

MINUTES OF THE 4J BUDGET COMMITTEE

School District 4J, Lane County, Oregon

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

February 28, 2022

6:00 p.m.

PRESENT: Josh Burstein, Chair; Dakota Boulette, Gary Campbell, Tom Di Liberto, Anne Fifield, Ericka Thessen, Juan Carlos Valle, Appointed Committee members; Alicia Hays, Loral O'Rourke, Judy Newman, Gordon Lafer, Maya Rabasa, Mary Walston, Board Committee members; Cydney Vandercar, Andrea Belz, Brook Wager, Kerry Delf, staff.

I. Call to Order and Roll Call

Mr. Burstein called the 4J Budget Committee to order and called the roll. A quorum was established.

II. Agenda Review

Mr. Burstein reviewed the agenda.

Mr. Valle asked that the agenda include requests for information from committee members under V.a. Items Raised By Committee Members. There were no objections.

Ms. Hays and Ms. Newman announced they would need to leave the meeting at 7:30 p.m.

III. Items Raised by the Audience

Mr. Burstein reviewed procedures for providing testimony and invited comments from the audience.

Chelsea Hardrath spoke to the need for certified teacher libraries and equitable funding and support for all schools and Oregon Battle of the Books (OBOB). She described her experiences volunteering in libraries at her children's schools for several years. She said libraries had large inventories of assets that were not being managed and urged the District to determine if the budget could support teacher librarians. She noted that other District assets, like its school buses, were not managed by parent volunteers. A certified teacher librarian at all schools would support teachers. She encouraged the District to inspect school libraries and see the vast differences among schools. She would email additional comments to Budget Committee members.

Danielle Bowerman said her story was similar to Ms. Hardrath's as she had also volunteered in different school libraries. She concurred with remarks about the differences in student access and how libraries were operated, and stressed the positive impact on teachers and students of having full-time library staff. She asked that librarians be a priority, particularly in elementary schools, if there were funds available. She also hoped the District would continue with paid lunches for all students, as well as breakfasts, although lunch was preferred if both could not be supported. She suggested that an acoustic engineer review how baffle panels could be used to reduce echoing to improve students' mealtime experience.

Sheila Waggoner, OSEA Eugene Chapter 1 president, said that classified employees were the most unnoticed staff that supported District operations. She explained the roles of classified employees such as bus drivers, food service workers, custodians, grounds workers and clerical and technology staff and their contributions to the educational environment.

Katherine Tagwerker said she had been employed by the District as a "lunch lady" for 34 years, a job she loved. She said it was important to provide children who might not otherwise receive it with good nutrition at school. She said food service employees continued to work in the cafeterias throughout the District during the pandemic. She said the District was short on food service employees in the fall of 2021, several kitchens were closed and food had to be brought in from other schools. There was still a staff shortage and it was difficult to find staff with the wages being offered, which were lower than wages at fast food businesses. She urged the District to review the salary schedule and longevity policy.

Melanie Namkoong, OSEA Eugene Chapter 1 member, spoke to Goal 5, Stable, Sustainable Stewardship. She said that if it was only viewed as bottom line financial stability the human investment would be lost. Many classified staff had left during the past two years because of the difficulty of the working environment and many changes in their job assignments. Many found better opportunities in neighboring districts. She said the loss of skilled knowledgeable personnel had left the District understaffed. The proposed budget appeared to anticipate some enrollment increase and an increase in teaching staff by 1.6-1.8 percent each year, but a drop in classified employees. She explained the challenges classified staff encountered when there were not enough employees and said the appropriate environment for staff and students could not be provided at schools.

Ms. Walston applauded the work of nutrition service employees. She recently volunteered at Adams Elementary School and appreciated their contributions as public employees.

Mr. Burstein disclosed that he was employed by Lane Council of Governments (LCOG) and Eugene School District 4J was a member and represented on LCOG's Board. His work at LCOG was separate from and not influenced by his participation on the Budget Committee.

Mr. Valle disclosed that he was employed by the federal government. He asked if the District had ever had all library positions filled in all schools. He also asked about staff attrition over the past five years and particularly the past two years for classified employees and teachers and how that affected the budget. He was pleased that people were providing the committee with stories about the work of District employees and volunteers.

Ms. Thessen thanked the speakers and concurred that the need for certified librarians had been under discussion for some time and needed to be addressed. She listed the ways in which certified librarians provided essential assistance to students. She also agreed that free meals at schools were life-changing for many students and efforts to reduce noise in cafeterias would be very beneficial to students who were neurodivergent.

Mr. Burstein reminded people that other options for providing feedback to the Budget Committee were through the 4J website, contacting the superintendent's office and submitting public comment.

