

## February 3, 2026, Deliberative Session Meeting Minutes

Moderator Williams gave extra time to allow everyone to sign in. Present at the meeting were 394 members of the public, 8 district administrators, 6 Board members, and Attorney Diane Gorrow.

Moderator Williams opened the meeting at 7:30 PM. He welcomed everyone and thanked them for their patience. He asked all who would like to join in the pledge of allegiance to stand and join him. He confirmed that everyone seated had obtained a ballot voting card. He introduced the members of the School Board and members of the administration seated at the presentation table. He then called Sean Harrison to the podium.

Sean presented the Distinguished Service Award to Daniel Couture. The district recognized him for his tremendous job with the ORCSD First Robotics Program. First Robotics is an international program that blends engineering, teamwork, and real-world problem-solving. Students design, build, and program robots to compete in yearly challenges that mirror real engineering constraints—limited time, limited resources, and high expectations. Beyond robots, FIRST emphasizes gracious professionalism, collaboration, and STEM inspiration, helping students grow into confident, capable innovators.

Dan has been dedicated to this work for many years. He took on the role of lead mentor two years ago and has continued to drive the team forward. As a FIRST mentor Dan guides students through the challenges of designing, building, and programming a competition robot while also helping them grow as thinkers and teammates. They share their technical knowledge, but even more importantly, they model problem-solving, resilience, and gracious professionalism. A mentor supports students as they brainstorm ideas, test prototypes, troubleshoot failures, and celebrate breakthroughs, all while encouraging them to take ownership of their work. They create an environment where every student feels capable, valued, and inspired to push beyond what they thought they could do. In the end, a FIRST mentor isn't just helping build a robot, they're helping to build confident, curious future innovators.

Sean read statements from several members of the leadership team who appreciate the dedication he has to supporting students. Congratulations Dan. Dan accepted the award and recognized the other 9 mentors who work with him.

Moderator Williams explained the task for this evening and how they will be conducted. He noted there are several things that will be different. We will not be following Roberts Rules of Order tonight. Having said that anyone can overrule him. Voting will be by holding the voter cards up in the air. He reviewed the process for explaining and discussing each warrant article and how members can participate in the meeting. He explained that members of the public can speak on each article by coming to the podium and must state their name and the town they reside in.

Amendments must be presented in writing and must be seconded. They will then be discussed and voted on. Some articles cannot be changed. We will not be voting on the final status of each warrant tonight. Everything on the warrant must be moved to the ballot. The counting of ballots will be different this year. Moderator Williams explained that each town will count the ballots for the school district and the count will be reported at each town.

Aggregate results will be reported at the district level. He then announced a Candidates' Forum on February 17, 2026 at 7:00 PM in the high school auditorium. Suggestions for topics to be addressed by candidates can be submitted on the district website. He also asked for volunteers from the school community to help count school ballots at the three towns.

Moderator Williams then read the posting statement, the posted warrant and Articles 1 and 2. He then introduced Denise Day.

Article 3 was presented by Denise Day. Denise read Article 3 and explained the project the article covers. This project includes both an expansion and renovation of both elementary schools. It will expand the cafeteria at Mast Way, which is a long-identified need. In addition, it will address a number of inadequacies in the building, will open up the library and north commons, and improve a number of services for students. At Moharimet the project will address a number of inadequacies of some of the spaces in the building. It will include an addition of 4 general education classrooms. This is replacing 4 spaces lost when the modular classrooms were removed in 2018 and changes in kindergarten population. She also explained how difficult it is to predict the kindergarten population and how this impacts classroom space. This project addresses our current needs and those of the future.

Moderator Williams asked if there were any discussion questions on Article 3.

Thomas Daly of Durham asked for a description of information used in the Public Hearing on the enrollment data and the analysis used to justify this project and explain why data from 2022 was used for a project to be completed in 2027. Lastly explain how the district plans to address HB751. Heather will need to go back to see what was actually presented. She then explained how the district tries to predict enrollment. They use different models to do this. The strongest for predicting kindergarten tends to be live birth to mothers. Your best bet is to use what you have this year and assume that is what you will have next year. There is a lot of variability in predicting kindergarten and there is not one way to do this to get it all right. Grade progression ratios are used to predict the other grades. There is a lot of variability in doing the predictions. Denise added that the pandemic made it difficult to predict numbers and skewed the numbers. There are always more fourth grade students in that class than there were when those students were in kindergarten because people move into the district.

