

MONTAGUE FINANCE COMMITTEE and SELECTBOARD

Thursday, February 5, 2026, at 5:30 p.m.

This meeting was held in person and recorded:

<https://vimeo.com/911057305>

Finance Committee Chair Dorinda Bell-Upp called the meeting to order at 5:33 PM.

Selectboard Chair Matt Lord called the meeting to order at 5:56 PM.

Finance Committee members present: Chair Dorinda Bell-Upp, and members Leigh Rae, Francia Wisnewski, and Josh Bell

Finance Committee members absent: Chris Menegoni and Jennifer Waryas

Selectboard members present: Matt Lord and Marina Goldman

Selectboard members absent: Rich Kuklewicz

Others present: Town Administrator Walter Ramsey, Town Accountant Angelica Desroches, GMRSD Interim Superintendent Tari Thomas, GMRSD Director of Business and Operations Joanne Blier, GMRSD School Committee Chair Jane Oakes, Gill Town Administrator Ray Purington, Gill Selectboard members Greg Snedeker and John Ward, Gill Finance Committee members Claire Chang, Tupper Brown, Sandy Brown, Julia Wallace, Jen Waldren, and Peter Turban

The meeting was recorded by MCTV.

GMRSD FY27 Budget Presentation:

Enrollment changes from FY25 to FY26:

- Foundation enrollment decreased from 916 to 872 and district enrollment decreased from 862 to 853.
- Choice in students increased from 91 to 109 and Choice out students increased from 142 to 146.
- Charter students decreased from 52 to 50.
- Gill students increased by 6 students and Montague's enrollment decreased by 50 students.

FY27 Chapter 70 funding amounts were released and did not bring the expected additional funding. Preliminary estimates for FY27 were \$45,000 less than the first Chapter 70 number. Only \$134,000 more than FY26. The district received the minimum Chapter 70 increase again due to decline in foundation enrollment. Chapter 70 is 27.3% of the school budget is Chapter 70.

This year for the affordable assessment portion the school requested a high-end assessment and a low-end assessment since Montague's budget is not set yet. With the affordable assessment calculations, the Towns of Montague and Gill give the school \$7.5 million more than the minimum contribution calculation done by the state. This year using the high-end affordable assessment, Gill will see a 7.85% increase and Montague will see a 4.67% increase.

During the pandemic the school district received money from ESSR funding. This allowed the school choice revolving fund to grow with the hopes of using that money while transitioning staffing down to pre-pandemic levels. However, they are having issues bringing this staffing down and are slowly draining the School Choice Revolving.

Primary drivers of expenses are technology, special education, aging buildings, inflation, and student learning options. When budgets came in from department heads the biggest cost drivers are new position requests, technology increases, insurance/benefit increases, facility, and textbooks. The current budget is \$1.2 million over budget. This includes \$465,810 of requested new positions.

Mr. Snedeker asked if there is a tuition agreement with Erving. Ms. Blier responded that it is on the website what the agreement is. She believes they need to give notice if they no longer want to tuition to GMRSD.

Ms. Bell-Upp questioned what preschool students count as. Ms. Blier responded that they count as half a student. They discussed that they are looking into starting half day preschool programs.

Mr. Purington asked why the school is looking to increase staffing with the numbers of students declining. Ms. Thomas stated that one of the new positions is an administrative position that would be the curriculum director. This position would analyze the different school education programs and work on rolling out new curriculum that helps push the school to a better educational level. The other positions are a half time HR director, the school resource officer, Central Maintenance director, a few new teachers, and Instructional Assistants.

Mr. Brown wanted clarification on what the total FY27 budget. Ms. Blier stated it was \$29.8 million dollars. Mr. Brown also clarified that the foundation budget does not fund all of this and it shows how wrong the foundation budget calculation is.

Ms. Wisniewski questioned what the ask of the school is in this process. Ms. Blier stated that the budget is built around the high-end of the affordable assessment and that is their hope. Ms. Desroches reported that the high-end is adding back in the financial reserve policies and \$35,000 buffer for the other decisions that Selectboard has been weighing. Mr. Lord stated that while Montague has excess capacity the tax burden on the Town has increased so they are looking to build a conservative budget to reduce the impact on the taxpayers.

Mr. Snedeker brought up the issue of regionalization. Money will only solve a portion of the issue but the biggest issue is enrollment. There are less students in the high school with dropping enrollment so the cost per student keeps increasing. He also stated that as enrollment drops programs disappear not because of a lack of funding but because of a lack of students participating in the programs. School buildings are now at a 40% capacity. Elementary schools were closed when they hit about a 67% decline in students. There are currently high schools that have declined 70% but no one wants to have the discussion of closing those schools. Regionalization would create a bigger community that would start to get school choice to go away, and the schools would not be working to take students from other districts.

Ms. Wisniewski inquired about the reason why students are being choiced to other schools. The answer to what school a child goes to is generally what is most convenient for the parent and that is how the schools are chosen.

Mr. Snedeker reported that Gill is in a different financial situation than Montague with only \$9,000 to \$16,000 in excess capacity and that last year they had to dip into stabilization to fund that increase last year.

Mr. Brown wanted to know what percentage the school offers for health insurance. Ms. Blier responded

that it varies from 75% to 90% with the HMO being the 90% with it being the most popular plan. The school has tried to approach this change in the future but the unions did not budge on this negotiation.

Ms. Rae inquired about combining the school facilities if the enrollment is low. Ms. Blier reported that there are no empty classrooms currently and that the facilities were built before there was special education or other services that are now currently being offered, which have been filling those classrooms.

Ms. Desroches stated that the school needs the final affordable assessment by the end of February. Ms. Blier said that the final school committee vote is March 10th and that it is set by being 45 days before the first town meeting.

The meeting wrapped up with an overall discussion of legislation that is in the future and the need for more communication to our legislators about the needs of the towns.

Finance Committee Adjournment

Mr. Bell makes the motion to adjourn at 7:08 PM. Seconded by Ms. Rae and approved.

Bell-Upp – Aye, Bell- Aye, Rae – Aye, Wisnewski – Aye

Selectboard Adjournment

At 7:08 PM Ms. Goldman makes the motion to adjourn. Seconded by Mr. Lord and approved.

Goldman – Aye, Lord - Aye

Respectfully submitted,
Angelica Desroches

Documents and exhibits:

GMRSD FY27 Budget Presentation