will, in the next day or two, announce 9C cuts totaling at least \$600M (the shortfall is likely to be higher) as September's revenues were very low.

Medicaid is under-funded by \$3-\$4M. Local aid will most likely be impacted, as well as lottery, additional assistance, and the circuit breaker. These cuts may total \$100-\$150M. These cuts will gut programs and services across the state since there has not been a strategy on how to address collapsing revenues.

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- The impact to Belmont will depend on what formula is used. In addition to lower than expected revenues, the state is also experiencing a depletion of one-time funds. It used \$5B out of \$6B in one-time money for the FY10 budget. Assuming there is some revenue growth in FY11, we will still have a \$2B gap, therefore, cuts in FY11 will be commensurate to FY10. Chair Curtis asked if there are other big states that seem as chaotically managed? Widmer replied that many are in worse shape; at least Massachusetts presented its budget on time. Town Administrator Younger asked about legislative initiatives to help with this. Widmer said that there are no known tax increases, but that there would be more reforms, especially in the area of health care.

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- ***Role of Subcommittees (continued)***

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- Member Allison continued with the second suggestion: to present the department budget including its growth, and to present the department's personnel, with its growth. The third suggestion is to put this information into a program budget format (programmatic labels would be useful). Member Smith asked if there were templates from other towns? Member Bruschi replied yes, and that Belmont is presently working on creating such a template. Member Allison noted that "Boston About Results" [BAR] offers a well thought-out template.

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- Town Accountant Hagg added that she has met with department heads already and is looking at program issues. The health department, for example, is broken down into four programs: social services, Veteran services, animal control, and inspection services. The BAR report is useful in the way it looks at program measures and the personnel in each department. The budget figures and graphs make it easy to understand.

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- Member Allison asked BOS Chair Leclerc about the BOS perspective the issue of subcommittee reports. Leclerc said he is attracted to this "holistic approach". He added that the town side of the budget has experienced a "slow bleed" over time.

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- Member Allison said that this template would be helpful in looking at cuts/additions as expenditures are split by programs. Trade-offs are visible across the range of departments as is the question of who benefits from a program's initiatives. Some initiatives are very focused, some are more broad. Some programs, Allison continued, are redistributed from taxpayer to better-off Belmont citizens. In looking at the COA, for example, their programs benefit the healthy older, not the frail older. Sometimes there is a mismatch between goals, activities, and the allocation of funds. The library, for example, cuts its weekend hours when it may make more sense to cut Tuesday morning hours. Fire suppression has a huge budget allocation for fire suppression, but not so many fires.

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- Chair Curtis asked if there was a template for subcommittees to follow, an iterative document, whereby these points could be made into a template from which to put notes into. The template could be given to the department heads and they could be requested to help in the process. Member Allison said that a template would be created (Member Paolillo is working on it) and she will send it to Chair Curtis for his review.

- ***Update of FY11 Budget Process***

- Chair Curtis asked for an update on how the town/schools are doing on the budget process.

- SC Chair Rittenburg: The process is under way. The Community Dialogue will yield a “district improvement plan” which will lay out priorities and the Leadership Council will make sense out of the data. Town Administrator Younger: I am meeting weekly with department heads. The Capital Budget requests have a November deadline.

- ***Update on Summer Projects***

- Minuteman: BOS Chair Leclerc noted that even if per-pupil costs go down and the operating budget levels off, it is troubling that their budget is still significantly higher than other vocational schools. Minuteman has more programs, he said, which they feel forced to do to attract students. Even with the additional programs, it is unclear why Minuteman costs so much more. There are some really small numbers of classes (9-18 students), he added. Member Millane offered that it is very difficult getting information from Minuteman and the numbers they give are inconsistent with what is on the DOE website. They will give Mr. Joe Scali a list of questions to address.

- BOS Chair Leclerc spoke to the issue of the upcoming TM and the Minuteman warrant resolution. The resolution states that per-pupil and operating costs must go down or the Minuteman budget could be rejected. They have gone down a little, he said, but not substantially. The WC then discussed the TM timeline as it relates to rejecting the Minuteman budget. Member Brusch noted that the Minuteman warrant is asking TM in November to put parameters on a budget that is not yet written and that the make-up of TM in November is different in Spring.

- Member McLaughlin emphasized that the per-pupil and operating costs must go down substantially or their budget will be rejected. If we reject their budget, they’ll pay attention to us. We will get six towns to reject it with us, he said, because their budget is way out of whack. Member Brusch added that the way they configure the base budget is wrong. Belmont could have 20 kids attending Minuteman next year, and we will still pay for the 39 we have there this year. Minuteman, she said, was discussed at the recent MMA meeting. Regionalizing Minuteman was explored. Shawsheen is overfilled – if we merged with them, this could smooth out the costs.

- ***Possible Use of Kennedy School Graduate Students to Assist Belmont With Best Budgeting Practices***

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- Chair Curtis noted that graduate students from the Kennedy School have been used to develop best budget practices for various cities and towns. They have had a number of successful projects, notably Somerville. Professor Bilmes said she would consider Belmont. Curtis said that this might be an interesting resource and Member Allison said that she will distribute work product samples at the next WC meeting.

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- ***Nominating Committee***

- Member Smith noted that he and Member Lynch comprised the Nominating Committee. They respectfully nominated: Chair Curtis as WC Chair, Member Allison as WC Vice Chair, and Member Bruschi as WC Secretary. These nominations reflect the WC status quo as their experience and leadership are needed (more than ever this year).

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- A motion was made to accept these nominations.
- The WC was unanimous in its favorable vote.

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- ***Minutes of 10/14/2009***

- The Minutes of 10/14/09 were approved with one amendment. Three members abstained as they were not present at the meeting.

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- ***Other***

- Member Hofmann moved that the WC adjourn at 9:10 pm.

- Submitted by Lisa Gibalerio
- WC Recording Secretary