

February 26: (300) Schools

The Selectboards and Finance Committees of Montague and Gill will hold a combined meeting on Feb 26 at Montague Town Hall to hear from the Gill-Montague Regional School District (GMRSD) and the Franklin County Regional Technical School (FCTS). I have attached a draft agenda for the Montague boards' meetings, which will be posted soon. (The meeting is already posted on Gill's website, here: <https://gillmass.org/d/10202>Selectboard-and-Finance-Committee-Meeting>.)

Please note that:

- The committee members and town administrators have already familiarized themselves with the districts' FY2021 operating budget proposals via the materials provided for their public hearings earlier this month.
- For each of the districts, the total dollar amount and share of the assessment for each town is calculated according to an established formula. The agreement with the GMRSD centers on a commitment to share available revenue sources in a predictable and consistent way, whereas the FCTS assessment calculation hinges on resident student enrollment.
- The School Committees and administrations of the districts are responsible for determining the use of the local and state funds received by their district. However, as municipal leaders of the member towns, it is our responsibility is to understand the school districts' budget proposals and the assumptions underlying them, and to offer observations and critique that might influence the districts' planning efforts.

So, based on the materials GMRSD and FCTS have offered us ... and anticipating the questions that may arise at our Annual Town Meetings, here are some of the topics we hope you will address in your presentation, and/or with a written response. (We clearly have more questions than will be possible to address in the time we have available on February 26th, but we sincerely hope to work with you to find ways to address all of them.)

GMRSD

1. We clearly are in a declining market: over 14 years Foundation Enrollment has dropped about 14%, but the District Enrollment has dropped 24%. TFHS enrollment has dropped 50%. So one might conclude that we are holding K-8 better than 9-12, but what additional information and patterns are evident in enrollment data? For example, to what extent, if any, have total enrollment levels changed by building (Hillcrest, Sheffield, GFMS, TFHS) from last year to the current one? What have we learned about where students go when they leave GMRSD schools? What do we know about their reasons for doing so?
2. What steps has the district taken to retain or recruit resident students? Can you offer any evidence of progress? What do you recommend for next steps? What programmatic

enhancements or other proactive measures are being implemented to address enrollment losses at the high school level, in particular? Please identify where we can see these investments in the proposed budget.

3. The combination of a higher Affordable Assessment from Montague and Gill and the recovery of Ch. 70 aid has been matched by program enhancements and “instructional & support services” spending — implying that there is a backlog of unmet program needs. Will the addition of 9 FTE heads be a one-time jump or will there likely be more in the future?
4. Another negative factor in the budget is the reduction in contribution from Revolving Funds and Medicaid, both explained in your presentation. Is this likely to continue or is it a one-year phenomenon?
5. Recovery of Charter Reimbursement; is any of that a formula change (that will continue) or is it primarily the effect of climbing Charter-Out activity?
6. The E & D appropriation is flat to FY20; I assume this is "conservative fund-building;" what is your long-term expectation?
7. This is a bit far-out; are you aware of any effect of Equalized Valuation or population changes, over the last year or two, on Minimum Contribution for Montague?
8. School choice and FCTS enrollment are factors affecting TFHS enrollment, but how does early college high school programming with GCC affect the number of students who are actually in the building, taking classes, on a given day? Are any of the early college programs being taught in the building?
9. What forecast can you provide vis a vis future foundation and attending enrollment? What do you estimate to be a realistic number of students that we might aspire to have attending GMRSD schools at each level? What percentage of those students might we reasonable expect will be resident students from Gill and Montague?
10. We understand that the relationship between enrollment and staffing is not necessarily linear. However, at some point the need for certain types of staff in certain categories may be assumed to decline. Is this true and, if so, where can we see these adjustments in the proposed budget?
11. GMRSD has submitted an extensive list of special article requests for FY21 and reported on a great deal of work on projects funded with past special articles. What is your proposed timeline for developing the 15 year capital plan you’ve proposed? What is your current thinking about the district’s capacity to implement such a plan – in terms of staffing and of resources? When might the district be in a position to incorporate more

of its routine maintenance and equipment repair/replacement costs into its operating budget?

