

**COMMUNITY FORUM / REGULAR MEETING
OF THE SOUTH BURLINGTON SCHOOL BOARD**

Wednesday, January 14, 2026

Regular Session at 6:00 pm

South Burlington School District Administrative Office
577 Dorset Street, South Burlington, VT

COMMUNITY FORUM/REGULAR MEETING

Present

Seamus Abshire, Laura Williams, Jennifer Lawrence, Dan Boyer, Emilee Hoffman, Michelle Boyer, Austin Smith, Ally Leduc, Momin Waqar

Administration/Staff

Dr. Joe Clark, Nicole Carter, Patrick Burke, Lissa McDonald, Monica Desrochers, Jean Marie Clark, Daisy Brayton, Nick Bocchino

Guests

15 in person

36 online

Call to Order

Chair Seamus Abshire called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm. Abshire said the board was originally scheduled to have an executive session at 5:00 pm today, but since there were no topics to discuss, the board did not hold the executive session. The Pledge of Allegiance was said.

Announcements and Amendments to the Agenda

Laura Williams said that the board members should announce this evening if they are planning to run for reelection. Seamus Abshire said the seats that are open are a 2-year term, two 3-year terms, and 2-years remaining on a 3-year term. He asked if any board members would like to announce if they are running again.

Michelle said she is planning to run for the remaining 2-years of the 3-year term.

Dan Boyer said he will be running.

Emilee Hoffman said she is unsure if she will run again.

Austin Smith said it is his intention to run.

Comments and Questions

Mark Gabel asked about the percentage of increase for the proposed FY 2027 budget.

Kate Jarvis said that she and her family participated in the Christmas tree pick-up fundraiser event on Saturday, organized by Christina Toner and the music department.

She said they raised at least \$17,500 which goes towards scholarships, musical instruments, etc. for the music department.

Bridget Burkhardt spoke about the early retirement program. She is surprised the district would spend the amount of money proposed in the plan to get people to retire early. She said other districts in the state do it for much less than what we are talking about by signing up with a consultant. She hopes the board decides not to move forward with this program.

Student Representative Report

Ally Leduc and Momin Waqar presented the following information:

- No school for all students in the district on Monday, January 19 in honor of Martin Luther King Day.
- This Friday is the last day of Part 2 and Semester 1 for all the high school students, so to any high school students, make sure you are aware of the changes to your schedule.

Superintendent's Report

Cell Phone Update

Dr. Clark said students are adjusting to the lack of cell phones and are more engaged and interact better with each other. Some students still try to use their cell phones from time to time, but there is a good follow-through, and it seems like the policies are working well. Principals Suzanne Gruending and Patrick Burke said the cell phone policy is working well and they have a lot of support from students, families, and staff members.

Report on High School Students and the CTE Trades and Career Education

Patrick Burke and Meghan Sweet provided a brief presentation on how career technical education happens in Vermont, and specifically in our region. There are 14 tech center regions in Vermont and within those regions there is typically one center, except for Chittenden County, which has two tech centers, one at Burlington and one at Essex High School. Patrick and Meghan reviewed the offerings at each of the tech centers South Burlington High School students attend. He spoke about the programs in which students can earn college credit and apply for 2- or 4-year post-secondary professional programs. A lot of the tech programs are also aligned with industry-level certification so when students graduate they can move into jobs. Many students also engage in work-based learning during their high school career.

Patrick reviewed the statistics on the number of students that attend the tech centers as well as the number denied access to the tech centers last year due to capacity. The board thanked Patrick and Meghan for the presentation.

COMMUNITY FORUM**FY 2027 Budget**

Seamus reviewed the guidelines for the community forum and said the board would be using a timer and everyone will be allowed to speak once before anybody speaks twice.

Dr. Clark provided an overview of a 3.4% (\$73,939,121) increase and a 0% (\$71,507,854) increase and what the impact would look like to district programs and services. Dr. Clark discussed the unassigned \$2,554,157.57 fund balance from the FY 2025 school year and the options about how the district can allocate the funds.

