



Town of Ridgefield
Board of Selectpersons Special Meeting Minutes
APPROVED

February 26, 2025 at 7:00pm

Please note – these minutes are not verbatim.

Present: Sean Connelly, Maureen Kozlark, Rudy Marconi, Chris Murray

Present via Zoom: Barbara Manners

Rudy Marconi called the meeting to order at 7:00pm.

Maureen Kozlark motioned to add Public Comment to the Agenda. Sean Connelly seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

1. Public Comment

Chuck Hancock, 480 North Street, suggested, before the Public Safety Building be brought forward for another vote, they first explore why the vote failed. Mr. Hancock proposed creating a citizens group to hear residents' perspectives, as was done with the Schlumberger property.

David Yolen, 9 East Farm Lane, teacher at Ridgefield High School requested to read a letter from Mary Ellen Foley, 197 Barry Avenue, Ridgefield Public School (RPS) teacher and President of Teacher's Union, as she was unable to be present. Ms. Foley wrote she understands the complexity of balancing needs and wants, and the varying needs, and asked the BOS approve the Board of Education (BOE) budget without further changes.

Liz Carlin, 31 Mallory Hill Road, expressed support for the proposed BOE budget and Dr. Da Silva's leadership. Ms. Carlin asked that the BOS trust the hard work that has gone into the BOE budget process to maintain excellence in education.

2. Board of Education Budget Discussion

Tina Malhotra, Board of Education Chair, Jonathan Paradiso, Board of Education Secretary, Christine More, Board of Education Member, Dr. Susie Da Silva, Superintendent of Schools, Jill Browne, Director of Finance, Dr. Wes DeSantis, Director of Educational Technology, Cory Gillette, Assistant Superintendent, Elizabeth Hannaway, Assistant Superintendent of Special Services, and Joseph Morits, Director of Facilities, were in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Ms. Malhotra expressed the BOE is proud to present their budget, representing a 4.21% budget increase over last year's budget, but lower than the budget originally presented to the BOE in January. Ms. Malhotra shared the BOE thoroughly analyzed all line items,

- and shared it was not a unanimous vote, but the majority of the BOE felt this budget is both fiscally responsible and avoids direct cuts that may impact teachers and schools.
- Dr. Da Silva expressed gratitude for the Roofs and A-School/Transition Program Building passing in the Referendum on February 25, 2025, and disappointment that the Public Safety Building vote failed. Rudy Marconi shared Jacob Muller, Director of Public Works & Facilities, has met with Planning & Zoning about the Highway Department beginning site clean-up work. Dr. Da Silva shared Ms. Browne has begun the DAS (\$500k grant) application, which is required to submit prior to going out to bid. Mr. Marconi confirmed the roof project would begin immediately, with Ridgebury Elementary School.
 - Dr. Da Silva detailed four proposed additional full-time employee hires, including:
 - o Elementary school world language program teacher to expand the current program to K-2, from 3-5. Dr. Da Silva noted the following year, they will add a third teacher, who will ensure two 30-minute world language sessions every six days for elementary school students.
 - o Elementary school gifted teacher to provide one-on-one support to most academically-talented students (2-3% of student population). Maureen Kozlark asked about grade level. Dr. Da Silva confirmed grades 2-5. Chris Murray asked whether this was a State-mandated program. Dr. Da Silva confirmed identification is mandated, but programming is not. Mr. Marconi asked about assessment. Ms. Gillette confirmed there are specific criteria and RPS has worked with a gifted education consultant to ensure the same processes are in place across all six elementary schools.
 - o Teacher on special assignment to respond to social-emotional wellness needs of middle school students. Dr. Da Silva shared RPS currently has one teacher who works part-time at East Ridge Middle School (ERMS) and Scotts Ridge Middle School (SRMS), working directly with students who may be struggling socially or emotionally, and also working alongside their parents. Dr. Da Silva expressed the work is effective and needed, as children are more dysregulated than in the past, and navigate the challenges of social media, cell phones, and cyberbullying. Dr. Hannaway shared the current teacher is mostly responding reactively, due to being split across two schools, and this new role would allow for more proactive work.
 - o Special education chairperson at ERMS and SRMS. Dr. Da Silva expressed a high need for this role, as students become more complex and require more meetings with parents and educators – which is a positive as more students have been able to remain in-district. Dr. Da Silva confirmed this role would be a 10-month position split between ERMS and SRMS.
 - Dr. Da Silva shared as of October 1, 2025, RPS has 4,404 students, with SRMS being a current hot spot due to large cohorts in grades 5-6.
 - Dr. Da Silva shared her original proposed budget had a 4.44% budget increase, and to achieve the BOE-approved reduction to a 4.21% (\$4,884,958) increase, savings were found through a potential retirement and non-replacement of the role, middle school music technology program (\$100k), and reduced insurance by one family plan (\$30k).
 - Dr. Da Silva shared two of their largest drivers are employee benefits (3.56% increase) and insurance (14.19% increase). Dr. Da Silva explained, to offset the new full-time hires, a middle school technology teacher was removed, a department chair at Veterans Park (VP), and a Technology Operations Management retirement whose role will not be filled. Dr. Hannaway noted RPS receives a ~\$1M federal grant which is used for staffing, which

