

*Minutes*  
*Williamsburg Board of Selectmen*  
*February 26, 2019*

The members of the Board of Selectmen met in special session on Tuesday, February 26, 2019, at the town office. The chair called the meeting to order at 5:04 p.m.

Present: David Mathers, Denise Banister and William Sayre

Also present: Legislators and staff: Sen. Adam Hinds, Rep. Natalie Blais, Jon Gould

School officials: Aaron Osborne (Superintendent), Stacey Jenkins (Dunphy Principal), Kristen Smidy (High School Principal), Bobbie Jones (Finance)

Select Board staff: Charlene Nardi (Town Administrator), Eleanor Warnock (Administrative Assistant)

Others: Charles Dudek, Mary Dudek, Osa Flory, Rob Stinson

1. Meeting with Sen. Hinds and Rep. Blais and school officials – School budget – The Board had invited Sen. Hinds and Rep. Blais and the school officials to talk about the budgetary struggles facing the town and schools. The chair started by noting that the town's share of the school budget makes up 60% of the town's budget. The school officials, starting with Superintendent Aaron Osborne, described the challenges in the areas of transportation, special education and charter schools.

Transportation – Bus contracts are challenging; they need to cover 120 miles and there is just one bidder. Schools have done a lot over the years but there are laws preventing some creative options. Reimbursement from the state never reaches 100%.

Chapter 70 – Things that would help are revising and increasing the Chapter 70 foundation budget, and increasing rural aid. Some of the proposals for changing Chapter 70 would help rural towns like Williamsburg and some would not; rural aid is more promising. The foundation formula assumes growth and increases in tax revenue but the rural towns have flat growth and are limited to a 2½% tax increase. Health insurance keeps rising and the county retirement contribution is jumping up this year.

Special education – School officials said there are more and more students with special needs. The schools have only one van provider and no alternate bidder. They are trying to provide transportation themselves and have bought a van. There is unpredictable variability: if a student moves in, services need to be provided immediately but budgets are based on the previous year. Department of Children and Families may place a student in Greenfield and the school has to pay to get the student back and forth from Greenfield to Westhampton every day at a cost of up to \$20,000. The schools don't need a full-time English Language Learners instructor but it is difficult to find an ELL instructor for a part-time position.

Unfunded mandates – School officials emphasized the difficulties with state requirements. The schools may know what their students need but the state says they must have other things. It is hard to find a part-time occupational therapist or psychologist. Making a larger school region means the students will lose relationships and consistency. Other unfunded mandates are collecting data and purchasing the programs to do that, and computer-based testing, requiring doubling the number of laptops so that students can be tested within the required time framework. It was noted that with unfunded mandates, the small rural schools are not hiring more people, just

doing more and more. Things that are a good idea for larger communities put a burden on smaller communities. Smaller communities don't have time to apply for grants, and in any case Williamsburg has learned that technically the town is too wealthy and so it is not worthwhile to apply for some grants. Suggestions included sharing software across districts and asking the legislature to provide funds for what it mandates.

Chapter 70, continued, and rural aid – Sen. Hinds said he is somewhat optimistic about school changes this year. The Governor and the Speaker are committed, and the Chapter 70 foundation budget will change, even if not everyone agrees how. There are two areas of attention, changing the formula and expanding the available budget. He himself is co-chair of the commission on school transportation and he spoke of inviting the local school officials for a hearing in Boston or a meeting with the other co-chair. He also pointed out that a large delegation from the Rural School Coalition will be at the Statehouse this week to promote help for rural communities.

Charter schools and school choice – School officials emphasized the need for a level playing field. Charter schools do not have to have teachers who are certified, they have few special needs children, few English Language Learners, and few children in poverty even when surrounding communities have 30% poverty. They get to say that parents have to volunteer in the school but local public schools can't say that. They take the students who would cost the local schools only \$3-5,000 to educate, leaving the ones with huge needs. If a student goes out of the district to a charter school the cost to the town is no longer \$5,000 but could be \$17,000. Parents with children in charter schools are often unaware that the town is paying for the child's education. When a local class has more students and needs to be split into two classes, the local school needs to invest in an additional teacher where a charter school could just say sorry, we're full.

Further discussion – A large group will be going to Boston for the rural aid issue, and the Gazette will be covering the trip. Rep. Blais emphasized that personal stories can be powerful for legislators. Rep. Blais said she would like to ride the bus and spread the word that students are spending up to three hours a day on the bus. The Board thanked the legislators for coming.

Adjourned at 6:15 p.m.

Approved:

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Clerk