Dr. Clark recommended that the district ask the voters to:

- Vote on a 3.4% budget increase for expenditures (\$73,939,121)
- Allocate the FY 2025 Unassigned Fund Balance (\$2,554,157.57) to the Capital Improvement Reserve Fund
- If the 3.4% budget increase for expenditures is rejected by the voters, return with a 0% budget increase for expenditures

Emilee Hoffman spoke about the proposed budget as she was not in attendance at the January 7 school board meeting. She said the district can not build the schools our community wants by reducing resources. She said holding the budget at a 0% increase might feel safe but it lacks creativity, and it ignores our mission which is to connect our community and schools. A 0% increase comes on top of an existing deficit because last year's cuts eliminated programs like Big Picture, guidance counselors, and the 9th grade dean of students. Continuing down this path only deepens the damage. We need to stabilize before we start cutting deeper. The community is asking for more rigor and better test scores, and those goals cannot be met by reducing resources. She added that we are not just balancing a budget, we are shaping the future of the community, and she feels like we should aim higher than zero. She wants to be creative, courageous, and clear about why investing in our schools matters, not just for the students, but for everyone. And she wants to give our superintendent the tools to succeed and to give our community the schools they deserve.

Jennifer Lawrence said she agrees with much of what Emilee said but we have declining student enrollment. We have to look at this critically because we are representing the community and not everyone has children in the schools. We need to look at the food insecurity in our community, rising health care costs, and people are pinched so tight right now and we do need to consider that as well as declining enrollment.

Michelle Boyer said as we make difficult decisions in the coming weeks, months, and years, decisions that affect students, families, the community, and staff, we need to be clear about the difference between what we think we know and what we actually know based on evidence. So, what we have right now are three problems. We have historical

spending increases that have led to an infrastructure in South Burlington that's not sustainable. No matter how passionate we are about not making changes, she thinks that we can make changes that are strategic and purposeful and this will take some strong partnerships to do.

Michelle said the state education finance system does not work, and she personally has very little hope that our legislature is going to address those problems substantively anytime soon. We are not satisfied with our achievement trends because they are showing us really the opposite of what we expect. The local solution for the first two is to scale back spending, knowing that even at a 0% increase, many community members are still going to struggle.

Based on the cumulative effect of past spending and state financing law. It is especially important to contain spending because there are drivers that influence that final tax rate that we have been talking about that are outside of our control. So, we have to prepare for the worst-case scenario and the effect of what we decide.

Michelle added that our persistent focus needs to be on student foundational learning needs identified through rigorous processes, with efficacious methods, and monitored for improvement.

Seamus Abshire said we are elected representatives of the whole city of South Burlington and many of our constituents are not represented at school board meetings in general. We need to listen to how we can rebuild trust and legitimacy of our school district and in this community in the context of declining enrollment, but also some very challenging property tax increases over the last five years.

Laura Williams said she is in the schools every day and \$30 million a year in Vermont goes to feed our children. Mental health and well-being add over 1 million for Howard Center Clinicians, as well as an increased need for special educators; the needs are greater with fewer students. She does not think everyone understands what educators are up against every single day. Educators are a child's parents, caregiver, counselor, therapist, social worker, etc. What we pay for in the schools is much different than what it used to be like.

Ally Leduc said she agrees with Dr. Clark's 3.4% increase and we should bring the budget to the voters to decide. If they vote no, then we come back with a 0% increase in expenditures.

Bridget Burkhardt asked how much of the enrollment decline is actually a decline of the student who are in seats? How much of it is a decline in tuition students? How much of it is a change in weighted students because that is really a big difference. If it's a change in weighted students, there's so many potential changes coming, at the state level, that she would hate to see us make cuts to our programming based on the way the weighted students are changing. Is our weighted pupil count certified yet? She

added that she is really astonished that the board is going to vote on a budget to take to the community without any of the usual discussion about what that actually means for programming; what are the reductions?