RPS uses to pay private contracts for low-incident needs, but proposed to make those part-time positions in the grant to reutilize the cost savings.

- The BOS expressed their support for the BOE and RPS, and discussed the importance of achieving a mill rate under 4%. Mr. Murray and Ms. Kozlark expressed looking for ~\$700k BOE budget savings, as it currently stands the mill rate would have a 4.77% increase.
- Mr. Paradiso shared the BOE discussed that at their February 24, 2025 meeting as they reviewed the budget, and the next step would be to make reductions to programming that the community needs, wants or expects. Mr. Paradiso expressed there are two competing expectations of Town, one a lower tax rate, and another prioritizes an excellent school district. Mr. Marconi expressed the BOS would like the budget to pass, and the collective sense is a mill rate increase under 4% would be more palatable. Ms. More expressed the BOE's guiding principle has always doing our best for our children and their ever-changing needs. Mr. Murray expressed support for the BOE and RPS, but concern about the financials.
- Mr. Marconi shared the capital budget came in at \$12M, and have worked to reduce it closer to \$7M. Mr. Connelly shared Kevin Redmond, Director of Finance, shared capital, as a percentage of the budget, has increased over the last ten years, averaging 3.71%.
- Dr. Da Silva indicated the BOE is wrapping up their master plan study, and will receive the report in the next two weeks, which may influence their future capital plan. Dr. Da Silva shared the previously-approved RHS auditorium study will begin in late March.
- Mr. Morits detailed their capital projects (\$2.9M):
 - o Auditorium sound system upgrade at VP.
 - o Student bathrooms (\$187k). Mr. Morits noted this is a continuation of the Branchville (2 bathrooms) and ERMS (4 bathrooms) projects.
 - o Continued sound attenuation improvements in cafeteriums.
 - o Visual performing arts upgrades, including a sound system at SRMS.
 - o Farmingville electrical service. Mr. Morits shared Farmingville has an internal vault with transformers, which is unique to the school, and Eversource is requiring the transformer be relocated to a slab outside. Barbara Manners asked whether Eversource will be contributing to the cost. Mr. Morits confirmed no.
 - o Cooling and heat pumps in second-floor classrooms at RHS. Mr. Morits shared this is a continuation to the heat pumps installed in October 2024.
 - o Dr. DeSantis detailed a number of technology projects, including: improving WiFi connectivity in all schools, based on first responder recommendations as some parts of the buildings also do not have cell service; updating servers; adding additional access points at RHS to ensure adequate bandwidth for online AP and SAT testing; adding additional battery back-ups; and updating security cameras.
 - o Programmable emergency radios. Mr. Marconi suggested they discuss with the PD and FD Chiefs about potentially using their old radios.
 - o RHS LED lighting upgrades (may receive a grant upon project completion).
 - o Furnishings, fixtures and equipment upgrades at RHS.
 - o World language classroom desk upgrades at RHS.
 - o ERMS student locker updates.
 - o Barlow Mountain Elementary gymnasium floor replacement. Mr. Morits shared there is an issue with the slab, which has allowed water to get into the 2x4s under the flooring, which has caused the floor to warp and bow.