Tom asked if we would run out of new student capacity before the bond was paid. Heather explained there is no magic crystal ball to tell us if we are going to run out of capacity. We are doing the best we can. We are using the data we have. Heather ran these numbers in 2024. There is an update that has not been fully vetted. Robert Sharp explained the long-range numbers vary. It is very hard to predict kindergarten enrollment. In terms of HB571 nothing has been determined at the state level, and he does not believe it will have a direct impact on us. Tom shared his concern and hopes there is flexibility in the numbers. Robert Shap stated that we do provide flexibility in the numbers. We do move students between schools, but it is problematic. Tom made a motion to amend the article to include a statement to express the tax impact. He read his amendment.

Moderator Williams did not think we could allow that amendment. Attorney Garrow explained that if you want to add tax impact to a warrant there is an appropriate article needed to do that. This amendment was not allowed.

Ken Stuff from Durham moved to amend the article to read:

“Shall the District raise and appropriate the sum of \$3,900,000 (gross budget) to finance renovations and additions at both elementary school...and authorize the issuance of not more than \$3,900,000 of bonds and notes...and further to raise and appropriate the sum of \$97,500 for the initial debt service payment due during this fiscal year?”

Second by Colin Blake-Butler.

Moderator Williams asked if there was any discussion on the amendment. He also stated he has been presented with a request to have a secret ballot on this amendment. It can be done by petition of 5 voters present. He verified that the petition signers were present and asked if there was any discussion on this amendment.

Gweneth Crossman from Durham asked if anyone on the Board could explain what effect this amendment would have on the project should it go forward. Matt Bacon would love to be able to know exactly what would be changed but he could not do so since it would have to be discussed with the architect.

Loren Selig from Durham asked about this article and how voters would be able to choose how they vote on voting day. This article requires  $\frac{3}{5}$  vote to pass. People could choose how to vote on this at the ballot box.

Peter Miller from Durham stated that he is opposed to the amendment because the school board has done its work and made a good case for the project. There has been no explanation on why this has been amended. He is supporting the school board's efforts and voting against the amendment.

Kalika Bower of Lee wonders if the school board has looked at the possibility of doing renovations at Moharimet and holding off on Mast Way. Is that something that has been thought about and what would your plan B look like if this does not pass.

Matt stated that the most effective and best way to do this would be to put everything in one package. If the voters reject this, they would not be allowed to spend any of these funds on the project. They would have to look at other solutions that fit within the constraints they find themselves in. Denise added that this project has a guaranteed maximum price. If the amendment passes, we would have to go back and redesign the project and not be able to start it this summer as planned.

Daniel Day of Durham is of the opinion that we need to look at and consider the condition of both Mast Way and Moharimet. There could be a better solution.

Moderator Williams explained the process for the secret ballot vote. Voters were then asked to proceed to vote by secret ballot and deposit their vote in the ballot box. Voting was closed at 8:40. At 8:54 Moderator Williams read the results:

Yes 42

No 237

Blank 2

The amendment fails.

Motion to call the question by Lyssa Bayne-Kim of Durham, second by Tuck Pescolido and it passed by show of voter cards.

Eric Johnson of Lee moved to restrict reconsidering Article 3, second by Sarah Farwell of Lee. Motion passed by show of voter cards.

Article 4 was read and presented by Heather Smith.

Heather reviewed the numbers for each budget in the article and the increases compared to last year's budget figures. The operation budget is a 3.64% increase. She reviewed the different areas of the budget by percentages and explained what these areas include. Next, she reviewed the demographics of the employees of the district and the areas contributing to the increases in the budget. She then reviewed the reductions made to the budget and how decisions were made to reduce staff. There are 6 staff reductions in this budget. She reviewed the differences in the budgets from last year and the difference of the Default budget. Proposed revenues were then reviewed along with the tax impact for all areas of the budget and the amounts for each town.

Moderator Williams asked if there was any discussion on the article:

Krista Butts of Lee spoke on behalf of the union contract coming up in the next few articles. She stated that she is a previous Board member and explained her concern about the loss of an employee due to her not doing research about the position that was cut. She explained the elimination of the positions that are being cut and how they will impact the students. She asked that the Board bear in mind the impact these cuts will have on students.

Kate Wilson of Lee asked for clarification on the salary line and the cola and if it is in the CBA. Heather indicated that the COLA is in the Guild CBA and other bargaining agreements approved also have their own increases. The non union members in the district do not have an agreement. They have an increase in this budget that matches other increases. Those increases are not in the default budget.