IV. Items for Information

1. Financial Update

Ms. Belz provided the financial update. She noted that some areas of the 5-year forecast were still unknown at the committee's January 24, 2022, meeting. She said the initial understanding that a six percent increase in the 2023-25 and 2025-27 biennium was conservative, it now appeared that could be an optimistic viewpoint. The legislature could direct additional revenues to other areas that were in desperate need of funding. Staff would continue to monitor the issue closely. She said a three percentage point increase in the PERS rate going into the 2023-25 biennium was estimated in the initial forecast in January, based on preliminary reports from PERS. Since that time PERS investment returns were well above projections and a rate (increase) of one percent in 2023-24 was more likely. She said a tentative agreement had been reached with licensed employees and that contained a four percent COLA for the current year and the next two years. She said an equivalent value would be provided to other employee groups. She said approximately \$2.9 million of the PERS reserve would remain at the end of the 5-year forecast and a full five percent in the ending fund balance, equal to about one month's payroll.

2. Budget Committee Discussion

Mr. Lafer said the Oregon School Board Association (OSBA) released a statement that legislative leadership had decided to add \$275 million to k-12 funding, mostly for summer programs and staff recruitment and retention. He asked how much of that amount the District might receive. Ms. Belz said the District estimated it would receive about the same amount of funding for summer programs that it had last year, with a match requirement that could be met with carry over Student Investment Account (SIA) funding and other sources. She said there would likely be a child care component. She noted that there had not been sufficient time for districts to plan for and spend all of the funds available last year and the legislature would try to make those funds available earlier this year. She said discussions were underway on options for allocation and use of retention funding.

Ms. Fifield asked if there was concern about a reduction in the ending fund balance and the impact reserves had on the District's ability to bond. Ms. Belz said it was important to ensure sufficient reserves to cover basic needs and avoid impacting the District's bond rating. As long as reserves did not drop below the Board's mandated five percent minimum she was not concerned.

3. Review Statutory Responsibilities of the Budget Committee

Ms. Belz summarized the following responsibilities of the Budget Committee:

- conduct at least one meeting where the proposed budget was presented
 - the proposed budget must be balanced
 - program budget detail report must be included
 - the Superintendent's Message must be included
- public testimony must be requested at the meeting
- budget appropriations (General Fund and other funds) and tax levies and rates must be forwarded to the Board for action in June

4. Discuss Community Engagement in Developing Spending Plans

Ms. Belz said that previous budget committees had frequently expressed concern that they were not a part of budget development and could not assure that the community's voices, as represented by committee members and through public feedback, were being heard. She asked for the committee's assistance in looking to the future and helping the District implement a new directive from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) entitled Aligning for Student Success -

Integrated Guidance for Six ODE Initiatives. She described the six initiatives, their common elements and associated goals:

1. High School Success
2. Student Investment Account
3. Continuous Improvement Planning
4. Career and Technical Education
5. Every Day Matters
6. Early Indicator and Intervention Systems

Ms. Belz said the document would be distributed to committee members. The intent was to create a new process which had the common elements of consistent engagement across all initiatives, an equity-based decision process, a focus on students historically marginalized by the education system, completing a comprehensive needs assessment for the area, and a continuous improvement cycle.

Mr. Valle asked if the initiatives were in priority order, what baseline tool would be used and how/when they could be refined to reflect the community. He also asked if progress would be measured by specific years or on an ongoing basis. Ms. Belz replied there was no order of priority among initiatives. She said ODE would be providing training in the spring on initiating the various processes within the directive.

Speaking as an individual Board member, Ms. Rabasa agreed the process should be implemented using an equity tool and the committee's interest would provide leverage to assure that happened and hold the District accountable.

Ms. Vandercar said obtaining information from the public on spending priorities would include an equity lens in the questions. She said for example, questions about funding for library and food service staff could also address which item would help the most students and responses could help inform budget decisions. She said the Board would determine the approach to be taken during community engagement.

Ms. Rabasa said the Equity Committee was close to being finalized and that was a subject that the previous committee had discussed. She asked if ODE had incorporated direction to districts about formation of equity committees and use of equity tools. Ms. Belz said ODE provided an equity tool, but also gave districts the option of using its own tool.

Mr. Di Liberto cautioned the District not to wait for guidance from ODE because it already possessed expertise within its system to begin the job of better community engagement.

Ms. Newman commented that she was pleased to see all six funding streams brought together in a way that would help the District focus clearly and utilize funds more efficiently.

Mr. Burstein reflected on Budget Committee discussions in previous years about a needs assessment and ways to assure funds could be directed towards the greatest needs. He commended ODE for the guidance. Regarding public engagement, he said the District needed to hear from students and others whose voices were not heard at meetings. Many people did not have access because of lack of time or technology.

