

**CITY OF WOBURN
CITY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE ON FINANCE
As a Committee of the Whole
TUESDAY, MAY 14, 2024, at 6:09 p.m.
COMMITTEE ROOM
WOBURN CITY HALL**

Voting Members present: Chair Charles Viola, Councilor Joseph Demers, Councilor Robert Ferullo, and Councilor Joanne Campbell, President Jeffrey Dillon, Councilor Robert Toro, Councilor William Pappalardo and Councilor Lou DiMambro. Absent: Councilor Darlene Mercer-Bruen

Also present: Mayor Michael Concannon, Fire Chief Donald Kenton, City Auditor Charles Doherty, Supt. of Schools Dr. Matthew Crowley, School Committee Chair Andrew Lipsett, School Committee members Jessie Wetzel, Patricia Chisholm and Colleen Cormier, Asst. Supt. of Student Services Maureen Ryan, and Asst. Supt. of Curriculum & Instruction Courtney Young

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MOTION made by Councilor Demers and seconded by Councilor Ferullo to dispense with the reading of and approve the minutes of the meeting of March 25, 2024; all in favor, 8-0.

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Order that the sum of \$255,000 be transferred from Mayor Salary Adjustment Acct# 0112151-511019 to WHMS Teachers Salaries Acct# 0219071-511010: Mayor Concannon this money will go toward contractual settlements to ensure there are sufficient funds. Motion made by Councilor Demers and seconded by Councilor Campbell that the order “ought to pass;” approved, 8-0.

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Order that the sum of \$2,053,000 be transferred from Fire/BLS Ambulance Acct# 31359-595000 to Fire Regular Salary Acct# 0122051-51000, Fire Overtime Acct# 0122051-513100, Apparatus Maintenance Acct# 0122054-544400, Fire Holiday Acct# 0122051-514500, and Fire Sick Leave Buy Back Acct# 0122051-515400: Mayor Concannon said this is a standard request that is expected at this time of year. Councilor Pappalardo said this is his first time through the budget process and asked for some elaboration. He asked if it is normal for the Fire Dept. to transfer such a large amount of dollars. He asked why this money wasn’t included in the budget in the first place. Mayor Concannon said he asked the same questions his first year on the City Council. Auditor Doherty said money from ambulance receipts is used to offset the costs of certain line items in the Fire Dept. budget. Chief Kenton said the overtime account needs to be augmented more than normal because of staffing issues. He said there have been a higher number of firefighters who have been injured while on duty. Chair Viola said he spoke to Councilor Mercer-Bruen about this transfer and she is in favor. Motion made by Councilor Demers and seconded by Councilor Campbell that the order “ought to pass;” approved, 8-0.

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Order that the Committee on Finance meet to discuss the School Department budget: Chair Viola said the City Council has not yet received a copy of the actual budget from the mayor. He said the council has received a draft copy of the budget. He said there will be no comments taken from the public tonight, but the public will have an opportunity to address the entire city budget at a City Council hearing on June 10. Motion made by Councilor Toro and seconded by Councilor Demers to receive and make part of the permanent record an email from Belinda McConnell (Smith) entitled "Document shared" and dated Tuesday, May 14, and an accompanying attachment; approved, 8-0. Councilor Toro thanked Dr. Crowley and his staff and the School Committee for taking the time to develop a budget. He said that is not an easy task. He said it is important to acknowledge this budget is unlike any other the City Council has experienced. He said a budget increase of 14.34 percent is historic. He said that does not mean he disagrees with the budget, but it is a tough increase to swallow. He said it has been widely known that it's not whether taxes are going to have to be raised, but by how much. He said that is the council's job to decide. He said the council's job is not only to decide what is best for the schools, but also what is best for the 22 percent of the city's population and the 29 percent of households that are classified as low income. He said the suggestion that any reduction in the budget will result in a decrease in personnel is deceitful. He said the discussion is not about reducing the budget but rather managing the increase to the budget. He said all the council can do is provide a number by which the school have to reduce the budget. He said the council cannot mandate where the money is cut. He said that is contrary to a direct statement made at last night's School Committee meeting that suggested any reduction to the budget would result in layoffs of teachers. He said that is not true. He said the council provides a number and what the School Committee does with that number is its choice. He said what he would like to see is a more collaborative approach. He said the goal as elected officials is to work together. He said he is supportive of the schools. He said he has two children in the school system and his wife is a teacher. He said the city has a duty to provide the best services possible not just for the schools but as a whole. He suggested the schools should try to focus any cuts on non-student facing positions. He said he has a list of about 28 questions he would like to ask later in the meeting. He said his first request is for the council and the schools to work collaboratively and stop with untrue comments. He said the council and the school officials need to work together. Councilor Ferullo said he was offended by some of the comments that were made during last night's School Committee meeting. He said he has supported the Woburn Public Schools for his entire life. He said any comments that the City Council is not supportive of the School Dept. are unnecessary and uncalled for. He said this city is his life. He said he served 38 years as a Woburn Police officer and then became a City Councilor, and he finds any suggestion he does not support the schools personally and professionally offensive. He said he will not tolerate that. He said years of goodwill were burned last night. Councilor Demers said he would like to echo the comments of his colleagues. He said he is a former School Committee member who sat in that meeting room at the Joyce Middle School. He said he has never seen an instance when the School Committee passed the buck to the City Council. He said during his tenure the School Committee sat down with the mayor and got a number that the committee worked toward. He said they didn't just ship a budget off to the City Council. He said all the city's agencies need to work within financial constraints to benefit the entire city. He said he was so committed to the schools he served on the School Committee though he doesn't have children. He said he is deeply disappointed the