Amanda Hassen from Durham stated that cutting nurses and paraprofessionals is negligent and will impact the mental health of the students. Matt Bacon explained these cuts were not taken lightly. She feels these positions are vital to the mental health of the children.

Al Howland of Durham proposed an amendment to Article 4 to increase the total operating budget from \$61,846,067 to \$62,365,067, an increase of \$519,000, second by Colin Blake-Butler.

Moderator Williams asked for a show of voter cards. The amendment passed by a show of voter cards.

Krista Butts of Lee asked to make a motion to not reconsider article 4, second by Colin Blake-Butler. Motion passed by a show of voter cards.

Warrant Article 5 was read and presented by Kelly Ickes.

Kelly explained that this warrant article is for ORPaSS, the paraeducators and the nutrition workers. Key highlights include increases in pay to make the compensation for these positions competitive with surrounding school districts and changes in the offering for health insurance. In addition to salary and benefits there were some increases to some professional development and coverage of additional holidays.

Christine Deptula from Durham is a paraeducator and president of the union. She asked for the support of the community in voting yes for their contract.

Colin Blake-Butler stated that he would like to see the tax impacts on these articles.

Moderator closed discussion on article 5.

Article 6 was read and presented by Kelly Ickes.

Kelly indicated that this union, ORESPA, includes the custodians and office support personnel. The key highlights are adjustments to pay scales to make them competitive to area school districts. It includes reimbursement to staff for preapproved safety gear.

Moderator Williams asked if there were any questions and with none moved to article 7.

Article 7 was read and presented by Giana Gelsey.

Giana explained that this fund was created in 2017 for maintaining, repairing and upgrading to the districts buildings and grounds. This is for facilities costs and cannot be used for something else. The current balance is \$614,990.

Tom Daly of Durham is interested in understanding this article. His understanding is that unused funds from 2026 at the end of the year will be added to this fund. Amy explained that if there is money left over in the 2026 operating budget it would go to this fund.

Moderator Williams asked if there was any additional discussion and there being none, he moved to Article 8.

Article 8 was read and presented by Giana Gelsey.

Giana explained this is similar to the last article. This is a fund used to compensate special education funds that are unpredictable. This fund would balance out funds if there was an emergency in special education. The current balance is \$344,210. The district used \$250,000 of this fund two years ago.

Moderator Williams asked if there are any questions on Article 8.

Colin Blake-Butler asked if any of these funds are invested and receive interest. Amy indicated that the funds are held by the Trustee of the Trust Funds in Durham and they do invest them in safe investments.

Article 9 was read and presented by Matt Bacon.

Matt explained that this article does not have to do with HB571. This has to do with the town of Pittsfield ruling. It has to do with open enrollment. The Board feels this would protect the students and the taxpayers in the district in the best way possible by authorizing \$0 dollars for this.

Moderator Williams asked if there were any questions.

Patrick Napier from Madbury asked if it would be better to put \$5 in this article. Matt explained that by putting \$0 in this article it will keep taxpayer money in the district and spent on Oyster River students. Moderator Williams explained that having no money in this article prevents anyone from seeking funds from the school. Having no money in this article prevents the Board from having to transfer any funds to support this.

There being no additional questions, Moderator Williams moved on to the 4 petitioned warrant articles.

Moderator Williams called Rita Mason and the group of petitioners to the podium to present Articles 10-13.

Moderator Williams read Article 10.

Rita Mason from Durham is speaking on behalf of a group called Oyster River Voters Voice. This group is no part of the Free State project. They have one goal and that is to protect the academic excellence of the district and support a budget that is sustainable and supports everyone. The four articles are not about taking away. They feel the community needs clear information. By establishing an elected Budget Committee, we would be joining other communities who feel this makes the system work best. They feel this would assist the school board allowing them to focus their primary energy on the most important job of student achievement and educational publicity. This is about a partnership.

Moderator Williams asked if there were any discussion or questions on Article 10.

Peter Johnson from Lee stated that the OR Way of the 1990s may not be equipped for the realities of today. The task of the Board is an impossible task. By adopting this committee this would provide the Board with a support system that already exists in the most successful districts in New Hampshire. This group would focus on budgetary spending. Having this analysis will allow the district to have a stable tax rate and ensure the funds are used to the maximum capacity. By establishing a budget committee, we would be creating a firewall for our institutional core. They feel this committee would act as a seal of approval for the voters. Please join him in supporting Article 10.

