

JOINT FINANCE COMMITTEE AND SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES  
UPSTAIRS MEETING ROOM, 1 AVENUE A, TURNERS FALLS, MA  
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2020  
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The Chair opened the meeting at 6:01 PM in the Upstairs Meeting Room

- **Montague Finance Committee:** Jen Audley, Fred Bowman, John Hanold [arrived 6:11 PM], Chris Menegoni, Greg Garrison. Shauna Wallace and Francia Wisnewski were absent.
- **Montague Selectboard:** Chris Boutwell, Rich Kuklewicz (also FCTS SC). Michael Nelson was absent.
- **Gill Finance Committee:** Claire Chang, Tupper Brown, Sandy Brown
- **Gill Selectboard:** Greg Snedeker, John Ward [arrived 715 PM]
- **Others present:** Montague Town Administrator Steve Ellis, Montague Town Accountant Carolyn Olsen, Gill Town Administrator Ray Purington, GMRSD superintendent Michael Sullivan, GMRSD School Committee chair Jane Oakes, GMRSD Director of Business and Operations Joanne Blier, FCTS Superintendent Richard Martin, Business Director Russell Kaubris, and FCTS School Committee members Dennis Grader, Bryan Camden, and Sandy Brown
- The recording of the meeting is available at: <https://vimeo.com/394250519>

**Montague Revenue Estimate for Fiscal Year 2021 with updated New Growth; corresponding adjustments to the GMRSD Affordable Assessment.**

The Director of Assessing has adjusted the FY2021 estimate for New Growth to \$250,000 (an increase from \$120,000) and increased the allocation to Overlay from \$135K to \$150K.

The Grand Total General Revenue estimate for FY2021 is 22,988,036 and the Grand Total All Sources Revenue estimate is \$25,270,834.

Using the “Affordable Assessment” allocation methodology, Montague’s GMRSD Assessment will be \$10,732,268, a 4.91% increase over the past year.

**FY21 Budget Discussion: School District Budgets (GMRSD and FCTS)**

Jen Audley welcomed visitors and noted that:

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- The committee members and town administrators received and familiarized themselves with the districts' FY2021 operating budget proposals via the materials provided for public hearings earlier in February.
- For each of the districts, the total dollar amount and share of the assessment for each town is calculated according to an established formula. The agreement with the GMRSD centers on a commitment to share available revenue sources in a predictable and consistent way, whereas the FCTS assessment calculation hinges on resident student enrollment.
- The School Committees and administrations of the districts are responsible for determining the use of the local and state funds received by their district. However, as municipal leaders of the member towns, it is our responsibility is to understand the school districts' budget proposals and the assumptions underlying them, and to offer observations and critique that might influence the districts' planning efforts.
- Both districts received questions and suggestions about topics to address in advance. We hope many of them will be answered in presentations tonight, but also welcome written responses and other ways of sharing information.

### **Gill-Montague Regional School District (approx. 6:10 – 7:10PM)**

Superintendent Michael Sullivan and Director of Finance and Operations Joanne Blier presented "Gill-Montague Regional School District FY2021 Budget Information February 26 2020." This document includes detailed information about enrollment trends, programmatic and staffing changes, share ratios between Gill and Montague, etc.

GMRSD is one of 35 school districts in the Commonwealth that expects to receive substantially increased Chapter 70 state aid as a result of the Student Opportunity Act (SOA). (Greenfield Public Schools and FCTS are the other Franklin County districts that will benefit.) Declining enrollment at neighboring districts has kept their funding at the "hold harmless" level, resulting in continued very modest increases in state aid and no benefit from the SOA.

The district came out of "held harmless" this school year because the percentage of high needs students attending GMRSD has increased. Foundation enrollment at GMRSD has been essentially flat since 2012, while resident enrollment has declined. High school enrollment has declined steadily over the past decade.

Reduction in Medicare revenue estimates reflects changes in what qualifies and a negotiated payback of benefits received in error. (This will be Year 18 of a 20 year agreement.)

