

**CITY OF WOBURN
CITY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE ON FINANCE
As a Committee of the Whole
CITY COUNCIL CHAMBERS
WOBURN CITY HALL
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 4, 2025, at 6:36 p.m.**

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

Also present: Northeast Metropolitan Regional Vocational School Supt. David DiBarri, Finance Director James Picone, and School Committee Chair Deborah Davis

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Discussion of the Northeast Metropolitan Regional Vocational School Budget for FY '26:

Chair Davis said she and the administration are proud to present the FY '26 budget for the Northeast Metropolitan Regional Vocational School. Supt. DiBarri said they are about a year away from the new school being completed. He said the first window was installed today. He thanked the council for its support. He said he appreciates what the council does for the vocational school. He said elected office involves a lot of time away from your families. Mr. Picone said the administration's goal is to keep the financial burden for member communities at a minimum. He said this budget was made more difficult this year due to a lack of state funding. He said a lot of those costs had to be passed on to member communities. He said based on the Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education formula for required net school spending, Northeast is required to spend \$2.2 million more than in FY '25 to meet the threshold. He said he does not see that stopping at any time in the near future. He said a committee was set up to look into Ch. 70 funding but the committee may take 3-4 years to do its work. Supt. DiBarri said last year he was a little dramatic about the financial picture at Northeast Voke, but now the state has grossly underfunded public education for the second year in a row. He said Woburn did a little better than some of the communities with smaller enrollment. He said other communities were doing overrides. He said next year it is going to be a crisis. He said some towns set up task forces. He said it is going to be a tight year. He said the district is giving you less and requiring you to spend a lot more. He said the proposed budget does call for the minimum contribution. Mr. Picone said a \$1.3 million annual increase is not a sustainable model. He said the district is looking at creative ways to reduce the debt service on the new school. He said they have been applying for grants and the debt service has been reduced by \$2.7 million. He said this has resulted in a \$256,000 savings for Woburn. He said there will be eight additional students from Woburn resulting in an increase in the assessment of \$411,201. He said nothing was added to the budget. He said the total assessment for FY '26 will be \$2,632,230, plus \$616,227 for debt service for a final assessment of \$3,248,457. Councilor Toro said he owns a construction company and therefore is a big proponent of vocational schools. He asked who sets what each community pays. Supt. DiBarri said the per pupil cost is set by DESE and the state Dept. of

Revenue. He said the school has no say in that formula. Councilor Toro said he would appreciate any info on what the formula entails. Supt. DiBarri said the formula is one of the most challenging things he has ever encountered. He said there are a lot of factors involved. Mr. Picone said income and property values are two critical factors. Councilor Toro said Woburn pays about \$25,000 per student. He said some communities like Chelsea and Malden contribute significantly less per pupil. Supt. DiBarri said the school charges the exact same amount for every student, and the variable is how much the state subsidizes. He said that is part of the Ch. 70 formula. Councilor Toro asked about enrollment figures. Supt. DiBarri said the new school has a capacity of 1,600 students. He said the current school has 1,350 students. Councilor Toro said he expects the demand will increase once the new school opens. He said he expects there will be a wait list. He said he appreciates the district trying to increase the assessment as minimally as possible. He said without the savings and grant money the assessment probably would have been closer to \$4 million. Supt. DiBarri said they are at an 80 percent reimbursement rate from the MSBA for the new school. He said the new vocational school will cost \$330 million and now new schools are going to cost \$750 million. He said the district received \$30 million in grants to reduce the cost of the new school. He said being able to get that was very helpful. He said the district has been very aggressive in its attempt to obtain grants. He said they have one consultant and do the rest in-house. Councilor Toro said he would love to take a tour of the new school when it opens. Supt. DiBarri said they will have a Woburn night. Councilor Demers said he has been a member of the Woburn School Committee and the City Council and he knows how hard it is to come up with a budget. He said the folks at the vocational school are doing a great job. He said the administrators are saving the member communities millions of dollars. He said vocational schools are vital to the educational process. He said it provides a valuable service for students who are not interested in a 4-year college and emerging with huge loan debt. He asked why Ch. 70 money is cratering. He asked if there is any justification about why the money keeps fluctuating down. Supt. DiBarri said the state has other priorities. Councilor Demers said they have been hearing about affordable housing and not investing in education. He said even in 2017 he was talking about the funding formula for the vocational school. He said the City Council should be contacting the city's delegation in the state legislature. Councilor DiMambro said Northeast Voke has advanced light years from when he graduated in 1990. He said he will say it drives him insane that the state is not funding schools. He said he sees where some of the money is going. He said it is almost like Northeast Voke is being penalized by how much grant money it is getting. He said he really wishes the governor and state legislators would focus more on education. Councilor Mercer-Bruen said she is so excited to see the new school. She said the vocational school wastes nothing. She said the school is run like a private business. She said there is a great need for people who are skilled in trades. She said the average age of tradespeople is between 55-58 and they will be retiring. She said there is an opportunity to earn a great deal of money in skilled trades, perhaps as high as six figures. She thanked the representatives from the vocational school for all the work they do. She said she has lots of things to say to the representatives from the state and federal government. She said it is time the cities and towns start saying no. She said she supports the vocational school's budget 100 percent. Councilor Campbell said she has been on the City Council for about 10 years and every year the officials from the vocational school give them the leanest budget possible. She said the difference between the vocational school and Woburn Public Schools is amazing. She said the vocational school is always ahead of the game. She said next year is going to be rough. She said the year after that is going to be rough. She said the governor is focusing on things other than

education. She said if there are cuts, they are going to be on the schools. She thanked the administration from the vocational school for always looking ahead. She said she loves the idea of going after grants and she wants to thank them for that. Councilor Ferullo thanked the Northeast Voke administrators for their commitment to the city. He asked if the bakery in the new school will be as good as the one in the old school. Supt. DiBarri answered affirmatively. Councilor Pappalardo said this is his second budget. He said the vocational school is like a well-oiled machine. He said they did a great job. He said his son-in-law went to the Voke. He said his son-in-law is a welder. He said he has nothing but good things to say about the school. Chair Viola thanked the officials from the vocational school for appearing tonight and answering questions from the council. Motion made by Councilor Demers and seconded by Councilor Ferullo to send the Northeast Metropolitan Regional Vocational School Budget for FY '26 "back for action," approved, 8-0-1. Motion made by Councilor Demers and seconded by Councilor Ferullo to send the draft version for the municipal budget for FY '26 "back for action;" approved, 8-0-1.

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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 7:10 p.m.

A TRUE RECORD ATTEST

Gordon Vincent
Clerk of Committees