

**Alexandria School Board
Budget Advisory Committee**

**March 16, 2021 - 7PM
Location: Zoom**

MINUTES

Budget Advisory Committee Members Present: Erin Dahlin (Chair); Nancy Drane (Secretary); Sean McEneaney, Sukumar Rao

ACPS Staff Liaison Present: Robert Easley, ACPS Director of Budget and Fiscal Compliance

Alexandria School Board Liaison Present: Ramee Gentry, Alexandria School Board; Susan Neilson, Clerk, Alexandria City Public Schools School Board

Public Participant: Selena El Hajji (potential BAC member)

Meeting was called to order at 7:04 p.m.

Approval of Prior Meeting Minutes – Motion to approve the minutes was made and seconded, with all present approving adoption of these minutes.

Ms. Dahlin oriented attendees for our agenda tonight (after staff report) – to discuss our comparison of budget calendar as between Alexandria and a few other jurisdictions.

Staff Report

There is not much to report as far as a budget update. The budget is now with the City and going through its normal process. They are working on some reallocations among ACPS individual schools based on revised enrollment numbers.

As far as forthcoming American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds, ACPS hopes that the State will provide guidance and information to them by the end of the week on amounts and allowable usage. ACPS expects receiving about \$30M, with 2 years to spend it. (This is significant, since prior allocations had shorter time lines. ACPS is also anticipating a second round of CARES ACT/Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) funding of about \$15M. Application for those funds is due on April 1. Broadly speaking, ESSER funds are focused on infrastructure (including technology infrastructure). The State doesn't want to see more laptops, but instead wants to see HVAC, ventilation, facility type upgrades; bottle fillers (to avoid contact bubblers); technology infrastructure in the classroom; etc. The American Rescue

Plan is much broader. It is still a little early to know where they'll focus with ARP funds. It could be staff hires for temporary staff (since these are one-time funds); facility upgrades/modification (e.g., spacing, air filtration systems); learning loss services; etc.

Staff was asked whether there are glaring holes in the proposed FY22 budget that these funds might address? Biggest gain could be in the ability to expand capacity (e.g., add facilities or buildings they can utilize for expanded capacity). They've engaged with owners/operators of Victory Center on Eisenhower to discuss potential use of that space. There have also been several meetings between the City Manager, Council, and School Board about potential use of city-owned space. Absent the ESSER and ARP funding, it would be challenging to pursue those options.

Staff was also asked whether there has been any "after action" analysis of how stimulus and emergency funds have been used thus far (e.g., usability of packets, other materials sent home, etc.) Not as of yet.

Discussion of Other Jurisdictions Budget Process

BAC members then turned to a discussion of research conducted about the budget process in other jurisdictions. Each BAC member summarized the information contained in the Google docs chart and made some additional comments:

Fairfax County

- Similar timeline but School Board approves its budget before the County Executive issues proposed budget to the Board of Supervisors
- Alexandria has more work sessions and public hearings than Fairfax County
- CIP seems to be a completely separate process

Arlington County

- School Board proposes budget before the budget is presented to Arlington County Board, but the School Board approves the budget after the final budget is proposed by the Arlington County Board
- Arlington has less work sessions and public hearings – and has less combined work sessions

City of Richmond

- There are 6 levels of engagement between school and city
- School Board approves budget w/in about one month and then it goes to the Mayor, so appears to be a more truncated process than Alexandria

- For public engagement, there is one hearing at school board level – but other opportunities for public engagement through the city budget process
- The “budget book” appears to be about ½ the size of Alexandria’s materials

City of Newport News

- Seems like the School Board and City processes are well aligned
- Public information is sparse, but appears that there are two joint meetings with respect to the budget and 1-2 public hearings; no obvious add/delete process

After the reports out, BAC members engaged in further discussion and covered the following points:

- Key questions presented:
 - Is there a way for the School Board, as a governing body, to pursue a more streamlined, efficient budget process in Alexandria?
 - Note that while the impetus for this examination may have been desire to re-align timeline for School Board’s budget approval vis-à-vis the release of the City Manager’s budget, we took this as opportunity to look at the budget process more broadly
 - Alignment is one thing, but it is also about efficiency and “working smarter, not harder.” A simpler process leads to better engagement.
 - Are there costs and benefits to pursuing a more streamlined, efficient budget process and if yes, what are they?
 - Are there lessons from other jurisdictions that we can learn from?
- Observations:
 - Alexandria does appear to be an outlier in having the School Board’s initial vote to approve its budget come after the budget release of the City/County executive
 - We appear to have *more* work sessions and public engagement opportunities than other jurisdictions; a look at our calendar makes it appear quite complex compared with other jurisdictions.
 - Query: are the public engagement opportunities we have meaningful?
 - Note: there is a requirement to have 1 public hearing for CIP and 1 public hearing for Combined Funds.
- Potential recommendations – there are opportunities for BAC to recommend a more efficient public engagement process, such as:
 - More targeted public engagement opportunities
 - School Board could have less formal public budget hearings throughout its budget calendar, but increase the methods it uses to engage the community on budget issues (“work smarter, not harder”)
 - Use online tools like survey/comment page on Division’s budget page (e.g., Fairfax County and Newport News)

- Engage w/ FACE Center or PTAs on pushing out budget information and/or getting budget feedback
- A lot of people have taken advantage of submitting written comments (in addition to live testimony) during COVID
- Equity demands engagement opportunities other than a formal public hearing
- Pair more targeted public engagement opportunities with more robust public information (e.g., more interactive and educational materials on ACPS budget web page)
- Potential to use BAC to solicit public feedback on the budget and then submit to the School Board

Next Steps

- BAC will provide recommendations or present options to the School Board in May. ACPS staff will consider these and come to the School Board in June with several options to consider, building on information we've shared in our memorandum and reference materials.
- BAC April Meeting (April 20) – we will review a draft outline/template together, including ideas about other engagement opportunities.
- Goal would be to finalize memo by May, with final review at our May meeting (May 18)
- We will present our findings to the School Board in May – Ramee and Susan will discuss getting it on the School Board agenda (possibly May 20 or June 3)

With that the meeting was adjourned at 8:35 p.m.