

ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE (ABRSC)
Joint Leadership Meeting with the Acton Select Board, Boxborough Select Board,
Acton Finance Committee and Boxborough Finance Committee

MINUTES

Approved by ABRSC 11/1/22

Learning Commons
Boardwalk Campus
75 Spruce Street, Acton

October 25, 2022
6:45 p.m.

ABRSC Present: Ben Bloomenthal, Kyra Cook*, Adam Klein, Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, Adam Schwartz
ABRSC Absent: Evelyn Abayahh-Issah, Liz Fowlks, Ginny Kremer, Yebin Wang, Rebecca Wilson
Others Present: Acton Select Board: Dean Charter*, David Martin, Jim Snyder-Grant
Boxborough Select Board: Jennifer Campbell*, Les Fox, John Markiewicz
Acton Finance Committee: Christi Andersen, Roland Bourdon, Jason Cole, Esha Gangolli, Mike Majors, Adam Nolde*, Steve Noone, Christine Russell, David Wellinghoff
Boxborough Finance Committee: Gary Kushner, Becky Neville, Anthony Newton, Maria Neyland*, Priya Sundaram
John Mangiaratti, Peter Light, Marie Altieri, Dave Verdolino, Beth Petr

1. Call to Order

The Boards and Committees were called to order at 6:55 p.m. by the Chairs.

2. Welcome and Introductions – Adam Klein

Adam thanked [Acton TV](#) for recording the meeting which will be available on their site.

He welcomed everyone to the “amazing” new school building, a testament to what our communities can do together. Goals for the meeting included:

- Relationship Building – key to a functional government. Because much is lost in email and virtual meetings, and this was the first opportunity for most in attendance to gather in person, members were encouraged to connect with each other.
- Understanding each entity’s goals, as well as the fiscal constraints faced by all.

3. Acton Select Board - Town Strategy/Goals – Dean Charter

Dean thanked the District for hosting the meeting stating that the Select Board was “financially and emotionally supportive of the District”. Although the Board has not begun their budget discussions yet, he described several of their major goals:

- Reconstruction of the Dept of Public Works building which is shared with the Town and Schools. This building is “undersized, inadequate and predates the Douglas and Gates School Buildings”. (Short term)
- Determine the fate of the Isa Parlin House (Short term)

- Continue progress on the Climate Action Plan implementation, part of the 10 year Capital Plan (Long term)
- Complete street intersection improvements along Main St including Prospect St and Main St as well as Hayward Rd and Main St (Long term)

The Select Board reviews their 10 Year Capital Improvement Plan annually and tries to keep spending in line with the Plan. Current concerns include:

- Rising fixed costs of Middlesex Retirement assessments and health care are coming.
- Acton's senior population (5,570 seniors as defined by the state) is rising faster than other groups. Their needs must be considered including how to limit tax increases and help them stay in our community.
- The excellent education offered by Minuteman Tech and increasing number of AB students who choose to attend may lead to a funding shift between the two districts.
- Increased staffing in Acton's Tree & Grounds/Public Works dept is needed due to: climate change, carbon sequestration and urban forest management.

The Select Board continues to pursue efficiencies regarding regionalization opportunities such as the Regional Emergency Communications Center (with Concord) and the Veteran Services Office (with Boxborough). Dean stated that there is no sense of support for an operating override in the future.

Question: Who manages Acton's ARPA funds?

Dean: The Town Manager and Finance Department with some professional accounting support due to the complexity of the rules.

Question: What is Acton's ARPA amount?

Dean: \$7 million of which \$2 million went to the school district. A second allocation was done this past summer. John Markiewicz added that Boxborough had \$1.7 million and suggested that the two towns coordinate about how some of this could be used. Dean agreed.

4. **Boxborough Select Board - Town Strategy/Goals – Jennifer Campbell**

Boxborough's new Town Administrator, Michael Johns, starts Nov 7. More formal goal outlines will be done when he transitions. Goals include:

- Transparency, to establish trust in the Board
- Code of conduct for meeting participants, in the audience and on the Board
- Support for #1 Asset - personnel
 - Fall Town Meeting will include vote on establishing a sick bank
 - More benefits, such as expanding family leave, free transfer stickers
 - Town Hall layout review to use space effectively
- Community issues: water quality (no public water source), regionalization opportunities (possible intermunicipal with Littleton), explore rejoining a vocational tech school given the interest from students (no longer member of Minuteman Tech)
- Policies and processes being reviewed especially regarding volunteers, disaster recovery plan, regional dispatch
- IT services in general, including a searchable website, shared school services

5. **ABR School Committee - District Strategy/Goals – Kyra Cook (see slides)**

Kyra presented on the District Strategy from now until 2026. Adam discussed the funding of them at the end of the meeting. Kyra emphasized that covid was the context for FY21 through the current year. Hybrid and remote learning did not work for every student and every family. When everyone returned last year, there were deep social emotional needs and some students "didn't know how to do school". This year student assessments show growth (MCAS, I-Ready) but there are still cohorts of students who are not achieving as they should be.

