

January 8, 2013  
Newton South High School  
Lecture Hall

## **Notes from the Joint Meeting of the School Council and PTSO, With Members from the School Committee**

In attendance:

- Cindy Bergen, Newton Public Schools Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Education
- Claire Sokoloff, School Committee Chair
- Margie Ross Decter, School Committee
- Steve Siegel, School Committee
- Joel Stenbridge, Principal of Newton South
- Charles Myette, Goodwin Housemaster of Newton South
- Susan Flicop, Newton South School Council
- Ryan Augusta, Newton South faculty and representative to the School Council
- Nancy Bauer, Newton South School Council
- Marnie Bolstad, Newton South Librarian
- Julie Sall, Newton Schools Foundation Co-President, member "Building Newton's Future"
- Betsy Blagdon, Newton South PTSO Co-President
- Lori Lass, Newton South PTSO Co-President
- Michel Bruehwiler, Newton South Parent
- Risa Shames, Newton South and Oak Hill Parent
- Beth Greenspan, Newton South Parent
- Pam Frorer, Oak Hill Parent

### **School Committee Representatives:**

The city budget is approximately \$300 million, of which schools require about \$180 million.

The School Committee has worked closely with Mayor Setti Warren to get Newton's financial house in order. Some of the items focused on have been: the city contracts to workers, making sure revenues match expenses (which increase at 2.5% every year), and finding efficiencies in energy and food service.

The general population of Newton has remained stable at around 85,000 people. However, the school population has been surging. In 1990, Newton Public Schools (NPS) had 9,500 students. In 2012, we had over 12,000 students.

As a city, we need teachers and space to serve these additional students. We have addressed the state of our school buildings with a long term capital plan.

Mayor Setti Warren has requested an \$11.4 million override to fund the teachers and space needs. The vote regarding this override will take place March 12, 2013. The override is broken up into three questions:

1. General operating override package of \$8.4 million to address the need for additional police, street and sidewalk repair, fire station repair, renovation of Zervas Elementary School, as well as short term space and teachers to support enrollment growth.
2. Debt exclusion override of \$1.3 million for debt service for the replacement of Angier Elementary School.
3. Debt exclusion override of \$1.7 million for debt service for the renovation or replacement of Cabot Elementary School.

The mayor likes to say that this is one city, with three questions.

#### Difference between a debt exclusion override and a general override:

A debt exclusion override is project specific, for example to obtain the funds to pay for the replacement of a school. Once that project is completed, the taxes that fund that override go away.

A general/operating override is one where the new funds are added to the tax base and permanently increase that tax base.

In 1980, the Massachusetts law called "Proposition 2 ½" came into effect. This law states that the total tax levy collected for all existing property cannot increase by more than 2 ½% annually. (If new property is built, the city may assess additional taxes on the new property.)

An independent group, [Building Newton's Future](http://buildingnewtonsfuture.org/), [\[http://buildingnewtonsfuture.org/\]](http://buildingnewtonsfuture.org/) has been created in support of the override. Newton South parent Robin Maltz is the liaison from the high school parent community to Building Newton's Future. Please let Robin or Risa know if you want to help. [Her email is: [robinm@comcast.net](mailto:robinm@comcast.net).]

#### **Newton Public Schools (NPS) Representative:**

The theme of this year has been collaboration: collaboration at the administrative level, among teachers, working together in teams (for example co-teachers working with Special Education teachers), etc.

In the next year, Newton North High School and Newton South High School will get an additional 100 students. In the coming years, they will get an additional 400 students.

At the high school level, we are concerned about having adequate staffing to address these numbers. Space is less of an issue, staffing is key. Additional staff are needed to keep class sizes down and to preserve the breadth of the program. As we all know, staffing cuts are extremely painful, and we have already had to make them several times in the last few years.

To date, we have been able to preserve the breadth of programming at the high schools, with the exception of the electives. This override would allow us to concentrate on staffing and programming the way we need to.

**School Council Representative:**

The Cabot school renovation doesn't have plans yet. When would the collection of taxes for that project start?

