

Hooksett School Board

Chair's Report

February 2024



Coffee with the Board

Near the end of January, Hooksett School Board Members hosted social events at all three schools for an opportunity to visit directly with school staff. Jillian Godbout, Amy Tremblay, and Wayne Goertel were excited to interact with so many of our staff! We appreciate the frank, honest, professional, and engaging dialogues. Discussion topics were quite varied, ranging from software tools, exciting social studies projects, curriculum, professional development, mentoring, assessments, student behavior, emotional support, and family support of education at home.



In a thank-you note to staff who joined us, Ms. Godbout acknowledged, "...we did not get to talk to everyone or even every department. We also understand that this is just a snapshot of the present climate. We would like to encourage our staff that we are always available to listen, and that it takes all of us to work together as a team to get it right."

Deliberative Session Recap

The savvy Hooksett residents who read School Board reports are inevitably aware that the Town and School Deliberative Sessions on February 3 resulted in reductions to 2024-25 operating budgets. The School District proposed operating budget was reduced by \$750,000, making it \$174,000 below the default budget. Furthermore, the proposed 15-year lease purchase agreement for replacements and renovations at all three schools was reduced to \$0.

Property tax bills sent to Hooksett residents in January saw significant increases, thousands of dollars in additional cost for some residents, following the 5-year revaluation of the Town of Hooksett in the fall of 2023. The bridge between proposed budgets and taxpayer capacity grew too far for some residents, and some residents feel overwhelmed, frustrated, and unheard.

For some in the school district, there is a sense of frustration that residents hadn't expressed their perspectives prior to the Deliberative Sessions. Work on the 2024-25 school operating budget began in July, 2023, as administrators prepared draft operating budgets for the Hooksett School Board based on prior operations and forecasts. The draft budgets were discussed at public School Board meetings in October and November, and discussed further over seven weekly public meetings of the Hooksett Budget Committee. These meetings provide opportunities for resident input into the budgeting process, but saw very sparse attendance.

The next meeting of the Hooksett School Board is Tuesday, February 20. It will include an agenda item for a retrospective on the Deliberative Sessions, to incorporate community feedback in planning and improve communications in the future. Another agenda item will be for the School Board and administration to review scenarios and potential cuts, and develop plans of action for those scenarios to accommodate the Deliberative Session reductions to the 2024-25 operating budget.



The March School Ballot, Summarized

1. School district officers
 - a. Three School Board Members
 - b. School District Moderator
 - c. School District Clerk
 - d. School District Treasurer
2. School district operating budget
 - a. Proposed budget: \$40,672,137 (*after amendment*)
 - b. Default budget: \$40,846,130
3. Three-year contract with Hooksett Education Support Professionals Assn. (HESPA)
 - a. \$325,206 projected 3-year cost increases for salary, retirement and taxes
4. 15-year lease purchase agreement for equipment and renovations at all three schools
 - a. \$0 projected cost (*after amendment*)
5. Technology Expendable Trust Fund contribution
 - a. \$100,000 from additional taxation
6. Special Education Expendable Trust Fund contribution
 - a. \$150,000 from fund balance
7. Building Maintenance Expendable Trust Fund contribution
 - a. \$100,000 from fund balance

Learning from Operating Budget Math Shortcomings with “Plug and Chug”

When I was an Electrical Engineering (EE) student in college, a Physics professor caught my attention with a generalization. “All you EE majors just ‘plug and chug’ equations - but you really need to understand the ‘why’.” His observation came to me after seeing some bad examples of Hooksett operating budget math recently posted on social media.

One post claimed a nearly 8% increase in the school district operating budget in the past year, and forecasted huge budget futures with just two data points. Here, the author ‘plugs’ in the \$38.4 million operating budget from last year’s ballot, dividing into the \$41.4 million proposed operating budget. I ‘chug’ (solve) this to get a 7.75% increase. However, the school district deliberative guide and budget spreadsheets explain the ‘why’ - why these are not the correct values to ‘plug’.

The school district operating budget is different from the town operating budget because a larger portion of school expenses are for staff. Approximately 75% of the budget is for wages, health insurance, employer pension contributions, other benefits, and employer taxes. A substantial portion of yearly budget increases are thus related to staffing: as “cost of living”, inflation, or other competitive market wage adjustments, the extra pension and tax expenses accompanying any wage increase, and insurance increases. Last year, the operating budget lacked cost increases captured in separate warrant articles for the teaching and support staff.

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Since voters in March, 2023 approved those warrants with the proposed operating budget, those all become part of the starting point for this year's operating budget.

A better current year operating budget number to plug in is

\$38,442,000	2023-24 operating budget on last year's ballot
+ \$414,325	HEA new contract first year increases
+ \$345,482	HESPA market increases
= \$39,201,807	Revised 2023-24 operating budget

But is this the right number? 😊 Was \$41.4 million the right number for next year's operating budget? Just like last year, there is a separate warrant article for support staff.

There's still more involved in the official computation, such as accounting for a dispersal from the Technology Trust Fund. The operating budget spreadsheet indicated a 4.99% proposed increase from last year, with 3.53% of that being contractually required in the default budget.

Aside from the staff expenses already mentioned, some other contractual increases include

\$956,706	Special education (some of this captures insurance increases)
\$337,428	High School tuition (regular tuition is up 5.84% to \$16,308/student)
\$314,577	Transportation (regular and special ed)
\$112,100	Teacher retirement bonuses

Finally, a conversation about the school budget must include the critical 'why' of how we did with respect to our mission statement. For one timely example, Hooksett School District came out of the pandemic with test scores exceeding most of our peers. More recently, David R. Cawley Middle School received recognition from US News & World Report for impressive statewide ranking. There is more to education than test scores, but we should also be proud that we're doing well with regard to comparative metrics.

Stay in Touch Online

You can find the School Board online at:

<https://hooksettschoolboard.sau15.net>

<https://facebook.com/hooksett.school.board/>

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Wayne', written in a cursive style.

Wayne Goertel
Hooksett School Board Chair

The mission of the Hooksett School District is to develop a community of learners who are intellectually curious, resourceful, and respectful of self and others. Academic achievement, through constantly improving standards, is the District's highest priority.