

**CITY OF BERLIN**

New Hampshire

**Minutes of Council School Budget Session of 3/11/2024**

**City Hall Council Chambers**

**6:30 pm**

**Members:**

Mayor Cone  
Councilor Morency  
Councilor Korzen  
Councilor Higbee  
Councilor Qualls  
Councilor Theberge  
Councilor Valerino

**City Staff:**

Phillip Warren, Jr, City Manager  
Holly Larsen, Finance Director  
Shelli Fortin, City Clerk

**School Board, Administration and Staff:**

Superintendent Julie King  
Business Administrator Marion Moore  
School Board Member Matt Buteau  
School Board Chair Ann Nolin  
School Board Member Nathan Morin  
School Board Member Mark Evans  
Tammy Fauteux, Principal, BES  
Jesse Arsenault, Assistant Principal, BHS  
Brian Lamirande, Building and Grounds Director  
Danielle Demers, CTE Director  
Andy Rancloes, Principal, BHS  
Cynthia Pike, Assistant Principal, BES  
Sandy Pouliot, Assistant Principal, BES  
Anthony Valliere, Assistant Principal, BMS  
Jason Hook, Special Education Director

Lisa Connell, Berlin Daily Sun

Jamie Welch

Other members of the public

At 6:30 p.m. Mayor Cone opened the meeting.

## **FY2025 Budget – Board of Education**

Superintendent King provided copies of the District Report Card, which focuses on areas for growth, and provides transparency for the public to see where they are at, what their strengths are, and what areas need improvement, such as test scores.

In reviewing the budget, Ms. King advised that they began working on the budget in October and it is fluid. The School Board was adamant that they present the budget with what the needs are, not a stripped-down version. It is a process, and from here, they can bring costs down as needed. Ms. King advised that they are always doing their best to minimize local spending, and in the last several years have given unexpended funds back to the City. They also try to maximize revenues with grant funds and Medicaid reimbursements.

Ms. King advised that enrollment is down again this year. Class sizes are consistent with state averages. Ms. King provided a list of the projected student placements for special education, along with the costs for these services. Councilor Morency asked why there were more students, but less cost in the projected budget for placements, and Ms. King advised that is due to the movement of students between facilities or due to state funding. Ms. King noted that court placements have a CAP of \$57,102.24, and the Special Education CAP is \$69,697.81. Councilor Korzen asked if the city was responsible up to that amount, and Ms. King advised that was correct. Ms. King noted that they try to keep students in-district by hiring additional staff for needs.

A table of tuition rates was provided, which are set by the state. Rates are up at each school, except for BHS. This is the rate paid by other communities sending students to Berlin, such as Milan and Dummer.

Ms. King advised that the legislature changed the formula for school funding from the state, and they are still waiting on these amounts. There are multiple bills pending for adequacy aid, so they may get more per pupil or they may get more in special education funding.

Ms. King provided a breakdown of the tax rate from 2002-2023, noting that you also need to consider the changes in property valuation.

Ms. King presented a comparison of the revenues and expenditures over the last sixteen years, showing the actual general fund expenditures as compared to the approved general fund budget.

In presenting the FY2025 budget, Ms. King noted that the biggest increases are in salaries and benefits. The school has over 230 employees, and the students need staff for direct instruction and support. The proposed salary increases for next year have increased by \$683,459. The not-to-exceed rate for health insurance is 14%, and the budget change for benefits is an increase of \$657,061. Contracted Services has increased 17.91%, and most of this is special education or social/emotional related services, along with mental health support. Overall the general fund request is \$23,181,678, which is an increase of \$1,660,941. The Bond Payment is the same as last year, and the Capital Improvement Request has increased. The total budget request, with the general fund and Capital Improvements, is \$24,050,941.

Ms. King advised this is not a level-funded budget, but a level-service budget. There are new positions which support services that they already offer, and these are needed based on student behaviors, including violent behaviors. They do have an opening for a second social worker, as well as a full-time position for Social/Emotional Learning. They are also budgeting for a Preschool teacher for the Mini-Mounties program, which has been a program aide in the past.

Councilor Theberge asked if a language teacher was needed for ESOL, and Ms. King advised they do not have a large enough need for someone at this point, and these services are contracted out.

Ms. King stated that the Student Support Center has been in place for ten years, and currently services grades K-2, 3-5, and 6-8, with no program at the high school. They are hoping to add the high school center. The Student Support Center is a place for students who have a difficult time with behavior in the classroom. It is staffed with a staff member who works on prevention with the student and teachers to improve behavior and increase learning. Councilor Theberge asked if there are 1:1 aides, and Ms. King advised most of the time there are. They also have full-time teachers and an aide in the Student Support Center. Councilor Theberge asked if there was a School Resource Officer, and Ms. King advised that Lt. Hollie Dube is the SRO, which is grant funded. Councilor Korzen asked about JAGS and Alternative Education, and Ms. King advised that the ELC has behavior specialists who work with students to transition them back to school. This was previously grant funded, however they do not want to discontinue the service, so now it will need to be funded locally.