Use of Excess and Deficiency (E&D) The district is building tighter budgets that use less E&D, and aims to keep a steady balance from year to year.

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Gill enrollment numbers makes their assessment fluctuate considerably. This year the Gill assessment increased +8% over last year. The overall operating assessment increase from both towns combined will be just over 5% this year. Steve Ellis and others noted that the trend of 4+% annual assessment increases to GMRSD may not be sustainable and should not be perceived as guaranteed.

The charter school reimbursement estimates are affected by a formula change this year; school choice revolving fund estimates are based on what the district plans to spend.

Insurance estimates will be firm after GIC vote on Feb 28, 2020.

The rationale for adding the equivalent of 9 new FTE staff to the budget for next year is aligned with SOA guidance and focused on improving instruction and strengthening programmatic offerings.

The superintendent identified many additional staffing gaps that could be addressed after FY2021.

The presentation included detailed information about where resident students who do not attend GMRSD schools go to school.

Jen Audley noted that towns are obligated to provide a free public education for all resident students. The GMRSD budget includes the cost associated with resident students who attend GMRSD schools, as well as costs associated with educating students whose needs require out-of-district placement, students who “choice out” to neighboring districts, and students who attend public charter schools.

John Hanold noted that the GMRSD schools are “the default” for students who are not successful at other schools, including Tech. Questions were raised about dropout rates at TFHS and whether there is coordination between schools around dropout prevention.

The presentation included detailed information about demographics, perceptual and structural challenges faced by Turners Falls High School.

Tupper Brown asked if the negative perceptions cited in the presentation were from parents or students. Michael Sullivan said “both.”

Fred Bowman noted that parents of potential college-bound students need more compelling reasons to choose TFHS.

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Jen Audley noted that early college/dual enrollment programs at Greenfield Community College are appealing to students and families who want to manage debt.

Michael Sullivan noted that TFHS is aiming to increasing its efforts in career preparation through a state program that will increase opportunities for students to have direct experience with health and social support career opportunities.

Rich Kuklewicz observed that there is potential for collaboration between TFHS and Tech around healthcare/medical programs like this and also Advanced Placement (AP) class offerings.

Greg Snedeker encouraged people to also consider the opportunities that the Regionalization Planning Committee identifies as they consider the costs and benefits of potentially joining forces with the Pioneer Valley Regional School District

Tupper Brown expressed our communities' appreciation for Michael Sullivan's leadership over the past seven years.

**Franklin County Regional Technical School (approx. 7:10 – 8:20PM)**

*Superintendent Richard Martin and Business Manager Russell Kaubris'* presentation included detailed information about enrollment trends, programmatic and staffing changes, outreach, etc. at FCTS.

FCTS adds programs based on demand, and this year added a Veterinary program, which generated a larger-than-usual number of applications for 9<sup>th</sup> grade this year and next year, especially from female students. Goals include opening a veterinary clinic at the school, which would involve adding a building to the campus.

FCTS has also received a grant that will expand its Health Technologies program to include CMA certification and possibly LPN as well.

They have used grants to renovate and upgrade equipment in other shops as well.

Their cafeteria is turning a profit and has invested the profit into facilities upgrades.

Students who attend Tech do not always get their first, second, or third choice of programs. Some programs are full and some are not. 9<sup>th</sup> grade students have experience in all shops so they are familiar with all programs before choosing a track.

110 students will graduate in 2020 and 150 will enter as 9<sup>th</sup> graders in the fall. FCTS projects a total enrollment of 515 for the 20/21 school year. The school's capacity (capped below the legal

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limit by their school committee) is 682. Montague will have 18 graduates; as of this date there are 34 applications from Montague resident students, so the current estimate for Montague enrollment next year is 121. Montague's quota is 109. If other member towns do not fill their quotas, Montague students can have those spots. Last year FCTS accepted 150 of the 176 students who applied. This year they expect to have 200 applications.