12. Last year at Montague Annual Town Meeting there were many questions raised about the role, duties and performance of the School Resource Officer, and some Town Meeting members expressed dissatisfaction with the district's responses at the time. What has happened since then? Also, last year we were under the mistaken impression that the GMRSD would reimburse Montague for a percentage of the assigned officer's salary, but now we have been informed that the district's "reimbursement" is actually a flat rate fee of \$52,250. What is the basis for this amount, and when might it be renegotiated?
13. Last year the district was the focus of complaints, criticism and scrutiny related to a range of so-called "equity" issues, including reports about harassment, bullying, discrimination, and inconsistent disciplinary practices. What has been done to address this and to repair the harm done? Can you provide evidence of progress or change?
14. What recent success has the district had in collaborating or sharing services with neighboring schools or districts? What hasn't worked? What have you learned about the barriers to this sort of collaboration?

FCTS

1. What is FCTS' enrollment capacity and has it changed in recent years? We know that the school has expanded its student body and staff, most notably by adding a Vet Sciences program last year, and it has been reported that you are planning to add another program soon. What are your projections and targets for continued growth?
2. How does the number of 'available seats' at FCTS compare to your analysis of the number of 'available 8th grade students' in each of the 19 member towns? (It would be helpful if you could present enrollment data in a table format that groups together the sending towns for regional school districts.)
3. Please provide current enrollment broken out by grade level – total #, and actual #s for Montague, for Gill, and for Erving.
4. What are your thoughts on why Montague's enrollment has nearly doubled in three years, whereas Greenfield and Orange are steady to falling (p. 7)?
5. Please describe the application process and timeline for applying to FCTS. When are the seats that comprise each member town's quota released, and what is the procedure for determining how they are filled?

6. Please provide a table view of each member communities enrollment entitlement (quota) versus actual enrollment for the current school year.
7. Please describe your recruiting efforts and events in each district and or member community. To the extent recruitment activities/events are standardized, please tell us the number of comparable events by district, and otherwise describe the level of cooperation you receive from each district. Since Montague's enrollment has grown considerably relative to other communities, what plans do you have to strengthen recruiting efforts in those other districts?
8. It is good that the school is pretty fully enrolled. Do you keep a waiting list and fill vacancies created by attrition from that list? How much turnover is there? What do you about why students leave the Tech School? How many Montague resident students have been directed to leave the school subsequent to the October 1 census in each of the past three school years?
9. What led FCTS to start an Asset Acquisition/ Capital Stabilization account right after they incurred Long Term Debt (p. 23)?
10. Do you have a long-range financial plan and a capital plan? Are these plans available to the public?
11. What is happening with Non-Member Tuition — is this a long-term trend or a short-term anomaly (p. 4)?
12. The E & D appropriation is quite a jump from FY20 (p. 4); I assume this cannot continue in the future, so what is his long-term expectation? Does this indicate a jump in the total budget in FY22?
13. This is a bit far-out; are you aware of any effect of Equalized Valuation or population changes, over the last year or two, on Minimum Contribution or Capital Assessment to Montague?
14. Our understanding had been that FCTS reimburses the Town of Montague for 100% of the cost of its SRO, but we have been informed that the calculation is now based on the lowest-paid officer's salary, and for FY21 is budgeted at \$50,000 – that is significantly less than what the officer assigned to the school is actually paid, and considerably less than the total cost of the employing the officer whose wage is lowest. Why? When might this arrangement be renegotiated?
15. What recent success has the district had in collaborating or sharing services with neighboring schools or districts? What hasn't worked? What have you learned about the barriers to this sort of collaboration?

16. As of FY20, Montague is sending more students to FCTS than Greenfield, but the district agreement sets our town's representation on the School Committee at 2 members, while Greenfield has 4. What is the process for addressing this? Are there other elements of the district agreement that are due for revision?