**School Committee Representative:**

The override only gives permission to the alderman to assess additional taxes, and those taxes cannot be assessed until the Cabot project has reached a certain stage of development. So those taxes would not happen until that time.

The taxes from the operating override (Question #1) will be assessed immediately if the override is passed.

**Parent:**

Why are the questions divided up the way they are? And are modulars part of the override?

**School Committee Representative:**

There are three questions on the ballot because the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) requires that, if we are to fund projects through overrides, we have separate debt exclusion overrides for each project that can receive MSBA funding.

The state has put the Angier project in their queue and Newton anticipates a 25 – 30% reimbursement of costs for the \$37 million project. However, the Zervas project will not be reimbursed as it is not on the top priority list maintained by the Massachusetts State Building Association (MSBA), and because the MSBA generally only engages with a municipality on one or two projects at once. Zervas is a top priority for Newton because of how well it helps us with our capacity issues.

Yes, 7 modulars are included in this override: 1 at Burr, 1 at Horace Mann, 2 at Mason Rice, and 4 (two double deckers) at Bowen, with the old modular at Bowen being moved to Burr (that's why it's 7 total new ones, not 8).

Currently, Bowen has such a student population increase that they need three new modulars just to deal with the students that they currently have.

**Parent:**

What is the breakdown of the city's budget for schools versus everything else?

**School Committee Representative:**

Approximately 60% of the city budget goes to schools and 40% goes to the city side, which includes important things like sewer, trash, sidewalks, fire and police.

**PTSO Representative:**

Will the additional tax revenues from the development at The Street in Chestnut Hill and Chestnut Hill Square benefit Newton, or is that in Brookline?

**School Committee Representative:**

The revenue from Chestnut Hill Square will benefit Newton. It's all been taken into consideration.

**Newton South Principal:**

Newton South was able to hire more teachers this year, but that extra staffing was immediately offset by the larger enrollment. I feel we are at the edge of being able to meet the needs of all of our students.

For example, one of our special programs in which approximately 400 of our students participate, known as Modern Global, is capped at 22 students per class. This is because each class contains three different levels of students, which requires a tremendous amount of differentiation by the teacher. Such differentiation is not possible beyond that number of students.

However, that forces other classes that are not part of the Global curriculum to have class sizes of 25 - 29. It is not equitable for a school to have classes of 22 for some students and classes of 29 for others.

Right now, we are putting together two budgets: one if the override passes and one if it fails. These will be ready in March before the override vote. Without trying to scare anyone, the budget if the override fails is quite austere. We won't have the resources to provide education for all needs in these larger classes.

**Parent:**

It feels like the NPS system wants to do everything for every body. For example, the course catalogue at South is extensive and reads like a college course catalogue. Isn't it time to narrow our focus? Shouldn't we be separating what is nice from what is extra?

For example, years ago the School Committee decided not to pay for substitute teachers at the high school level. In my experience, this had led to a huge waste of time for students, in that they have multiple classes canceled every week, and some times every day.

We should address more than just the minimal needs of our students.

**NPS Representative:**

That is the kind of questioning that we do every year. We ask ourselves, "What are the trade-offs? And how are we going to make them?"

The feedback we've gotten when we've asked those questions has been that Newton wants a program rich in arts, with an emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), as well as career and technical training.

**School Committee Representative to Parent:**

If we had all the money in the world, would you want us to expand?

**Parent:**

Regardless of the resources, it's not possible to do everything for everybody. Shouldn't our first mission be to make sure all of our students can do the basic things well, so they can go out into society and be productive citizens?

**School Council Representative:**

I am a dean at Tufts University, and in my experience the reason that education is so expensive is that unlike T-shirts sold at Target its production cannot be outsourced overseas to save costs. You have to have teachers, who have to have a livable wage, who have work in decent buildings, which have to be heated. Those are things that we cannot escape; that is what much of the budget pays for.