Mr. Valle said it was important to bring in stories from the community. He was pleased an equity tool was being developed and said it should be updated at least every three years. He hoped to see all six initiatives funded. Regarding community engagement, he urged the District to go to the people instead of expecting them to come to the District.

Ms. O'Rourke arrived at 7:12 p.m.

Ms. Belz reviewed a 12-step summary of the planning and application process and timeline and said the District was already beginning the process and the application was due in March 2023. Funding estimates would be used until final figures were available at the conclusion of the legislation session. She encouraged committee members to read Appendix A: Community Engagement Toolkit to prepare for its March 14 meeting. Members of the committee noted the statement "the right people" as problematic (slide 13 showing page 11 from the ODE Aligning for Student Success document), as not inclusive and historically indicates a wish to omit certain groups or viewpoints. Ms. Vandercar said she would ask ODE to change that language.

Mr. Lafer said librarians were critical to helping students like reading and encouraging them to read materials outside of those they were required to read. He said 4J used to have librarians in every school and the last elementary school librarian left in 2010. There were currently no librarians assigned to elementary or middle schools. He proposed that the District try to find funds for a five-year pilot program to place librarians at three elementary schools with the greatest need as determined by senior staff. He would like to see that program considered in the budget being considered to the next school year. He asked that staff provide information on the cost of such a program and how that would impact other areas of the budget.

Mr. Valle said community engagement in the 1990s typically involved talking to one person representative of a community. That was slowly changing by bringing in stakeholders with an interest in improving education for the District's students. He said communities across the state were all interested in education, but populations and demographics were different. He said community engagement should not consist only of testimony from the public as many people would not connect in that way, although they had things to say. The District should be willing to reach out to different communities and secure participation in different ways.

Ms. Thessen agreed with Mr. Valle on the need in providing input on the budget more accessible, such as an online survey, text and email. She supported the proposal to get librarians back in elementary and middle schools.

Mr. Burstein noted staff could provide cost estimates on proposals such as placing librarians in three elementary schools.

Mr. Di Liberto said in his experience librarians were a huge asset to students in promoting enthusiasm for reading and providing guidance on reading materials, and in developing researching skills. He supported efforts to put more librarians in schools. He was pleased with improvements in the District's engagement with the Spanish-speaking community, but improvements could still be made in gathering input. There was staff in the District's buildings and in the community who could assist in that effort.

Mr. Burstein said the committee's role was to represent the community and identify needs during the planning process. Local values and priorities should be addressed along with ODE guidelines.

Mr. Valle supported Mr. Lafer's proposal to fund a pilot program to place librarians in some elementary schools and hoped the committee could make that happen. He asked staff to provide information about how that could happen. He stressed the importance of an equity lens to view the system from that perspective, including looking at issues such as language barriers and bilingual/bicultural librarians.

Mr. Burstein stressed the importance of the committee's discussions about what was best for the District's children. He said the budget was a moral document and would benefit from the committee's candid conversations and different perspectives. He appreciated the contributions of each committee member.

5. Review Upcoming Budget Committee Meeting Schedule

Mr. Burstein reviewed the schedule for remaining committee meetings and determined there was consensus to allot 90 minutes for each meeting.

Ms. Belz asked that committee members review the ODE guidance section on community engagement and be prepared to discuss how the District could make that process efficient and effective and unique to 4J. She also asked for suggestions on ways to reach people that had not been engaged in previous budget cycles in order to achieve the best outcomes. Information on other parts of the budget would be presented at the March 28 meeting. The 2022-23 Superintendent's proposed budget would be presented at the April 25 meeting.

V. Budget Committee Wrap-up

a. Items Raised by Committee Members

Ms. Rabasa asked how Budget Committee agendas were established and when discussions about issues such as librarians and other priorities would occur. Mr. Burstein said he met with Ms. Vandercar to represent the committee's interests and develop meeting agendas. He also discussed agendas with Mr. Valle. He invited input from all committee members on agenda topics.

b. Items for Next Meeting

Ms. Vandercar asked committee members to let staff know if there were discussion items they wanted to add to an agenda. She said committee members could email their requests to Mr. Burstein or to her.

Ms. O'Rourke suggested emailing the committee chair and vice chair, along with Ms. Newman and Ms. Vandercar with agenda item requests.

Ms. Vandercar clarified that there should be no email discussions among committee members about agenda items to avoid violations of Oregon's public meeting laws. Mr. Burstein indicated he was comfortable with Ms. O'Rourke's proposal. He determined there was consensus among members to provide agenda requests as described.

VII. Adjourn

Mr. Burstein thanked everyone for their participation in the budget process and adjourned the meeting at 7:59 p.m.

(Recorded by Lynn Taylor)