A graphic of the District Strategy centers on students' sense of "Belonging, Relationships and Climate and Culture" (slide 3). District Priorities and Goals include:

- Continued focus on social-emotional health
- Fully implement the multi-tiered system of support model across the District
- Renew focus on belonging and cultural responsiveness across the District

What the District has done and what they are doing for each of the goals was reviewed (slides 6-8). The Strategy graphic on slide 3 summed up Kyra's message. Kids have to feel safe and stable to learn. Investments in things like the new boardwalk campus all trickle down to the students feeling like they belong and are ready to learn.

6. **Acton Finance Committee - Strategy/Goals Adam Nolde, Christine Russell** (see slides)
Noting that the Fincom worked hard this summer gathering data to create their Point of View document, Adam introduced member Christine Russell to present.

Given how large the School District budget is for both towns, it is important for both towns to be aware of the schools' positions. Fincom believes that:

- Spending is predicted to outpace revenue (based on historical budget increases and Acton Leadership Group forecasts)
- Reserves are strong for the town but low for the School District
- Capital Projects show an expensive 5 year forecast
- Taxpayers have multiple factors impacting their wallets
- The Acton Finance Committee does not support an operational override.

Based on projections members are concerned about the next few years. It is their job to make recommendations based on the information that they currently have. The numbers exceed the revenue. They may be ok for FY24, but they won't be for FY25 and 26.

Recommendations:

- Spending
 - Combined budgets must increase no more than revenue sources minus fixed assets. It is estimated that available revenue increases will be .64% for FY24, 1.16% for FY25 and 1.39% for FY26. Evidence suggests we are at a tipping point in the budget.
- Reserves
 - Town of Acton FY23 budgeted use of \$1.25M brings Free Cash to ~\$5M or 3.18% of total budget (within DOR guidelines).
 - ABRSD use of \$1.5M in FY23 brings E&D to 1.81% of total budget (below recommended minimum of 3%). Do not count on future turnbacks to replenish E&D. Other reserves should be used as revenue sources before considering an override.
- Capital Projects
 - Limit taking on new excluded debt.
 - Approach capital projects from a needs basis. Fund ongoing maintenance within the operating budget.
 - Continue to identify projects on the horizon and plan for them accordingly.

Acton taxpayers are feeling the pinch on all sides. Inflation and health care costs will remain high for the foreseeable future. A recession is possible. The Town and Schools must manage budgets within revenue sources to avoid an operational override.

Question: Boxborough Fincom is talking about the new state rules regarding the MBTA. Will that impact budgets in Acton, especially given the train station?

Adam Nolde: This is just starting to be discussed. An assessment has not been done yet. The Town has put together an advisory board and big changes are expected, not just economically but socio-economically as well.

Question: Regarding the Minuteman Tech assessment, we've talked about double digit assessment increases. Of that assessment increase, how much is going to an excluded debt portion of the budget vs the actual operating budget of the Town?

Adam/Christine: It is a large portion. That number will be provided after the meeting.

Follow up comment: Looking at it as part of the budget, it is a small portion, but if you look at the difference of what the bottom line becomes in terms of available funds for the Town, Minuteman becomes a pretty large portion of that. Because the Town of Acton is a member of the Minuteman District as well, the speaker encouraged the Fincom to share the same financial budgetary pressure that had just been shared, with Minuteman. While some of the assessment represents fixed costs, some result from Minuteman's own budget decisions.

Adam/Christine: Some people feel the Town is underrepresented at Minuteman, and perhaps a rep should attend ALG. While they have taken on more students and increased costs, it may not be a step all would agree with. That said, there was general agreement that Minuteman Tech is a great educational option for students and families.