Jean-Marie Clark said our student population for the incoming freshman class is very small, much smaller than it has been and our long-term weighted ADM is down.

Mark Gabel said that some of the declining population is because students are choosing to attend other schools instead of South Burlington. He said the district needs to pay attention to where students are going. We need to improve things, not make them worse, if you want to hang on to current students and families.

Kate Jarvis spoke about the need for the board to review the proposed reductions because the board needs to know what the schools and district are proposing for reductions. She asked about the large class size that required construction of the ZEMs at Rick Marcotte Central School.

Austin Smith spoke about the board's approach to Policy Governance and the way by which this board defers operations and operational decisions to the superintendent. He said this is the way this board has chosen to operate. It is not due to a lack of interest.

Sriram Srinivasan said he has exchanged a number of emails over the last 10-12 days with the administration and board about his analysis and perspective about the budget. He feels a high-level reconciliation of the numbers will lead to a different answer and he has shared that analysis and perspective. He said the way he reads the high-level math is that the \$1.35 million that was reserved for salary negotiations needs to come off the baseline budget. Dr. Clark said the \$1.3 million has been removed from the proposed FY 2027 budget.

Sarah Pineda spoke about the operational impact of the proposed reductions of two nurses in the district. She said the current nursing model is not excessive, we are not overstaffed. She detailed the duties of the nursing staff.

Andy Samara supported Dr. Clark's proposal to vote this evening on the 3.4% proposed budget.

Sophie Lee thanked the board for their work on the budget and for holding the community forum. She expressed her agreement with the comments made by the student reps, Ally and Momin. She said the staff cannot do more with less.

Meghan Sweet urged the board to let the community speak and vote on the 3.4% expenditure increase as proposed. She also made a correction about the enrollment of the incoming 9th grade class and said it is at 200 students, the same as the outgoing senior class.

Gerry Silverstein said the buy-down for FY 2026 reduced the South Burlington expected education rate from 7.93% to 7.64%. It is a very small decrease and no one in the state can explain how the buy down works. If you approve the 8.67% tax increase, the 4-year education tax rate in South Burlington would be about 30%, which would be 150% greater than inflation.

Jen Merkin said there are children in the district who really need the structure, the predictability, and for all of us to learn what it is to live with people who are very different from us. The district provides excellent services to the schools and students, but if we go with the zero budget or anything else that we have talked about that will not happen.

Bryan Companion said any organization, school district, or business in these times that's looking at 0% budget increase is endangering their future. He suggested using some of the \$2.5 million surplus.

Kate Goodwin commented on her concern about reducing the nursing workforce in the school district.

Tim Jarvis said he supports the superintendent's recommendation for the vote and commented about using \$130,000 as a proxy for the 13 or 14 FTEs due to the way the union contract works it would definitely result in more than 13 or 14 people.

Jean-Marie Clark said the district worked really hard over the last several months building an open and transparent budget with the community, the building administrators, and the Board which was a really different process this year. We solicited a lot of feedback from folks so when you asked us last week to come back with a 0% budget it felt like we just blew that whole process up, and it felt really disrespectful to our partners here, inside and outside of these buildings, that we put so much time and effort into that budget and to have to come back with a new budget in one week was difficult.

Julie Baer said she has a 9th grader that was so excited about high school and wanting to take all the classes, and, she is stuck spending an hour and a half, three days a week in study hall, because there are not enough teachers to teach classes because of budget cuts.

Liz Hassler said she supports Dr. Clark's plan to put the 3.4% increase to the voters and will communicate to friends and other community members what will happen if this budget does not pass.

Sriram Srinivasan spoke about the budget process and the FY 2026 baseline budget. He asked for an opportunity to sit down with someone in the district, outside of the board meeting, to review the district's budget numbers. Dr. Clark said he would be happy to arrange for that to happen.

