

**Uxbridge School Committee Budget Public Hearing
March 5, 2024
Uxbridge High School Library and Remote Participation**

School Committee Members in Attendance:

	Present	Absent
Mr. Barry Desruisseaux, Chair	X	
Ms. Arlene Liscinsky, Vice-Chair	X	
Mr. Ed Maharay, Clerk (remote)	X	
Mr. Ben Casper	X	
Mr. David Shinnick	X	
Mr. Aaron Lenart	X	
Mr. Michael Dion	X	

• Call to order

Mr. Desruisseaux called the hearing to order at @6:04 PM.

• Public Hearing – FY25 Budget

Ms. Sheridan gave an overview presentation on the FY25 proposed budget.

The proposed FY25 budget request is \$27,651,059. It represents a \$2,640,000 increase (10.56%) over the FY24 budget appropriation.

This is a reduction from the \$29,588,374 original proposal discussed in recent meetings.

The presentation included slides and commentary that included:

- a. Breakdown of the budget amount by DESE function code
- b. The budget drivers and their corresponding YOY increases: Salaries (698,735), Operations (90,622), Transition of ESSER positions and additional staffing needs (558,006), Transportation (601,725), and reduced contributions from revolving funds (690,912)
- c. List of reductions made from the original FY25 budget proposal
- d. Total staff numbers funded through the general fund (FY23-FY25 proposal). The current FY25 staffing levels represent a 2.5 DECREASE in full-time employees.
- e. List of new staffing and former ESSER positions included in the FY25 general fund request
- f. List of staff requests that administration was unable to fund in the FY25 proposal

- g. Breakdown of the transportation YOY increase
- h. Proposed town meeting warrant article for \$258,000 in one-time funding to support athletic and general education transportation costs for FY25
- i. Comparison of revolving fund revenue used in FY24 to the FY25 proposal
- j. History of circuit breaker funds FY21-FY25 proposal
- k. Out-of-district placement breakdown (schools and # of students), as well as the history of year-over-year rate increases in this area
- l. Comparison of school choice revenue history FY21-FY25 proposal as well as the number of students choosing to school choice into and out of Uxbridge public schools
- m. History of the Preschool revolving account
- n. Chapter 70 aid for Uxbridge FY23-FY25 (preliminary). Uxbridge is currently a minimum aid district.
- o. Net school spending breakdown from FY13-FY23
- p. Grant history FY20-FY24
- q. The FY25 proposal's budgetary connections to the district improvement plan
- r. Town appropriated % increases from FY15-FY25 (proposed)

Mr. Desruisseaux explained that he would like the public to ask their questions and then after all the questions were asked, the administration would answer them.

Public Comment #1:

Jim Hogan: What happens if the district's capital request and/or the warrant article fail/s at the town meeting? What existing positions are lost in the FY25 proposal?

Debbie Stark: What are the number of math and reading coaches and specialists in the new proposal? Is iReady included in the budget?

Peter Demers: Concern over putting computers into a capital request versus into the operating budget as a recurring expense. Concern that the presentation was confusing because it compared the original FY25 proposal to the new FY25 proposal to explain reductions, etc. instead of it being compared to FY24. Concerned about asking for transportation as a one-time transfer and that if the district needs the money for operations it should be in the operating budget because it is an annual cost. He also read a list of short questions at the end of his time.

Chris Pezzullo: What does the budget include for students/families that don't need social-emotional support or a sub-separate classroom and are looking for growth in learning? Concern that this budget is a "net loss" for those students and families, which includes her family, because they are losing additional academic support staff that could help these students

who are performing at expectations excel to the next level, they are losing the ability to play middle school sports, and they will now have to pay for high school athletics.

Jen Wilson: Is there an option to reinstate sports at Whitin by charging fees?

Sarah Douglas: Concerned that many positions in reading and math that have been listed as necessary at Taft are not included in the budget proposal. Wanted to know why the math coach at Taft could not be included in the general fund request.

Jen Modica: Are the therapeutic classrooms at Taft and Whitin for a new program and how many students would be in these classrooms? Commented on the need for other staff, aside from a teacher, to support these types of programs.

Responses by the administration included:

Dr. Dwyer:

- Taft will have a math specialist, a literacy interventionist, and a literacy coach.
- Whitin will have a reading specialist and a math coach.
- The iReady assessment section remains in the budget. The MyPath portion of iReady has been removed. Dr. Dwyer hopes to find funding for this through grants.