rhetoric last night was so divisive. He said he had to go for a walk today to calm down. He said if the School Committee members have concerns about the budget, he was readily available to have a discussion. He said he didn't hear from School Committee members until last Friday. He said he is curious why that approach was taken. He said he is going to try to put that past him and come up with a budget that doesn't wallop the taxpayer. He said the council is not doing this lightly. He said he is concerned about the rhetoric. He said he is hoping the council and the School Committee come around and work together. President Dillon said disappointed is an understatement. He said for the last 9-10 weeks various city officials have been meeting in Mayor Concannon's office to work on a budget. He said he wants to head into the budget process with a spirit of cooperation, not division. He said the council and the School Committee are going have to put any divisiveness behind them. Councilor Pappalardo said there are a lot of hard feelings. He said the budget increase the schools are asking for surpasses anything that's been approved before. He said he has more teachers in his family than anyone in this room. He said there has to be some consideration for the taxpayers. He said he does not see the city side budget coming down. He said there are a lot of people on fixed incomes who cannot afford another \$5,000-\$6,000 in taxes. He said there is also a lot of inflation out there. He said he has managed a household budget for 40 years. He said he has read every line of the school budget and if the school officials can find fat in there, it needs to come out. He said he will not support a school budget at this level of funding. Councilor DiMambro said there has been a need for a new school in North Woburn for a long time. He said this request involves quite an increase to the budget. He said he is also a member of the School Building Committee. He said there are problems with some of the school buildings that are going to have to be addressed down the road. He said if the council supports a school budget with a 14.34 percent increase, the taxpayers are going to come at them with pitchforks and torches. He said he does not know where the city is going to get that kind of money. He said raising taxes is not the solution. He said inflation is on the rise and he does not know where the cash is going to come from. He said at this rate the new Altavesta School is never going to get built. He said for whatever reason no one is considering that. He said this budget is unacceptable. Councilor Campbell thanked Chairman Lipsett for speaking to him the other day. She said the former administration was very tight with financial matters. She said many departments were left needing help. She said the previous administration was consistently cutting pennies. She said that made it difficult for the schools to do what she felt they needed to do. She said the pandemic changed everything. She said students are still having learning loss issues. She said she is seeing the same thing at St. Charles School, where she is the director of religious education. She said there are children who need help. She said every year the city has free cash, sometimes upwards of \$25 million. Auditor Doherty said the city's free cash was \$42 million last year. Councilor Campbell said she is fairly sure the council does not want to raise taxes. She suggested dipping into the free cash reserves to offset tax increases. She said she is a conservative but this is the first time the council will really have to cut anything. She said the city can not sustain a 14.3 percent increase in the school budget. She said it might be in the best interests of the city to bite the bullet and use free cash this year. She said she does not approve of a 14.3 percent increase. She said the past administration strapped the city down so tightly. She said the council has always supported the schools. She said the city always finds money to do things. She said funding the budget with free cash could be a 1-time thing that the council could give a thought to. Chairman Viola said at last night's School Committee meeting the City Council got attacked by one specific individual. He said he has family that has worked for the schools. He said his family supports teachers. He said he ran for School Committee. He

said to hear comments made toward the council about hurting teachers and students is unfair. He said there is going to be a burden on the taxpayers. Councilor Ferullo said school officials are doing a great job. He said he worked in the schools for 15 years. He said please don't let the fight for money diminish the quality of the product. He said he does not want that to be lost on anyone. Councilor Pappalardo asked if the school department gets reimbursement funding from the state for educating the recent migrants. Supt. Crowley said the schools are reimbursed \$104 per day per student. He said the schools have received \$430,000. He said more funding should be arriving in July. Auditor Doherty said the city is treating reimbursement money like a state grant. He said the city recognizes the city is not going to be getting this money forever. Supt. Crowley said this money is also being used for transportation from the hotels to the schools. Councilor Pappalardo asked if the cost of that is included in the grant money. Supt. Crowley said not now. He said there is no promise for continued grant money in FY '25. Chairman Lipsett said he looks around the table at each councilor and what he associates with them is support for the schools. He said the School Committee's job is to focus on the needs of the students. He said what he came to say to the committee tonight is the School Committee cannot determine the city budget or the tax rate. He said his job is to present the City Council with a budget that best serves the students in the most responsible way the School Committee can. He said he believes that is within this budget. He said he recognizes the enormity of it. He said since he has been a member of the School Committee, he has always been able to count on the support of the City Council. He said the School Committee needs the support of the council again and it needs it pretty deeply. He said the numbers have been rising rapidly.

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MOTION made by Councilor Demers and seconded by Councilor Ferullo to adjourn; all in favor, 8-0. Chair Viola adjourned the meeting at 8:48 p.m.

A TRUE RECORD ATTEST

Gordon Vincent
Clerk of Committees