

School Committee February 2023 Community Update

2/28/2023

Dear Worthington community members,

The kids are home for a snow day (again!) as I write this, but the sap tanks are out along the roads and the sun's growing warmth is unmistakable when the icicles start to drip along the eaves in the afternoons. It must be... budget season!

In our March meeting the school committee will review the latest draft of the FY24 school budget in preparation to meet with the Finance Committee and Selectboard before Annual Town Meeting. We don't have any new or unusual expenses in this year's budget, though we are watching the cost of heating oil and electricity as closely as every household in Western MA has this winter.

In addition to managing our annual budget carefully, we are also thinking about the future, advocating for state legislation that will support rural school districts' financial bottom lines and working with the selectboard on long-range planning. In early February we invited our state representative, Lindsay Sabadosa, to visit Conwell when she was here to meet with the Selectboard. She assured us of her support for a bill that will provide state funding for permanent free school meals for public school students, and she seemed aware of and ready to address some of the other issues that have a big impact on small rural districts' costs – busing, heating and electricity, and special education costs. We will meet later this spring with Senator Paul Mark, who is one of the sponsors for the MA Senate bill for universal school meals and who is a strong advocate for rural communities.

The recent increase in electricity rates really underlines the importance of our work with Charley Rose on the selectboard to explore municipal solar power options that could save Worthington money. The comparatively small size of our town buildings and high costs of Eversource rates relative to other power companies make some of the solar options other rural towns have pursued unavailable to Worthington, but we'll keep working on it, and we've alerted state representatives to the problem. If any Worthington community members have "leads" on grants or assistance for municipal green power, we'd love your input. In the meantime, our school office and maintenance staff are making sure our energy use is as efficient as possible day-to-day and continue to assess whether it's more cost effective to invest in more efficient heating systems (not currently) or continue to maintain what we have (yes. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it.")

We will continue our ongoing work of "fine-tuning" the ways we function as a committee. One of our current projects is creating a document for the public and for future school committee members that outlines the role of the committee and how we conduct our responsibilities. We will complete that document in our March meeting.

In May we will say farewell to committee member Amanda Brooks-Clemen, who has served since the Worthington district was formed in 2015. We are so grateful to her for her commitment to equitable education and for her years of support and advocacy for the students, staff, and parents of Conwell. Thank you, Amanda.

As always, we encourage everyone in the community to get involved in the school and the school committee's activities. Come to events at Conwell, join us for committee meetings, call or email members with your questions, suggestions, and thoughts, and come to Annual Town Meeting to support ours and the other town departments' budgets.

Lastly, on this snowy day, thank you, too, to all of the other town departments that help support Conwell and keep the students and staff safe at school. We couldn't do it without the Highway Department's early morning and late night plowing, the police and fire departments' routine and emergency safety support, and the selectboard and finance committees and the town office's collaboration and support.

Warmly,
Alison Todd, Chair,
on behalf of the Worthington School Committee