Tom Newkirk from Durham asked to honor Denise Day for her 12 years as a Board member. She has been the chair, been on the policy committee, and she has attended more plays, concerts and events than anyone will be able to accomplish. Tom is speaking to urge voters to reject this warrant in March. He made 3 points about the creation of a Budget Committee. This committee would give the responsibility of preparing the budget to them so you could separate the educational responsibilities from the budgetary decisions. This would be unwieldy because educational decisions almost always have some budgetary implications. It is difficult to split these decisions. They go together.

There is a budget subcommittee already on the Board. They go back and forth to work out budgets in the past that have come forth with great support from the community. The per pupil cost over the past ten years has come much closer to the state average over the last years and a lot of other districts have risen faster than we have. Moving to this system would be a mistake. It would be unwieldy, unwise, and unlikely to save the district any money.

Steve Worgiotist of Durham thinks it is very important to say no to Article 10 because this puts the accountants in charge. They would not have the skills to be in charge of this. It would be a mistake to put these people in charge. It is really important we have people who understand the issues and know what they are doing to be in charge. He extended his thanks to the School Board and administration for all the work they have done. They do their homework and it shows. He trusts the School Board and feels they are verified.

Mary Cobb of Lee has concerns with this warrant article. It lacks clarity. What is the framework? There is no explanation of how members are selected. She thinks this is a bad thing that lacks a lot of details.

Colin Blake-Butler clarified that the wording of the article cannot be amended. Attorney Diane Gorrow clarified that it can be amended in many different ways.

Moderator Williams explained the sections of the law describing how this committee is formed.

Ann Welch of Durham stated that there is no requirement that members of this committee have any knowledge of budget and finance. It is already hard to get good people on boards now.

Kathy Bernay of Durham asked if anyone calculated the additional costs for implementing this. She feels this presentation is implying that the School Board is not doing a good job and she is impressed with the School Board.

Daniel Day of Durham clarified that this is not questioning the qualifications of the Board members.

Patrick Napier of Madbury asked if someone could explain the current composition of the School Board Budget Committee and the process of the school board budget committee. He asked if we could limit the time for speaking like we do at board meetings.

Moderator Williams explained that petitioned warrant article presenters are allowed 10 minutes to present. Heather explained that the committee is composed of 3 members of the board and the process of how they function. They go through the budget line by line. They also do a lot of public meetings. They meet to weigh different options before they go to the Board.

Matt Rystika from Lee asked to call the question, second by Dean Rubine of Lee. Moderator Williams asked all in favor of ending the discussion to raise their voter card. Motion passed.

Moderator Williams read article 11. There is an amendment to remove the last few words of the article. Submitted by Rita Mason and second by Colin Blake-Butler.

Rita Mason explained that they believe that the surplus should be returned to the taxpayers, which is the standard operation of the district. They feel that every unspent dollar should be returned.

Moderator Williams asked if there were any questions or discussion on Article 11.

Ann Welch of Durham is annoyed by the transparency thing. This special fund is for instances where there is a very large hit that would hamstring the district. It should only be used for instances like that. She does not think this is being non-transparent because they must ask to be able to use it. This is all being done with the approval of the taxpayers when it was voted.

Nate Grove of Durham hears this underhanded attempt to cast doubt on what the School Board is doing. Doing this would create a confrontational relationship between the two bodies.

Ken Stuff from Durham wanted to apologize for the lack of communication. He believes the traditional standard of returning the surplus at the end of the year is the best way to handle this. He believes that returning the funds to the taxpayers is the way to handle these funds. There is a provision for the school to ask for funds if they have an unexpected need.

Gwenh Crossman of Durham asked why is the second sentence being cut?

Moderator Williams explained that he suggested the amendment. He thinks it was an extra sentence that wasn't necessary.

Moderator Williams asked for a vote on the amendment. The amendment failed so it will stay as it was originally presented.

Colin Blake-Butler called the question, second Al Howland of Durham. The vote to end discussion on Article 11 passed by voter card.

Moderator Williams read petitioned Warrant Article 12. There is a proposed amendment to amend the article to remove the last sentence from Rita Mason with the second by Colin Blake-Butler. It also includes the addition of the words "if any" before the budget committee.

Rita Mason stated that this article creates sustainable growth to provide stability for the district. We would be linking our growth to the standard CPI index. It ensures that as the cost of living increases for us, we follow the same path for the budget. This would ensure that the budget follows a clear path. This gives the voters the ultimate authority. It protects seniors and neighbors on fixed income from massive tax spikes.

Moderator Williams asked if there was any discussion.

Loren Selig from Durham asked to propose an amendment. Moderator Williams would not allow an additional amendment at this time.