Enrollment has increased 4.7%, but total assessment increase to towns is 2.9%. (This is made possible in part because FCTS also benefits from a substantial increase in Chapter 70 funding this year.)

Montague's assessment will increase 16.58% over last year; its share of enrollment is 21.65%, a 23.53% increase over the past year.

Gill's assessment will increase 11.47% over last year; its share of enrollment is 2.47%, a 9.09% increase over the past year.

The Capital Assessment for Montague is projected to be between \$25K-\$29K per year going forward.

Their estimate is that there are 630 "available" 8<sup>th</sup> graders – that is the number of resident students in all 19 member towns who will enter 9<sup>th</sup> grade next year.

Plan is to use excess E&D this year to create a capital stabilization fund (\$300,000). This is one of several "bridge years" when E&D is being used in budget – this will continue until end of lease for energy efficiency equipment. E&D is sometimes generated by staff attrition – policy is not to fill mid-year vacancies.

School building is 40 years old and cannot be expanded without triggering multimillion dollar upgrades to sprinkler system. Less costly way to expand is by adding additional building to campus.

Claire Chang expressed concern about the school's practice of consistently generating E&D from operating budget and using E&D for capital needs. Taxpayer funds intended for programming could be credited back to towns, but are instead being used to fund capital projects. Tech could collaborate more with neighboring schools in the interest of ensuring that all students in all districts get what they need – for instance, use space at TFHS instead of adding capacity at their facility.

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John Ward noted that including E&D in the operating budget raises the basis of the budget and agreed that collaboration is necessary to address the problem we are faced with, which is how to stabilize education as a region.

Rich Kuklewicz noted that there may be opportunities to collaborate on transportation from Gill to TFHS and Tech.

Some previous efforts to collaborate on programming have been stymied by differences in the schools' schedules.

Russ Kaubris noted that based on the % being assessed over minimum community contribution, the Tech costs towns less than district schools (140% over minimum vs 190% over minimum) and per/pupil cost of vocational-technical education is higher.

Steve Ellis explained that in a year when Montague will probably have to tap its stabilization funds to address urgent capital needs, it is difficult to hear that FCTS is planning to "sock away" funds for future capital needs.

Montague is likely to deplete its FCTS stabilization fund this year, and that will not cover the increased assessment due to increases in enrollment. We do not have revenue sources to offset the rising cost of sending students to FCTS.

Richard Martin described several ways FCTS attempts to recruit students from towns that are not filling their quotas.

John Hanold asked how programs that were being bolstered by grant funding would sustain themselves after grant funding ended; Martin response was that their practice is to use grant funds for equipment, rather than personnel.

**No requests for future agendas.**

**Topics not anticipated within the 48 hour posting requirements –**

Steve Ellis - The WPCF received an estimate for services related to removing an oil tank that was considerably higher than expected. The scope of \$ request for article #7 at the March 5 STM will likely be expanded from \$75,000 to \$136,000, with funding still coming from WPCF Capital Stabilization. We will discuss at our March 4 meeting; Selectboard may discuss on March 2<sup>nd</sup>.

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**Meeting was adjourned at 8:25PM**

**List of Documents and Exhibits:**

- “Revenue Projections Detail” and “Allocations Summary” from FY21 Budget File 2020-02-26.xlsx
- “300 GMRSD and FCTS February 26” (Questions sent in advance to the school districts)
- “Gill-Montague Regional School District FY2021 Budget Information February 26 2020” (presentation for this meeting – hard copies distributed, digital copy received)
- “Gill-Montague Regional School District FY2021 Budget Hearing February 11 2020” (distributed prior to meeting)
- “Franklin County Technical School District Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Feb 12 2020” (distributed prior to meeting)
- Franklin County Technical School District Fiscal Year 2021 presentation for Montague (projected at meeting; digital copy requested)

**Upcoming Finance Committee Meeting Dates** March 4, 11, 18, 25

Respectfully submitted by Jen Audley