



# City of Somerville, Massachusetts

## City Council Finance Committee

### Meeting Minutes

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Thursday, May 30, 2024

8:30 PM

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#### Committee of the Whole

The meeting took place virtually via Zoom and was called to order at 8:30 PM by Chair Wilson and adjourned at 10:16 PM on a roll call vote of 10 in favor (Councilors McLaughlin, Davis, Mbah, Strezo, Pineda Neufeld, Ewen-Campen, Clingan, Burnley, Scott and Wilson), none against and 1 absent (Councilor Sait).

Others present:

Dr. Ruben Carmona – Superintendent of Schools, Fran Gorski – CFO – School Department, Karen Woods - Personnel Officer – School Department, Michael Mastrobuoni – Budget Director, Edward Bean – CFO, Kimberly Hutter – Legislative Liaison, Peter Forcellese – Legislative Clerk.

#### Roll Call

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| <b>Present:</b> | City Councilor At Large Jake Wilson, Ward Two City Councilor Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott, City Councilor At Large Willie Burnley Jr., Ward Four City Councilor Jesse Clingan, Matthew McLaughlin, Lance L. Davis, Wilfred N. Mbah, Kristen Strezo, Judy Pineda Neufeld and Ben Ewen-Campen |
| <b>Absent:</b>  | Ward Two City Councilor Naima Sait   |

1. Review of the FY 2025 Budget
  - School Department
  - Salary Contingency
  - Revenue Questions
  - Miscellaneous Budgetary Items

#### School Department

Councilors Davis and Clingan were recused from all School Department discussions.

Superintendent Carmona presented the department's budget and said choices have to be made to adjust to realities. The FY25 budget reflects a 6.7% increase over the previous year's budget and reflects Somerville Public Schools' (SPS) values as it works towards developing the whole child. Mr. Gorski noted that the budget is student centered and accountability focused. Superintendent Carmona reviewed student demographics and programs and reported that SPS enrollment stands at 5093 students. He reviewed trends in attendance and suspensions, drop out rates, graduation rates and noted that 72% of graduates go on to further their education. He also mentioned district

awards and recognitions.

Superintendent Carmona spoke about aligning priorities with school committee goals and said that more than 80% of the budget goes to personnel. He spoke about whole child teaching and servicing students in all economic brackets, early education, special education, multilingual learner education, social emotional wellness, out-of-school time, and the launch of a new framework - See Every Child. He continued his presentation and reviewed 2024-2025 elementary class projections and spoke about having an equity specialist and teams in each school. Mr. Gorski told the committee that the SPS spent \$26,197 per student in FY23 (the last available data) and that the district is at or above the state average. For the non-salary side of the FY25 budget (operations and maintenance), the request is to go from \$17.9 million to \$18.6 million, an increase of 3.9%. For the personnel side, the proposed budget is \$88 million, up from \$82 million, an increase of 7.25%. Mr. Gorski noted that several staffing additions are being proposed and that some ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) positions are moving to the general fund.

Councilor Ewen-Campen asked about changes to out of school time programs and Superintendent Carmona explained that it's difficult to not have a waiting list. Space and capacity are challenges as more programs are included and more partnerships are created. He noted that capacity has increased every year and staff is looking at the current system for ways to increase capacity. Councilor Ewen-Campen asked about ESSER health care costs and Mr. Gorski replied saying that the School Department's health insurance is paid from the city side of the budget. Chair Wilson noted that out of school time funding decreased on the school side and Mr. Gorski explained that the BreakThru contract was cut, but the funds are still in the budget and were moved from the curriculum budget to a new organization.

Councilor Mbah asked about early childhood education and Superintendent Carmona explained different assessment tools saying that the city has invested in several areas and curriculum but needs more support. Councilor Strezo inquired about funding for a transportation contract to provide shuttle service for 20 Winter Hill School students and the Superintendent explained that transportation was secured for those students and that requirements for participation are being worked out.

Councilor Burnley noted that the transportation cost for busing students to

the Edgerly School was \$100,000 and he asked if another \$100,000 would translate to doubling capacity. Superintendent Carmona said multiple bids have been put out and no vendor would provide a larger vehicle. In theory, capacity could increase, but it's hypothetical and there are a lot of factors to be considered. Councilor Burnley asked about the creation of a district wide crisis team and the Superintendent said that a small group of people who have the credentials are working in concert with the Special Education Department and providing technical knowledge to address student behaviors. Councilor Burnley inquired about the universal screening tool and its use and Superintendent Carmona explained that it's a comprehensive screening for school readiness at different grade levels.

Chair Wilson asked if ESSER positions short term or being reviewed as new normal. Superintendent Carmona said that the reality is that some are about remediation and support to accelerate learning. SPS doesn't have a system of support in every school but still has needs that need to be addressed. He noted that programs are lacking on the social emotional side. He thinks that most of them will be here to stay.

### **Salary Contingency (Pg 366)**

Director Mastrobuoni told the members that the contingency is the vessel for the budget year's expected needs on the salary side, e.g., salary increases and contract costs. Any contracts already settled have already been included in the budget. The Director commented that he would like more but he's comfortable with the amounts available.

### **Revenue Questions**

Director Mastrobuoni will bring any questions that he's unable to answer to department heads for a response. Councilor Mbah noted that the projected revenue is \$342.8 million and Director Mastrobuoni pointed out that reflects a 5.8% increase over the current FY. Councilor Mbah asked about a state law regarding revenue and the Director explained that there is no limit to the amount of year over year revenue that may be generated but there is a limit, set by Prop 2.5, on the amount of revenue generated from taxes.

Director Mastrobuoni said that he couldn't project next year's free cash amount but noted that Somerville is in a better position than many communities.

Councilor Ewen-Campen inquired about the personal property tax line and the Director explained that it's budgeted in one line but then broken out by the treasury Department. Councilor Clingan asked if home sales have

slowed and the Director will refer that question to the Chief Assessor.

Councilor Burnley asked about the Fines and Forfeits lines and said it's important for the Council to see the numbers to know which ordinances are being enforced. Chair Wilson asked if the \$5.5 million in building permit revenue would be from smaller projects and the Director said that it's from "constant" projects, e.g., bathroom and kitchen remodels, and would exclude larger projects.

#### **Miscellaneous Budgetary Items**

Councilor Burnley commented that the city is projected to give the state \$500,000 less than in FY24 because of school costs. He would like to know how many students are represented here as not paying for charter schools, and did they leave Somerville? Director Mastrobuoni will look at data and noted that another piece of the assessment is from school choice. Director Bean noted that charter school assessments are challenging and said that the number will probably change in the fall.

Chair Wilson commented that local aid is below where it was in FY09 and said that if the amount were adjusted for inflation, it would be over \$82 million.

#### Referenced Documents:

- Finance - 2024-05-30 FY25 Schools-Budget Presentation
- Finance - 2024-05-30 FY25 Schools-Non Payroll Detail 05-01-24
- Finance - 2024-05-30 FY25 Schools-Proposed GF Staffing Adds 05-01-24
- Finance - 2024-05-30 FY25 Schools-Proposed Staffing Reductions
- Finance - 2024-05-30 FY25 Schools-School Committee Budget Summary
- Finance - 2024-05-30 FY25 Schools-Staffing Additions – ESSER
- Finance - 2024-05-30 FY25 Schools-Superintendent's Proposed Budget
- Finance - 2024-05-30 Schools-Revised Staffing Plan as of 4.19.24