

Oyster River Cooperative School Board
Public Hearings/Regular Meeting Minutes

January 14, 2026

DRAFT

SCHOOL BOARD PRESENT: Matthew Bacon, Heather Smith, Denise Day, Kelly Ickes, Giana Gelsey, Renee Bennett, **ABSENT:** Sean Harrison

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE: Elise Bacon

ADMINISTRATORS PRESENT: Dr. Shaps, Suzanne Filippone, Amy Ransom, Catherine Plourde, Dave Totty

STAFF PRESENT:

GUEST PRESENT:

I. CALLED TO ORDER at 7:00 PM by Chair Matt Bacon.

Ia. Public Bond Hearing – Warrant Article 3

Denise Day made a motion to open the Public Bond Hearing at 7:00 PM, 2nd by Renee Bennett. Motion passed 6-0.

Dr. Shaps summarized Warrant Article #3, the approval of the Elementary Expansion Projects, for a cost of \$9,827,000 to renovate and make expansions at each building. An evaluation of building conditions took place in the spring of 2024, and it was concluded that Mast Way should receive a cafeteria expansion for safety and Moharimet should receive additional classroom space for student learning.

PUBLIC COMMENTS – None provided.

Denise Day made a motion to close the Public Bond Hearing at 7:04 PM, 2nd by Heather Smith. Motion passed 6-0.

Ib. Public Budget Hearing – Warrant Articles 4 – 9

Kelly Ickes made a motion to open the Public Budget Hearing at 7:04 PM, 2nd by Denise Day. Motion passed 6-0.

Dr. Shaps stated Warrant Article #4 is for the approval of the Operating Budget at a cost of \$61,846,067. He said the budget hopes to represent what it accomplishes in the classroom and the experiences it provides for students in kindergarten through high school. Dr. Shaps highlighted academic statistics that speak to academic accomplishments including steady outcome of high school graduation rates, an increase of students in advance placement courses, the number of AP students scoring 3 or above, the number of students in college placement courses, the district's relationship with UNH Cats, and an increase in Career Technical Education programs and Extended Learning Opportunities. He said the multi-year trend of increased participation in programs of studies connects directly to the operating budget and the additional expenditures line. Also noted was the upward trend in student performance for SATs in math and reading/writing.

Regarding enrollment trends, Dr. Shaps said there have been short-term fluctuations in enrollment that in some ways align and diverge with projections. The K-4 elementary schools have maintained actual enrollment over the last two years due to the unexpected increase in this year's kindergarten cohort. Overall elementary projections in the coming years should maintain enrollment at the buildings. Over the last five-year period, large cohorts have traveled through grades 5-8 and periods of smaller kindergartens shifted the enrollment down with a 17% reduction at the middle school. The high school has seen a steady and stable enrollment of +/- 800 students partly from the tuition agreement with Barrington that allows for maintaining consistent enrollment. Dr. Shaps noted that in terms of enrollment by building, it's important to point out that the elementary schools were faced with space issues to accommodate this year's large kindergarten class and thirteen Moharimet students were shifted to Mast Way. This will be consistent in terms of elementary numbers moving forward with space pressures, all of which connect well to the expansion bond under Warrant Article 3. There are concerns over adequate space despite not knowing the upcoming kindergarten class size, although registration will begin soon. In terms of enrollment by town, Durham and Madbury have seen reductions while Lee has steadily increased. Across the district, enrollment will drop by 20 students for next year.

In terms of the operating budget, Dr. Shaps stated they must comply with state-mandated programs and services and provide those resources to meet them. Furthermore, there are expenditures for the required federal and state level staffing to meet those mandates. Dr. Shaps said the district also continues to adhere to school board guidelines to optimize learning with class size and favorable student-teacher ratios, which are a core value of our school system. The budget addresses a range of needs including safety, plant improvements, transportation services, and equipment to ensure a quality school year. The budget provides resources for the expansion of course offerings and sustaining a high quality of professional development. Dr. Shaps stated that the Board established several budget goals at the onset of budget discussions. These include identifying programs, services, and staffing priorities to maximize educational experiences; making connections in enrollment and staffing; and considering the budget impact on taxpayers of the community. Dr. Shaps recognized that there are on-going pressures of tax increases, and the Board was mindful about building a budget around that impact. Per state law, there are a number of program goals being implemented such as a K-6 English Language Arts program. The district is focused on strengthening K-8 mathematics and expanding course offerings by adding AP classes, Original Science Research, Statistics, and Data Literacy, some of which are new mandates by the state. It is also committed to implementing a Behavioral Health Intervention Risk Assessment as well as integrating AI tools in teaching and learning at all grade levels.