Jason Collins from Durham stated that the benchmark is about keeping things consistent. It would be a good model for the district. Looking at the historical data of the district he sees that the total budget had exceeded the CPI. This is something to set up a guard rail for the budget. This would help mitigate the spikes for people on fixed incomes.

Colin Blake-Butler called the question with a second by Eric Johnson. Moderator Williams asked for a show of voter cards to end discussion on the amendment. The motion to end discussion passed.

Next, he called for a vote of those in favor of the amendment. Motion failed by show of voter card for amending the article.

Al Howland made an amendment to the article to change the amount of the tax cap to 15%. Second by Loren Selig. Colin Blake-Butler questioned the legality of changing the amount. Attorney Garrow stated this can be amended. The amount of the tax cap can be amended. Al explained that tax caps do not really work that well and it inhibits the ability to deal with changes they have no control of. Reduced revenues, retirement cost shifts and health insurance increases make it difficult to maintain a tax cap. If you do this, you have to shift the funds for capital expenses and the result neglects the facilities. This is not a good idea. What is the appropriate percentage to increase by? If the taxpayers are not satisfied, they can go to the Deliberative Session or the ballot box and vote against it.

Loren Selig from Durham agrees with Al.

Eric Johnson from Lee called the question, second by Loren Selig. Moderator Williams asked for a show of voter cards to end discussion. Motion passed to end discussion.

Moderator Williams asked for a vote for the amendment. The vote on the amendment passed by show of voter cards. Eric Johnson asked to end discussion, second by Dean Rubine. Motion passed by show of voter cards.

Motion by Loren Selig of Durham to not reconsider Article 12, second by Seth Fiermonte of Durham. Motion passed by show of voter cards.

Moderator Williams read Petitioned Article 13.

Rita Mason made an amendment to Article 13, second by Colin Blake-Butler. She read the proposed amendment to Article 13. Amendment should read:

“To see if the Oyster River Cooperative School District will vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$60,000 for the purpose of hiring an independent auditing firm to conduct a performance audit of the District’s instructional and non-instructional operations. This is a special warrant article per RSA 32:3,VI. The scope of this audit shall include, but not limited to, an assessment of administrative staffing levels, operational efficiency, and a comparison of service delivery costs against peer districts. To ensure impartiality, the selected firm shall not have provided any services to the District within the last five (5) years. This appropriation is non-lapsing per RSA 32:7, VI and shall not lapse until the purpose of the audit is completed. The final report shall be presented at a public meeting and made available to the public in its entirety, subject to mandatory redactions required by RSA 91-A”

Rita Mason said this would follow a path of continuous improvement. The data on this is clear stating that performance audits typically identify efficiencies ranging from 1-4% of the total budget. This could redirect more to the classroom. Even a 1% finding would more than pay for this audit.

Eric Mason from Durham explained the difference between a financial audit and a performance audit. He researched several districts who have done this to support that the staffing matches the student count. A 1% finding would provide us with additional funds back to the classroom. This would be a third-party review to see if there are efficiencies to be made to protect the classroom. This would be a smart investment. He wants to make sure that the absolute maximum dollar is reaching the students. He feels we should join our neighbors with the use of data.

Motion from Eric Mason to end discussion on the amendment, second Colin Blake-Butler. Vote to end discussion on the amendment passed by show of voter cards.

Amendment failed by show of voter cards.

Rob Sullivan from Durham proposed an amendment. He thinks this is unnecessary. He trusts the School Board to do its due diligence. His amendment is to change the dollar amount to \$100, second from Al Howland.

Timothy Horrigan expressed his concern for anything to come out of this audit. He called the question second by Eric Johnson. The vote to call the question passed by show of voter card.

Moderator Williams called for a vote on this amendment. The amendment passed by show of voter card.

Motion to call the question on Article 13 by Loren Selig of Durham, second by Giana Gelsey. Motion passed by show of voter cards.

Motion to restrict reconsideration to Article 13 by Loren Selig, second by Eric Johnson. Motion passed by show of voter card.

Motion to restrict reconsideration to Article 10 and 11 by Colin Blake-Butler, second by Eric Johnson. Motion passed by show of voter card.

Moderator Williams reminded everyone about the Candidates Forum on February 17, 2026 and thanked the students for organizing this. Election day volunteers please let him know. He read times for voting in each town on March 10, 2026.

John Parsons of Durham came to the podium and made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Second was by Heather Smith. Motion passed.

Meeting ended at 11:35 PM.

Respectfully Submitted by Susan Caswell