Diane Bugbee said she does not support a 0% increase, she does not feel it will meet the needs of our students. She feels it would be wise to put the FY 2025 unfunded surplus into a capital improvement fund as we have aging buildings in the district.

The board took a two-minute break.

ACTION ITEMS

Policy G8 – Selection of Library Materials *(Third Reading)*

The board reviewed the policy as presented.

Abshire called for a motion to approve Policy G8 – Selection of Library Materials. Laura Williams moved and Jen Lawrence seconded. There was no public comment. All were in favor and the motion passes.

Educators Preferred Corporation (EPC) Presentation

Dr. Clark said that board had a presentation about the EPC early retirement program incentives for employees at the January 7 school board meeting.

Abshire called for a motion to approve the EPC early retirement program for implementation in the South Burlington School District. Michelle Boyer moved and Laura Williams seconded.

Elizabeth Fitzgerald said this commitment to an outside vendor to manage an early retirement incentive happened very, very quickly. As a community member, she would appreciate more information on the total cost of the program and have it compared and contrasted with what it would cost to do in house. As it was discussed at the previous meeting, there is a history of districts around the state offering these now and then but, she does not know that the board had an opportunity to hear Vermont's experience with early retirement and programs and the impact on the programming and what the challenges might be in terms of getting contracts out on time and hiring. She suggested the board slow down a bit.

Emilee Hoffman abstains. All others were in favor and the motion passes.

Redistricting Statement

Abshire spoke about the board making a public statement about support for discussion of consolidation and redistricting. Abshire shared a draft of the proposed redistricting statement saying: he moves to state publicly that the South Burlington School Board supports frank discussion and prompt action to address cost and academic proficiency concerns, and specifically is open to the idea of consolidation with other school districts, and authorize the chair to release a press release to this effect.

Austin Smith said he would like to move forward with a statement but feels the board should be a lot clearer in our language and what we are saying.

The board agreed to wait and review this at an upcoming meeting.

Vote on FY 2027 Budget

Abshire called for a motion to approve the FY 2027 budget of \$73,939,121. Emilee Hoffman moved and Williams seconded.

Thomas Chittenden complimented the board. He said you are doing great. We had a very civil, transparent, tough discussion, and he hopes the board is all proud of being here on a Wednesday night, having this very civil discussion, for the community. He offered a thank you and an applaud. This was a great conversation, a tough conversation, and it is going to continue in the next couple of months so thank you for all you do.

Christie Nold spoke about the student class size and student numbers. She teaches 35 more students this year than she taught 2 years ago due to budget cuts at the high school. If she gives just 5 minutes of my time per student essay, that means she is spending nearly 3 hours more than she did last year. Larger class sizes will absolutely impact the quality of feedback and instruction that our students receive, despite my best efforts. So, when you consider class size increases, it doesn't stop at the moment that student leaves our door.

A roll call vote was held. Emilee Hoffman yes, Austin Smith yes, Dan Boyer no, Laura Williams yes, Jen Lawrence yes, Michelle Boyer no, Seamus Abshire no. The motion passes by a vote of 4-3.

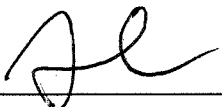
Abshire called for a motion to approve requesting the voters to approve putting the FY 2025 budget surplus of \$2,554,157.57 into a capital reserve fund. There were no comments. Laura Williams moved and Jen Lawrence seconded. All were in favor and the motion passes.

DISCUSSION ITEMS**Review Video Surveillance – Draft Revision to Executive Limitation 2.1 (Second Reading)**

The board agreed with the policy revisions and the proposed changes will be brought back to the next meeting for a third reading.

ADJOURNMENT

Abshire called for a motion to adjourn the regular meeting. Laura Williams moved and Jen Lawrence seconded. The motion passes. The meeting was adjourned at 9:29 pm.



Seamus Abshire, Chair



~~Laura Williams~~, Clerk
Austin Smith