Dr. Shaps recognized that the Board made hard decisions to create a budget that maintains the ability to grow year to year. They reduced plant operations by \$505,000 in areas of repairs, HVAC replacement, and facilities improvements. They took note of changing enrollment and staffing and made a personnel reduction of \$519,000 for 2.0 FTEs, 1.0 Nurse, and 3.0 Academic Support Personnel. Drivers in the budget include the new guild agreement which was community supported; overall programming for unfunded state mandates including new 306s and a literacy program; installing GPS in all buses and new video and audio systems; continued replacement of fleet buses; plant operations in the form of roof restoration and replacement; floor repairs in the gym and halls; as well as IT services for data protection, AI tools, network systems, and software licenses.

Dr. Shaps reviewed estimated revenues, some of which include the fund balance, tuition from Barrington, and school nutrition. Uncertainty remains around federal grants as to whether the district will receive full, partial, or no funding. Dr. Shaps said most of the budget is tied to salaries and the district's dedication to staffing needs. Increases include new contractual agreements with administrators, the guild contract, and the tutor agreement, as well as considerable increases to employee health benefits. This year's budget is a 3.65% increase, which is slightly above the 3.44% - 3.45% average over the last 3 years. Dr. Shaps said this year's increase is consistent with capital improvement plans in our region, salaries, and the high impact of healthcare costs. If the proposed budget of \$61,846,067 does not pass, the default budget of \$60,463,382 will automatically become the budget of FY27. Dr. Shaps noted that the reduction of \$1, 382,085 to the operating budget would have direct impact on staffing and meeting state and federal mandates.

Warrant Article 5 is for the approval of the ORPaSS collective bargaining agreement for Paraeducators and Support Staff for \$543,972. It represents the additional costs attributable to the increases in salaries and benefits required by the new agreement.

Warrant Article 6 is for the approval of the ORESPA collective bargaining agreement for Educational Support Personnel for \$213,498. It represents the additional costs attributable to the increases in salaries and benefits by the new agreement.

Warrant Article 7 is for the approval to raise and appropriate \$125,000 to be added to the Facilities Development, Maintenance, and Replacement Expendable Trust Fund.

Warrant Article 8 is for the approval to raise and appropriate \$125,000 to be added to the Special Education Expendable Trust Fund.

Warrant Article 9 is for the approval to raise and appropriate \$0 for the school district students attending an open enrollment school/program outside of the Oyster River district.

A Petition Warrant Article, which falls under Special Warrant Articles, has been proposed to see if the district will vote to raise and appropriate \$50,000 for the purpose of hiring an independent auditing firm to conduct a performance audit of the school district administration.

There were no questions or comments from the Board.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Debbie Nichols of Durham has been an educator since 1980 and is still working in public schools. She has supported education in every Durham election since 1996 and considers herself pro education. Debbie is curious to know why the cuts proposed have a direct impact on students. She said small classroom sizes offer the best education, and she believes there is a need for extra teachers, social workers, therapists and counselors. Debbie said all the proposed cuts directly work with students and she wonders where the cuts are in the top heavy and highest salary administrators. Debbie does not want to pit one role against another or say administration is not valuable, but she needs to see reduction in central office staff and keep the proposed staff the way it is before supporting the budget. She felt our leaders need to be mindful of the extremely high taxes and said those working directly with children are a far better use of money. Debbie cannot support the budget without seeing equitable cuts at the top.