In addition, there is an increasing demand for mental health services at universities, in part because the students feel tremendous pressure to perform in light of how much their parents are paying for college. They are also exhausted from trying to overachieve in academic courses in high school. One way to combat that is to have breadth of programming in high school, allowing students to explore their interests in an academic setting and to find something they genuinely love to do. Letting kids find that one course that makes them happy is a mechanism of coping with all the stress they have to deal with. It's the electives that make their day, give them positive energy and drive to persevere.

**School Committee Representative:**

When it comes time to create a budget each year, the School Committee sets guidelines and the educators ask for programs. Over the years, we've seen that the community screams if we try to shrink the programs, and then of course we have a legal requirement to meet the needs of special education students.

**NPS Representative:**

It was a major change to our high school offerings, when we decided in recent years that we would not be able to offer certain courses unless a significant cohort of students sign up for them. For example, AP Music Theory is now only offered every other year, when enough students can be amassed to make it financially worthwhile to have the class.

**Newton South Principal:**

Sometimes things don't always play out the way you expect them to. For example, a couple of years ago we had 2.0 faculty for a particular technical class, and budget cuts required that one of those positions be cut to a .6 position. However, that teacher was unable to stay for only a .6 position, so they left, and instead of going from 2.0 tech teachers to 1.6 as planned, we went from 2.0 to 1.0. That was a bigger drop than intended but shows you what happens in the real world and now there is a greater demand, but not enough resource.

When I was a principal at one of the exam schools at Boston, I would be routinely frustrated by the lack of resources, which ultimately prevented students from

reaching their full potential. One of the truly special things about NPS is the commitment to educate ALL students, which everyone takes very seriously.

**Parent:**

But do we deliver excellence for all students?

**Newton South Principal:**

No - not yet. We do a great job for the kids who do school well, but not so much the ones in the middle or the ones facing societal issues. The good thing in Newton is that at least we are willing to talk about these issues here.

The challenge is we don't really know how much the breadth of programming really costs us. For example, we work very hard to keep our class sizes for Curriculum 2 classes down to 17, but that is expensive. But if we don't keep them that small, then we are really doing a disservice to our students, because that is what they need.

There may be a community perception that NPS is over the top, but the truth is that there have been so many cuts year after year, that every day we are scratching and clawing to find ways to meet all the kids needs. Our budget reality is that we are on the edge of going from having an excellent school, to having a merely good one. So in the interim, we are trying to leverage staff efforts to help those kids who need us the most.

**School Council Representative:**

What I find frustrating is that we are struggling to pass this override and raise this money, but in the end, the money will not make the schools better, it will simply prevent them from declining significantly.

**School Committee Representatives:**

Exactly. Due to the surge in student enrollment, we have to pay more just so things don't get worse. Two years ago we had a \$4 million gap in our budget and that's when we instituted fees to help us raise \$1 million to help cover that gap.

**PTSO Representative:**

And could you please elaborate on how that went? In the first year of the fee collection, many parents did not understand how the fees worked and either chose not to pay or didn't know they should pay or were unable to pay. Those that did pay felt taken for granted.

**School Committee representative:**

Yes, this year we have a much better system in place to collect the fees and track who still needs to pay.

**NPS Representative:**

And we did get some pushback from a group of students who came to present at a School Committee meeting and let us know that they were very concerned about the fees, that it prevented some of their friends from signing up for activities, among other issues.

**PTSO Representative:**

That is an important point. I hope there are policies in place to make sure students who can't afford the fees can still participate, because this goes back to what we said earlier about student mental health, and how being part of something they love can help students deal with all the stress of all the classes they are required to do.

**Newton South Principal:**

Yes, the students were especially concerned when it came to social action activities. They felt they shouldn't have to pay a fee to be part of club to fundraise for a cause. They would much rather pay that fee directly to the charity. They mentioned that they might be tempted to take the social action work off school campus to avoid the fee, but that has its own problems, such as limiting access for all students, etc.

**School Committee Representative:**

Thank you everyone for coming and for this excellent discussion. Please know that everyone on the School Committee is local and don't feel you have to wait until something is a big issue before you contact us. Please feel free to pick up the phone and call us and tell us what's on your mind at any time.

*Notes taken by [Lori Lass](#), PTSO Co-President*