Councilor Korzen asked about the increase in Security Services and Ms. King stated that this included an upgrade to door locks, and all classrooms at the elementary level have been done. They are also applying for a grant to add cameras and other safety features in the buildings.

In reviewing Capital Improvements, Ms. King advised that they are using the last of the ESSER funds. Boiler work is underway and new boilers will be installed this summer. The remaining funds will be used for HVAC work and the gymnasium at BMHS. Ms. King advised that it has been a challenge to line up engineers and contractors for work and the deadline for the ESSER funds is September 30, 2024. Councilor Theberge noted that contacting congressional representatives for assistance with the deadline may help.

Councilor Theberge asked if the school buses have the flashing LED lights that are now required, and Ms. King advised that they do.

Ms. King provided a history of the school budget from 2001-02 until now. Ms. King also provided a list of the items that the School Board has already reduced this year from the Administration Request.

Ms. King reviewed the 2024-2025 Estimated Revenues, which have increased by \$675,819. Food Service is a self-supporting program. Councilor Theberge asked about free and reduced lunch, and Ms. King advised that many children eat three meals a day at school. Councilor Theberge asked if they were still having the same issues getting parents to fill out the eligibility forms, and Ms. King advised that they did have to encourage families during Covid, however

most fill out the form now. Ms. King advised that the unpaid lunch bills are high, currently at \$15,000, which the General Fund has to cover. A meal must be provided, and students do not get turned away for the inability to pay. Students who leave for sports are provided a bag lunch.

Ms. King advised that they have applied for grants for solar panels and electric buses. They are waiting on a facilities assessment, which will assist with long range planning. The Joint Building Committee will review the report when it is received.

Ms. King noted that she would like to see a bus garage, as the cost to rent space for the buses is expensive, at \$36,000 annually. City Manager Warren advised there are no grants at this time for this purpose, and it is difficult to find contractors to design and build. Ms. King advised that they are fortunate to have the space they do, and that she has researched the going rate and the price they pay is very reasonable.

Ms. King advised they will be getting a new gym floor at BMHS, as it was damaged due to rain coming in during the roofing project, and the contractor's insurance company has determined that it needs to be replaced.

Councilor Theberge asked about FAFSA applications, and Ms. King advised that it is currently mandated that every senior must complete the application to graduate, whether attending college or not. If parents are unwilling to provide financial information, a waiver must be signed. Councilor Theberge asked about scholarships for students entering the trades, and Ms. King noted that \$195,550 in a variety of scholarship money is given to graduating seniors every year. The community is very generous.

Councilor Valerino noted that he believes the school does an excellent job. Councilor Morency noted that their jobs have changed, with rules and student needs, and the students would not have these services without the school. Ms. King noted that the staff is very dedicated and student need centered.

Councilor Theberge asked if the School Board considers the tax impact to the elderly when doing the budget and Ms. King advised that they have the taxpayer in mind in all they do. However, mandates have grown and there are more things that need to be provided in services and education to students. Ms. King stated that she was concerned about legislation that would remove Social Emotional Learning from the schools, and noted that some of the stories you hear from families would break your heart. Councilor Qualls asked if behavioral health should be included at the school from CCFHS or Mental Health. Ms. King noted that under the grant-funded Project Aware they did have this, but they do not have the grant or the staff available at this time. Marion Moore noted that many of the hourly staff at the school also have a hard time paying taxes, so the tax rate is something they take very seriously.

Councilor Theberge noted that with enrollment down, this is a time to consider merging the SAU's. Councilor Theberge stated that he had contacted a member of the GRS School Board, who said they were not interested; however it would benefit both communities. City Manager Warren noted that combining services between the communities should start on a smaller scale to foster relationships. Councilor Valerino noted that they had tried this with the Police Department

several years ago, however it never materialized. Ms. King noted that they continue to meet with the AVEC group, which includes SAU3, SAU20, and WMCC, to provide additional programs and opportunities for the students, such as attending classes that are not offered at another school, and sports opportunities such as the Berlin-Gorham Cycling Club.

School Board Chair Ann Nolin stated that she hopes the public understands that they work hard, that the budget is a fluid document, and that they have the taxpayers in mind.

Another review of the School Budget is planned for April 22, 2024.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:56 pm by general consensus.

Respectfully Submitted by Shelli Fortin

Note: Minutes are unofficial until they have been accepted by the Council by motion.