Dr. Baldassarre:

- There are 13.5 current positions not supported in the budget proposal. The total FTE count from FY24-25 will be -2.5. He explained that the reduction of a position does not always mean the reduction of a person due to retirements, etc. The administration's main focus when approaching needed budgetary reductions was to maintain class size as much as possible and to ensure the decisions focused on achievement, wellness, and safety.
- He shared that the budget still includes @\$30K for intramurals at Whitin and that the budget situation made the administration have to choose between sports at Whitin or class size.

Dr. Rubin:

- Shared that transportation was one of the main drivers for having to cut Whitin athletics. He also explained the challenges that Uxbridge, as well as many other districts, have regarding having a sustainable middle school athletic program. He will work with the athletic director to "crunch numbers" and determine cost relative to potential athletic numbers for Whitin.

Dr. Baldassarre:

- Explained that the challenge with the end of ESSER funding was not that the district had not planned for when the funding went away, but that the needs of the kids have stayed, or become more profound.
- If the capital plan and/or warrant article fails the district will have to cut more from the proposed budget. The benefit is that the town meeting is not until May and it will give him and the administration time to see where other efficiencies might be able to be obtained. At this time, the administration has not made an additional cut list.
- He did not have a list to share with the public of the existing positions that are cut in the FY25 proposal because people still need to be notified and he did not want staff learning about their situation on television.
- The therapeutic classrooms can serve up to 7 students. The staffing needs per classroom would be: 1 teacher, 1 therapeutic specialist, and 1 school adjustment counselor/social worker assigned to the class.
- He stated that they will be implementing athletic fees at the high school to help offset the budget need.
- Regarding the warrant article requesting the use of one-time funding, he said it was something he felt the district should try because it would not increase the base budget and would let the voters decide. Ms. Sheridan said the passage of the warrant article would give the administration time to analyze their transportation needs and plan for FY26.
- He said that most areas of budget increase were areas out of the district's control.
- He said the new salary schedule in the union contract will help the district both retain and hire great talent and that the district has had a hard time attracting applicants for important positions. The new salaries were needed for the district to be competitive.
- He said the current budget proposal would not trigger an override and that was what the administration was trying to achieve.
- About how the budget affects all kids, he reiterated that the focus was on maintaining strong class sizes and that all students are positively impacted by this.
- He said that a PR firm is in this budget because it is a low amount, but also because the principals do not have the time to draft PR releases to celebrate the students' successes and that the district needs to share this because it is always in competition with other districts.
- The Committee asked Dr. Baldassarre to research the true cost of middle school sports.
- He will be making a hierarchy of "restorations" so that if the district finds additional funding it will be clear the order in which reduced areas will be put back into the budget. He said that if he can make a recommendation that impacts academic achievement for kids or wellness or safety that decision might come before restoring sports.

Public comment #2:

Debbie Stark: She appreciated the development of both the first and second budget proposals. She believes that although the current proposal is a large increase over the current year, it brings the district backward and asked the Committee to consider advocating for a bigger request and letting voters ultimately decide whether they would support a larger number or not.

Steve Mandile: Said he wants the schools to have what they need and he does not want to see cuts made. He asked the Committee to ask the town for what the district needs.

Steve Sette: Appreciated the discussions that night but wanted to reiterate that the current proposal is a level-funded budget plus an additional \$2.64M. He said the town has made cuts in their FY25 budget proposal and shared some of the examples. Mr. Desruisseaux asked Mr. Sette what were the pros and cons of pursuing an override. He said that if the town is at the levy ceiling at the meeting, voters can only vote to reduce the budget and if they wanted to increase it, they would have to be prepared with a motion that tells people that the town would need an override. He estimated that that would cost "well over \$1000" more a year for the average house and that this amount would be built into property taxes every year moving forward.

Administration/Committee Discussion #2:

Ms. Sheridan asked to potentially revisit placing a one-year warrant article that would keep the schools' base down for FY25 and allow the schools to restore some of its reserve revenue in FY25. Mr. Sette said he could look at this but would need to see an actual proposal to understand it.

Ms. Sheridan and Dr. Dwyer explained that some areas in the FY25 budget look like areas that are newly funded or areas that are high increases YOY and that is because some critical lines were reduced or not funded at all in FY24 due to budgetary restraints that had no choice but to be appropriately included in FY25.

Dr. Baldassarre said it was his recommendation to approve the current proposal. He said he was grateful for the town manager's and finance committee's support of this budget number and appreciated that the YOY increase is something unheard of in not only Uxbridge but most districts across the state. He said he had a fear that asking for more would cause unrest in the town. He said he is confident in the current proposal and that in the upcoming year, they can potentially settle some of the things that did not make it into this proposal through other revenue possibilities and then work on developing FY26 off of this FY25 base.