- Dr. Da Silva proposed to reduce the capital budget, the HVAC projects at RHS and Barlow Mountain be postponed (\$522,125) and related classroom fixtures (\$50,128), in anticipation of another round of HVAC grants, which would achieve \$572,253 in savings.
- Ms. Kozlark asked about anticipated capital changes after master plan study. Dr. Da Silva confirmed they do not anticipate any emergency projects, but rather a continuous improvement plan as the buildings continue to age.
- Ms. Manners asked about LED lighting. Dr. Da Silva confirmed there is a rebate program. Ms. Manners expressed understanding to want equity in bathrooms, but asked if those bathroom updates could be delayed. Dr. Da Silva confirmed they have updated bathrooms as needed, not all bathrooms have been upgraded.

3. General Budget Discussion

Kevin Redmond, Finance Director, was in attendance. Topics discussed included:

- Mr. Murray asked about revised fund balance numbers, based on the February 25, 2025 Referendum results. Mr. Redmond confirmed it would be a \$360k difference, and if the capital is closer to \$7M, that would also have a benefit of ~\$15-18k.
- Mr. Marconi confirmed if the Town will not do a Public Safety Building project for a while, it should be removed, but could leave it in should they want to proceed with the project in a different form. Mr. Redmond confirmed if the BOS decided to have another Referendum on a proposed Public Safety Building in September, it could be built into bonding in October. Mr. Connelly expressed the vote margin was very close, so perhaps should reduce the scope of the project. Mr. Marconi suggested a \$10M reduction, Ms. Kozlark expressed that may not be a large enough decrease, and Mr. Murray expressed the \$375k should be removed from the fund balance.

4. Possible Capital/Operating Budget Vote

Sean Connelly motioned to approve the \$47,081,269 (2.51% increase) Town and Infrastructure operating budget. Chris Murray seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

Maureen Kozlark motioned that the debt service be \$7,934,527. Sean Connelly seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

Ms. Kozlark asked about the capital budget, given Dr. Da Silva's proposed reductions to the BOE budget. Kevin Redmond confirmed \$2,419,709, for a total capital budget of \$7,124,195. Barbara Manners expressed the capital budget is too high.

Sean Connelly motioned to approve the \$7,124,495 capital budget. Maureen Kozlark seconded. Motion carried 4-0-1, with Barbara Manners abstaining.

Mr. Connelly expressed feeling torn, and ultimately the mill rate increase will be determined by the Board of Finance (BOF). Ms. Kozlark expressed the BOS should provide direction, but leave room for the BOF to increase or decrease. Mr. Marconi expressed it ultimately is for the BOF to decide, but the BOS could make a non-binding recommendation to use more fund balance.

Ms. Kozlark proposed a 3.89% BOE budget increase and \$1.5M use of fund balance, for a mill rate increase of 3.96%. Mr. Connelly noted the difficulty of removing the newly proposed full-

time roles, and is convinced the BOE budget (4.21% increase) makes sense as approved, and recommends using \$1.8M of fund balance.

Sean Connelly motioned to make a non-binding recommendation to the Board of Finance for a \$119,889,858 (4.21% increase) Board of Education budget, as recommended and adopted by the Board of Education. Rudy Marconi seconded. Motion failed 2-3, with Maureen Kozlark, Barbara Manners, and Chris Murray voting against.

Maureen Kozlark motioned to make a non-binding recommendation to the Board of Finance for a \$119,522,300 (3.89% increase) Board of Education budget. Chris Murray seconded. Motion carried 3-2, with Sean Connelly and Rudy Marconi voting against.

Resident, 419 Bridle Trail, shared they have two children in RPS, and thanked everyone for their hard work on the budget process. The resident expressed many people move to Town for the schools, and recommended against cutting the budget created by the Superintendent and supported by the BOE.

Maureen Kozlark motioned to adjourn the meeting at 10:48pm. Sean Connelly seconded. Motion carried 5-0.