Colin Butler of Lee spoke on behalf of the growing number of residents that couldn't be in attendance tonight because of being elderly or disabled and having no way to participate in the meetings remotely or those working second jobs to pay the high property taxes. He said many of these people have lived in Durham, Lee, and Madbury their entire lives and are the ones who built the communities. Colin said we are looking at roughly 14 million dollars of asks in the warrant articles. He said they cannot be looked at in a vacuum but rather as cumulative weight, and it's creating a breaking point for residents who are very close to being priced out. Colin said it is the very people that provide the make-up and history of our towns who can simply no longer afford the costs. He said the school district should serve the community, but it cannot survive if it pushes the community out of existence. He asked the board to please distinguish between what is truly urgent and what is a want, and when they look at the 14-million-dollar figure to think about the actual check a resident has to write. Colin doesn't want a drive for better facilities to be a cause to lose residents who are the character of the community. He urged the district to remain an affordable and inclusive community for all ages.

Krista Butts of Lee has lived in the community for 30 years and has watched the ebb and flow of the enrollment, the budget, making cuts, not making cuts, flourishing and not flourishing. In looking at the school board goals tonight she noticed a goal for Language Arts and Math. She urged the Board to reflect on the cuts they are making because they are going to affect those goals especially since people being cut support those goals. Krista would like the Board to take another look at what is important and what is extra, and said if we cut people, we will not be able to reach our goals.

Derek Sowers of Durham had a question pertaining to cuts that has not been answered. He wondered what specifically the staff cuts are for the 2 teachers, 1 school nurse, and 3 academic support staff. Derek felt it was important to know what is being cut before agreeing to a cut and to understand what those positions are and how they affect meeting educational goals. Of particular concern to Derek are the professionals that provide extra support outside the classroom in the math and writing labs. He felt they are effective in reaching kids that don't get all their questions answered during class time or might be hesitant to ask in front of the class. The one-on-one help outside the class really helps students to understand better, do better on tests, and ultimately perform and reach the educational goals. Derek said hopefully those positions will not be affected by cuts.

Ben VanCamp of Durham is a proud parent of both a high school junior and freshmen who have had great experiences in Oyster River schools. He appreciates the hard work the school board does to oversee that process and he appreciates everything. Since 3rd grade his son has received special education services and has benefitted a lot from small class sizes and extra support, which may get cut. Ben said not just special education students benefit from extra support, but all students can access tutors, including his daughter who occasionally benefits from extra help in reading or math. He said if extra support is not available or caseloads are too large, it's going

to have an academic effect on both of his children. Ben agrees with the first commenter that adding about \$100,000 to the administrative budget takes away from teachers, nurses, and those directly servicing students. He doesn't think that reflects the values of our communities and the way things are done at Oyster River.

Oliver Philbrick, a teacher of Oyster River, said maybe it's a minor point but he thinks it's unconscionable to push through funding for AI platforms that teachers and students aren't really asking for while cutting actual human staff. He thinks it's particularly insulting to those people that are going to lose their job.

Chair Matt Bacon appreciated everyone's comments tonight. He said the Board reads all the emails even though they aren't always able to respond. Matt appreciates the public's support and interaction, noting it's a community that cares and it shows. Personally speaking, Matt said it makes his job easier to have that kind of support from the community.

Denise Day made a motion to close the Public Budget Hearing at 7:46 PM, 2nd by Heather Smith. Motion passed 6-0.

II. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Kelly Ickes made a motion to approve the agenda, 2nd by Denise Day. Motion passed 6-0.

III. PUBLIC COMMENTS (followed the Discussion & Action Items)

IV. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

V. ANNOUNCEMENTS, COMMENDATIONS AND COMMENTS

A. District

B. Board

VI. DISTRICT REPORTS

A. Assistant Superintendent/Curriculum & Instruction Report(s)

B. Superintendent's Report

C. Business Administrator

D. Student Representative Report – Elise Bacon

E. Finance Committee Report

F. Other

VII. UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGENDA

VIII. DISCUSSION & ACTION ITEMS

FY27 Warrant Articles for Deliberative Session

Matt Bacon announced that the petition warrants will go on the ballots and tonight the Board is voting on the existing warrant articles, not the petition warrant articles.

Renee Bennett made a motion to approve the FY27 Warrant Articles for the February 3, 2026 Deliberative Session, 2nd by Giana Gelsey.

Denise Day asked for consistency in terms of the way they list the school board recommendation and majority vote since some are in italics and some are not. Denise prefers they all appear in italics because it stands out more.

Heather Smith said the second Article 4 in the heading needs to be scratched out.

Kelly Ickes asked if Article 9 requires a majority vote and Matt confirmed it does.