Mr. Shinnick and Mr. Dion asked Mr. Sette what were the logistics associated with an override. Mr. Sette explained that there are two hurdles: 1. Approval at town meeting followed by 2. Approval at the ballot box. He said that if it fails, the schools would get the amount for FY25 that was approved for FY24. Potentially the schools could go back to a town meeting with a new request. He said the risk could be that the schools might not get the second request either.

Mr. Shinnick asked if there was a way to have a supplemental request by putting something to the voter that would fund "key impactful things."

Mr. Maharay said that in terms of mechanics, the schools do not need a separate article and motions can be done under the budget article. He said the budget does not have to be balanced until the tax rate is set. He said that he hopes everyone can focus on the positive and that they will have \$2.64M more in funding to work with. He said he was in favor of sports at Whitin but not if they take away from academic achievement. He said "we are not where we need to be" and he believes the focus needs to be on academic achievement and wellness.

Mr. Shinnick said he felt the current proposal is a few steps in the right direction and that there is a lot of good in the proposal.

Mr. Hogan spoke again from the public. He asked the Committee to keep in mind that the reason the schools had this amount of money to work with was because the town had excess levy. He stated that at a previous meeting, Mr. Sette had indicated that the normal allowed (2.5%) annual property tax revenue increase would amount to \$1-1.1M annually. He said that for FY26, this projected amount would have to be shared between all the increases for both the town and the schools or the town will have to do an override to meet the goals of the town and schools. He said he would love to see more funding for the schools but there is the reality of the town budget.

Mr. Desruisseaux said that the schools got to a 10% increase which is really good even if it is not all they wanted.

Mr. Dion suggested two things he felt would help get acceptance for the budget at the town meeting:

1. A list of the order in which items would be restored
2. 5-year plan done in line with the town, particularly the next budget cycle

Ms. Liscinsky said she had never seen an increase like this one anywhere. She appreciated the discussion but felt some of the suggestions came late in the process and potentially could be considered next year. She felt the Committee had done what it needed to show need and is willing to compromise with the new proposal as a good start.

Motion: *Mr. Maharay made a motion that "we" close the public hearing and vote on the proposed budget.*

Mr. Casper said his concern was (with the larger budget proposal) whether the district could spend it efficiently within one year. He felt the 2nd proposal still has a significant increase and that it will still take a lot of effort to deploy this amount. He said it's a "big project" and to do it in stages makes more sense and could help them be more responsible.

Mr. Lenart said he wished they could find everything they needed, but that sometimes you have to make hard decisions. He believes the current proposal is the best path forward at this moment and next year they will be able to build off this base.

Mr. Dion seconded the motion. By roll call vote: Ben: YES; Dave: YES; Arlene: YES; Aaron: YES, Mike: YES; Ed: YES; Barry: Yes. The Committee voted 7-0 in favor of the motion. The motion passed.

Motion: *Mr. Desruisseaux entertained a motion to approve the budget as written with the warrant article. Mr. Maharay moved the motion. Mr. Casper seconded the motion. By roll call vote: Ben: YES; Dave: YES; Arlene: YES; Aaron: YES, Mike: YES; Ed: YES; Barry: Yes. The Committee voted 7-0 in favor of the motion. The motion passed.*

● **Adjournment**

Motion: *Mr. Desruisseaux entertained a motion for adjournment. Mr. Casper moved the motion. Mr. Maharay seconded the motion. By roll call vote: Ben: YES; Dave: YES; Arlene: YES; Aaron: YES, Mike: YES; Ed: YES; Barry: Yes. The Committee voted 7-0 in favor of the motion. The motion passed.*

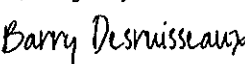
The meeting adjourned at 9:17 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,

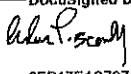
Debbie Stark

Uxbridge School Committee Recording Secretary

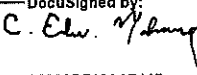
School Committee Members:

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Mr. Barry Desruisseaux, Chair

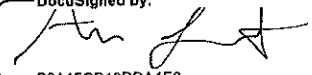
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Ms. Arlene Liscinsky, Vice-Chair

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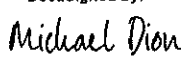
Mr. Ed Maharay, Clerk

Mr. David Shinnick, Member

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Mr. Ben Casper, Member

Mr. Aaron Lenart, Member

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Mr. Michael Dion, Member