

FINANCE COMMITTEE- 2013

Over the past year the members of the Finance Committee have attended the series of budget meetings of the Select and School boards of the Town of Plainfield. The community should take heart that there are many dedicated individuals that give generously of their time and talent to the serious business of operating our school and our town. Certainly there are a wide range of views within our community, but the discussions we observed, however energetic, were conducted with the civility and respect we would all expect. We offer the following report on our activities.

School District

Article II – Budget

The district is proposing a budget of \$6,016,077. This is a reduction of \$67,664 in general education expenditures or -1.11% on the base 2013/14 budget. This translates into a \$60,654 (1.22%) reduction in tax dollars to be raised. Approval of any other warrant articles will affect this number. There was an encouraging amount of discussion about creative ways for the District to adapt to emerging economic and demographic realities. It is clear that the Board, SAU, and School administration are devoting significant resources to the future of our school system. Article V, the AREA agreement committee, and Article VIII, the Cornish Collaboration Committee, should further this important discussion and we support them both.

There was concern expressed at the meetings that some cuts included might have unintended negative consequences.

Articles III and IV - Collective Bargaining Contracts

In Articles III and IV the District is requesting approval for salary increases for Support Staff and Teachers of 2% in each of the next two years. Committee members vary in their views on these articles. With inflation currently at about 1.5% the Articles represent a modest net percentage pay increase and the School Board has indicated that it is in line with our Cohort communities. However, when combined with the 3.5% step increases already part of the existing contract, actual increases for many teachers and staff could be as much as 5.5% each year or 11% over the next two years. Although there is a range of opinion on these articles we are unanimous in our opinion that the contract negotiation process should be more transparent. The lack of transparency throughout the process erodes public trust and weakens support for the results.

Article VI - Full Day Kindergarten

Our belief is that while it may have some appreciable benefits there is not yet consensus throughout the community, nor firm support from the Board or Staff. We support continued discussion, but not passage of the Article.

Summary

We are at an important time in the life of our school system. Our school board continues to wrestle with how to maintain quality of education in an environment of declining

enrollment, rising healthcare costs, and other factors. Our community clearly supports quality education and respects the expertise of the educators and staff who provide it.

The challenge for our community lies in defining the quality of education we want to provide and for which we are willing to pay. Imbedded in that discussion are assumptions about what is reasonable to expect of teachers and staff for a given level of compensation. These are issues in which the voters have a right and responsibility to participate. In order to participate productively they must be informed and the data need to be publicly available. We recommend that complete job descriptions be made readily available to the public. This should include details of time requirements and expectations and all forms of compensation for all school district positions. We believe this could be done without infringing on anyone's privacy rights. We would encourage staff to create "day in the life" logs of their workday to help the public understand how they spend their time.

We also believe that more openness and clarity about collective bargaining discussions would reduce divisive criticism of the teacher's union. It would also increase public understanding and support for the negotiation process and its results. We understand the need for balance in the negotiation process and feel that there is a role for collective bargaining. We also understand community discomfort with a process that occurs largely behind closed doors and has resulted in automatic pay increases and benefit packages that are slower to respond to new economic realities to which most taxpayers have already had to adjust. We would recommend that the District take steps to make negotiations open to the public.

We see and hear the School Board and the administration in action at public meetings and we know that they are working hard to provide our children a quality education at a reasonable cost to taxpayers. They are clearly forward focused, looking for creative ways to keep costs in line. We applaud this focus and effort.

With this in mind the finance committee appreciates the District's efforts to explore the possibility of tuitioning in students from other communities. However, we would suggest that this be viewed as an interim measure that allows us time to create a new vision of a public school for Plainfield's children and to then adjust our facility, program, and staff accordingly.

Town

Article 3 - Budget

The Select Board are proposing an operating budget of \$2,025,306 for fiscal year 2014. This represents an increase of \$51,951 or 2.6% over the previous year. Overall we feel that the increase is justified, and that the town has produced a fiscally responsible budget.

Article 5 - Roadside Mower

We understand the need for a roadside mower. We would recommend careful evaluation of any equipment features that are unlikely to produce practical value for the town given the frequency of use and/or extended learning curve.

Article 6 - Live Body Truck Bed

Based on the recent positive experience of the last purchase of this type we support this purchase.

Article 8 - KUA Study Committee

We feel this committee provides a valuable service to the community.

Article 9 - Mill Cemetery

We support this article because it eliminates an historic quirk and its passage will make cemetery operations marginally more efficient.

General Comments / Recommendations

We face a number of challenges resulting from the changing demographics of our town. As shown in the town's master plan, our community as a whole has become more affluent. However this does not mean that every household has experienced rising incomes. There are more residents for whom the tax bill is not a significant portion of their annual income and therefore whether the budget goes up or down may well be of discretionary interest. They have the freedom and resources to vote their support for education, and they have. There are other segments of our community for whom the tax bill is a bi-annual hurdle. They must vote based on their ability to pay regardless of their position on the merits of a given budget proposal. Historically, as the minority, they have also been forced to bear the added financial burden imposed on them by the votes of their well intended neighbors which have raised everyone's taxes.

The master plan calls attention to other important trends as well; we have a growing proportion of older aged residents. We have a limited number of "entry level" homes and a tax rate that make it challenging for young families to move to town. All of these forces make it more likely that we will continue to experience a downward trend in the number of children in our school system. And that the town may see a shift in demand for resources from education to services for the elderly.

We would also encourage the Select and Planning Boards to host discussions to develop a vision and long term roadmap for Plainfield.

As always, we strongly support efforts to increase participation of all residents and believe that our community will be stronger for it.

Respectfully Submitted, Brad Atwater, Eric Brann, Dan Lapan, David Grobe, Rangi Keen