7. Boxborough Finance Committee - Strategy/Goals – Maria Neyland

Boxborough is focused on transitioning their new administrators. Members want to work with them to create a new Capital Committee. The Committee will be balancing the overall needs of the town based on the needs of all taxpayers. Budget guidance has been given to department heads to do a zero based budget. Members would also like to include as much in the operating budget as belongs there. Reoccurring and ongoing warrant articles will be added to the budget. Given the level service request, there will be no new headcount unless it is really needed. They are also looking at a level service School District budget. That said, the Finance Committee is also aware of all of the things that Kyra outlined about students' needs post covid. If cuts are made to the schools, they should not directly affect the students. Maria added that cuts should also not affect capital items because when she was on School Committee, some capital projects were avoided that now need to be addressed. Both towns' opinions must be heard. All members must bear in mind what the towns can or cannot afford. The capital needs of the school district must be considered alongside the Towns' capital needs. Boxborough needs a public safety center and a youth center.

8. ABR School Committee - District Budget Strategy/Goals – Adam Klein (see slides)

Adam presented on behalf of the School Committee's Budget Subcommittee. Preliminary FY24 Budget Guidelines (not reviewed by the School Committee as a whole yet) include:

- 1) Limit the budget increase to x% (full committee to discuss)
- 2) Target use of Excess and Deficiency (E&D) reserves to \$x
- 3) Consider the budgetary impact of collective bargaining agreements on the District's ability to provide services for students.
- 4) Evaluate opportunities to create organizational efficiencies in order to prioritize services to students, including those who have been disproportionately underserved.
- 5) Evaluate class sizes at all levels and budget, to the degree resources are available, to maintain class sizes within school committee guidelines.
- 6) Ensure students have access to a robust system of supports for their:

- Social emotional needs
 - Mental and behavioral health needs
 - Academic needs
- 7) Continue to fund work to promote all students’ sense of belonging through a strong and inclusive school climate and culture.
 - 8) Provide resources that continue to address disproportionate outcomes for students who have been historically underserved by schools.
 - 9) Continue a path toward tuition-free All-Day Kindergarten to the extent that it is economically feasible.

The first five guidelines are monetarily focused. The second group are more along the guidelines of what Kyra shared regarding social, emotional and academic needs. How the school district budget becomes an assessment was explained (slide 4).

Using a hypothetical FY2024 Budget Increase of 3.2% (+\$3.3M) considering budget first:

Non-assessment sources

More Revenues (state aid, etc.)	1.5% (+\$265K)
Less Reserves (E&D, stabilization)	- 30% (- \$550K)
Total Revenues & Reserves	- 1.5% (- \$285K)

Budget increase, minus revenues

Assessment to the towns would be 4.3% (+\$3.6M)
 Acton ~4.0% increase Boxboro ~5.8% increase

Alternatively, considering a 3.2% assessment first, then calculating the budget change would result in 3% Acton increase and 4.3% Boxborough increase. This is an important way to think about the increases. Adam welcomed input as the School Committee begins their budget process.

Question: At budgeting time are your revenues known or estimated?

Adam: The small increases that the District has are relatively well known. State aid varies but we have a pretty good average. Some relate to medicaid reimbursement and interest earnings on investment.

Question: How does the budget subcommittee or whole School Committee think of the relationship of class size and the use of aides, particularly given the number of aides that were reduced last year?

Adam: This was a very difficult decision last year and the School Committee needs to discuss this as a whole this year. Given the dramatic change it made, the Committee is unlikely to consider it a cost saving option for FY24. The class size policy talks about certified staff so the Committee does not relate aides to class size.

Question: What does the subcommittee say regarding the assessment increase on slide 6?

Adam: The budget subcommittee has not reviewed it yet. Our guidelines are uncommitted regarding the actual number. A 3% increase was typically used at this stage of the process.

Question: When will the teachers’ contract settle?

Adam: We have an excellent relationship with the Acton Boxborough Education Association so the process usually resolves itself well in time for this budget decision to be made.

Marie Altieri: There is no average negotiations process. We did start early with some prework this spring and are actively negotiating now.

9. Adjourn

Adam thanked everyone for attending.

David Martin moved, Jim Snyder-Grant seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to adjourn the Acton Select Board at 8:15 p.m.

Les Fox moved, John Markiewicz seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to adjourn the Boxborough Select Board at 8:15 p.m.

Esha Gangolli moved, Jason Cole seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to adjourn the Acton Finance Committee at 8:15 p.m.

Becky Neville moved, Priya Sundaram seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to adjourn the Boxborough Finance Committee at 8:15 p.m.

Tessa McKinley moved, Amy Krishnamurthy seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to adjourn the ABRSC at 8:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

*Chairperson

List of Documents Used: Posted Agenda, Presentation Slides: Kyra Cook (ABRSC), Christine Russell (Acton Finance Committee – Point of View), Adam Klein (ABRSC Budget Subcommittee)