

Benton School District Meeting - 2021

School Warrant State of New Hampshire June 8, 2021 (Postponed from March 9, 2021)

The meeting opened at 7:04 PM.

Article 1

To choose a Moderator for the ensuing year.

Gilbert W. Richardson was elected by voice vote.

Article 2

To choose a School Clerk for the ensuing year.

Michael P. Stiebitz was elected by voice vote.

Article 3

To choose one School Board Member for a term of three years expiring in 2023.

Two candidates, Dwight Swauger and incumbent Kristina Harris were nominated and ballot slips were handed out. The tally went in favor of Kris Harris.

Kris Harris was then declared the winner.

Article 4

To choose a Treasurer for the ensuing year.

It was stated that Penny Chicoine would like to step down, but in the absence of any other candidate, she would accept the position.

Discussion centered around finding someone during her upcoming term who would be willing to take over for her.

Penny Chicoine was elected by voice vote.

Article 5

To hear reports of Agents, Committees, or Officers chosen and pass any vote relating thereto.

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Motion made to accept article as written, seconded.

Discussion ensued, with a suggestion by Sam Gregory that we as a town would be better off purchasing a house in Woodsville for our \$680K school bill, and housing our kids down there.

He also asked a question regarding free lunches which were supplied to families with children during the learn at home phases of the pandemic.

Laurie Melanson, Superintendent of SAU 23, explained that forms were distributed to all school children which, when filled out by the parents and returned to the SAU, allowed boxed lunches to be delivered to various drop-off locations within the district's towns.

The article then passed unanimously on voice vote.

Article 6

To see if the school district will vote to raise and appropriate Six Hundred Eighty Thousand, Ninety-Eight Dollars (\$680,098.00) for the support of schools, the payment of salaries of school district officials and agents, and the payments of statutory obligations of the district. This article is exclusive of any other article on the warrant. (The school board recommends this article.)

Motion to accept article as written, seconded.

A question was raised concerning the roughly \$20K per student fee and whether that was comparable to other districts within the State. Superintendent Laurie Melanson responded that it was, but that it represented tuition, transportation and Special Education charges. She pointed out that Special Ed and transportation were not scalable, that is, whether you have two kids on a bus or a full bus, the transportation charge is the same.

The article then passed unanimously.

Article 7

To see if the district will raise and appropriate up to the sum of Fifty Thousand dollars (\$50,000.00) to be added to the previously established Tuition and Education Expendable Trust Fund. This sum to come from the June 30, 2021 fund balance available for transfer on July 1, 2021 in excess of \$55,000. (The first \$55,000.00 of the June 30, 2021 unassigned fund balance will be used to reduce the school tax rate in 2021). No amount to be raised from taxation. (The school board recommends this article).

Motion to accept article as written, motion made to amend, motion to amend was accepted and the following amended article was proposed by Selectboard Chairman William Darcy:

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To see if the district will raise and appropriate up to the sum of Fifty Thousand dollars (\$50,000.00) to be added to the previously established Tuition and Education Expendable Trust Fund. This sum to come from the June 30, 2021 fund balance available for transfer on July 1, 2021 in excess of \$70,000. (The first \$70,000.00 of the June 30, 2021 unassigned fund balance will be used to reduce the school tax rate in 2021). No amount to be raised from taxation.

Amended article was seconded and discussion ensued.

Bill Darcy explained that owing to a ruling by the DRA last year misinterpreting the vote of the Town Meeting, Benton had to appropriate \$65,000 of the Town's unassigned fund balance to keep the tax rate below \$18.00.

Since the SAU has forecast an \$85,000 surplus for the end of this school year, the tax rate can be kept stable by devoting the first \$70,000 of the surplus for tax reduction.

Laura Richardson, Chair of the Trustee of the Trust Funds, felt that the current level in the Trust Fund of \$188K is a good cushion, although she believed that it might not be legal to increase the amount in the article. Bill stated that it was legal.

Laurie Melanson weighed in that since it was so close to the end of the school year, the likelihood of the surplus changing radically was slight. That is one advantage of having the Town Meeting in June. She stated that she would check with the DRA the next day and verify the legality of the amendment.

Note: Town Clerk verified with SAU 23 Business Manager Kathryn Ducharme later in the week that the proposed amendment was indeed legal.)

The article then was passed unanimously by voice vote.

Article 8

To see if the school district will vote to authorize, indefinitely until rescinded, to retain year-end unassigned general funds in an amount not to exceed, in any fiscal year, five percent (5%) of the current fiscal year's net assessment, in accordance with RSA 198:4-b, II. (Majority vote required)

Motion made to accept article as written, seconded.

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Bill Darcy stated his opposition to increasing the amount which can be retained. He said that at the current budget level, allowing the extra 2.5% to be withheld from being returned to the Town would result in an approximate \$1 per thousand increase in the Town tax rate. Since there is a Trust Fund from which necessary amounts can be withdrawn it doesn't make sense to authorize this statutory increase.

School Board Chairman Joe Boutin III pointed out that the local School Board would make the choice as to the amount of the surplus to be retained, and that their meetings are open to the public. It turns out that in the last 5 years, this provision has never been required or authorized by the School Board, even at the 2.5% level.

The article was then denied by unanimous voice vote.

Article 9

Shall the Benton School District accept the provisions of RSA 198:20-b providing that any school district at an annual meeting may adopt an article authorizing indefinitely, until specific rescission of such authority, the school board to apply for, accept and expend, without further action by the school district, unanticipated money from a state, federal or other governmental unit or a private source which becomes available during the fiscal year? (Majority vote required)

Motion made to accept article as written, seconded.

SAU 23 Superintendent Laurie Melanson explained that for some reason this provision had never been formally approved by the voters. She pointed out that due to the pandemic, a lot of Federal as well as State funds have become available and this provision must be in place in order to accept them.

The article then was passed unanimously by voice vote.

Motion was made to close the meeting and the meeting adjourned at 7:51PM.

A true copy

Attest:

Michael P. Stiebitz 4/22/2021
Michael P. Stiebitz

Michael P. Stiebitz - Benton School District Clerk - Benton, New Hampshire