

**Alexandria School Board  
Budget Advisory Committee**

**December 15, 2020 - 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 Financial Systems

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

**The meeting was called to order at 7:01 p.m.**

Welcome, Public Comment, and Preliminaries - The meeting began with a welcome from Chair Dahlin after the committee's COVID-related hiatus. (The committee's last meeting was in March 2020.)

There were no public participants, and thus no public comment period was needed.

Mr. McEneaney moved to approve the January 2020, February 2020, and March 2020 minutes as drafted by Secretary Drane. The motion was seconded by Mr. Rao. **VOTE:** All members present voted unanimously to approve the minutes.

ACPS Staff Report - Mr. Easley then provided a staff report to all present.

With respect to the fiscal year 2021 budget, ACPS is seeing some savings, specifically with building related costs (e.g., utilities) and extra staffing costs (e.g., substitute teacher). ACPS has benefitted greatly from CARES Act funding and State of Virginia pandemic-related funding. ACPS received \$3.7M in CARES Act funding and another \$2.8M in State of Virginia Coronavirus funds. ACPS front-loaded use of the Virginia state funding since it had to be expended by December 31, 2020. The funds were used for PPE, learning kits, etc. The vast majority of total CARES Act funding remains available, with a 2022 deadline for expending. This will be utilized as ACPS continues virtual learning and plans for reopening. Approximately \$450,000 of Alexandria CARES Act funding was allocated to non-public schools, per Federal mandate. ACPS worked closely with these non-public schools to identify eligible needs and to facilitate the reimbursement process.

As for fiscal year 2022, ACPS staff is in the midst of budget planning. ACPS staff are holding two-by-two meetings with School Board members to discuss budget strategy. The fiscal year 2022 budget theme is resiliency: *recover*, *retain*, and *reignite*. Funding priorities include areas to help students and staff *recover* from learning losses; strategies to *retain* staff (e.g., compensation enhancement); and ways to *reignite* learning and passion among students and staff.

In terms of timing, on Thursday, December 17, the School Board will adopt the 2022-2031 Capital Improvement Program (CIP). Goal of this particular CIP was to refocus on projects that can be accomplished now, including those projects with an unique window of opportunity because of pandemic-related school building closures. Other key fiscal year 2022 dates include:

- January 7 – presentation of Superintendent’s general operating budget to the School Board (School Board’s first glance at the comprehensive budget);
- January 14 – first School Board budget work session on combined funds budget; and
- January 21 – first public hearing on combined funds budget.

Committee members inquired of Director Easley about communications efforts around the public hearing. Director Easley reported that his team has met with the ACPS Communications team to talk about the roll out of Superintendent’s combined funds budget (“we want it to tell a story”) and a better way of communicating to the public about the contents of the budget. The strategies they discussed include an enhanced and dynamic website with information about the budget. Finally, Director Easley reiterated that he is happy to answer budget-related questions anytime. Committee members should feel free to reach out to him via e-mail.

BAC Activities - The committee then turned to a discussion of the proposed Scope of Work for academic year 2020-2021.

Chair Dahlin reminded committee members that a considerable amount of work was done before March 2020 to chart a path for the committee’s work. One clear issue that arose during the interviews with School Board members and, recently, in the development of the FY22 budget calendar, is the sequencing of decision-making by the Superintendent, School Board, and the City Manager. Several School Board members want to realign the sequencing of School Board and City decision-making regarding the ACPS budget. The specific point that has caused the most friction is the point where the School Board is poised to vote to approve the Superintendent’s proposed budget. What has historically happened is that the Superintendent shares his proposed budget with the City prior to School Board approval. The Superintendent’s proposed budget is considered by the City and incorporated into the City Manager’s proposed budget when released – all before the School Board officially votes on the Superintendent’s proposed budget (sometimes by just a few days). As a result, the School Board’s vote approving the Superintendent’s proposed budget can seem irrelevant. Some School Board members find the optics of the City Manager saying that he’s “met ACPS’ request 100%” upon release of his proposed budget problematic when the School Board has not actually approved the budget. Some Board Members find this particularly concerning when one of the primary roles and functions of the School Board is to approve the budget.

The School Board would like to task BAC with looking at the ACPS budget calendar with this and other concerns in mind, with the goal of developing a set of recommendations for addressing them. Ms. Gentry noted that over the years there have been adjustments to improve the sequencing of the calendar, but this one issue remains. She believes that this is the one point that has garnered the most focus, but that there could be other things we will discover about the sequencing writ large. BAC's effort will include an analysis of surrounding and/or comparable jurisdictions.

BAC is being asked to do the following:

- Provide an overview of the ACPS budget calendar process and identify any and all sequencing concerns.
- Identify and explore the most significant impediments to aligning the School Board and City budget development and decision points.
- Provide comparisons from other neighboring or comparable jurisdictions.
- Outline and/or propose potential adjustments that could be made to align the sequencing, with an exploration of the pros and cons of each adjustment.
- Explore the efficacy of other budget-related events (e.g., Community Budget Forum).

In order to advance this Scope of Work, BAC members will endeavor to study other jurisdictions. Recognizing that there is additional coordination that happens outside of the published calendar, BAC members will set up a time to talk to Dominic Turner and his counterpoint in the City.

Some brief discussion ensued. Ms. Gentry noted her impression that ACPS is usually the first of other neighboring jurisdictions in terms of budget release timing. Why is that? What are the real impediments to either moving ACPS decision-making up or giving ACPS more time to deliberate? A few things that have been raised: (a) enrollment numbers are "late" and push against budget development; and (b) City cannot push their timeline back because of external pressures they're under re: timing. These issues need to be explored. Another alternative Ms. Gentry hopes BAC can explore is, if the calendar sequencing cannot be resolved, whether there are communications-type strategies that can be implemented to clarify the role between the City and the School Board regarding budget approval. One BAC member asked how significant an issue this is for the School Board. Ms. Gentry shared that this has always been a problem for certain School Board members; that leaves a perception that the City Manager is telling the School Board what its budget should be instead of the School Board having that autonomy. Practically speaking, there may not have been significant problems with alignment between the Superintendent, School Board, and City Manager in recent years – but the process should accommodate either circumstance.

As far as jurisdictions to explore, the Dillon Rule sets Virginia apart from other jurisdictions, so looking at Virginia probably makes most sense. Ms. Gentry suggested City of Falls Church, Arlington County, Fairfax County or City of Fairfax, City of Fredericksburg, City of Richmond.

In terms of timing, the goal is to have a memo available to the School Board by May 2021 with recommendations for its consideration. This timing will allow the School Board time to deliberate before budget calendar(s) are proposed by ACPS in June 2021.

BAC Next Steps – The committee then discussed next steps for BAC activities.

Secretary Drane will draft a proposed 2019-2020 End of Year Report (outstanding because of the committee's abrupt interruption of activities) and a 2020-2021 Scope of Work for the committee's consideration. BAC will also need to develop a work plan for its 2020-2021 Scope of Work, with a list of questions for consideration, jurisdictions to be explored (with assignments to BAC members), and internal ACPS interviews (e.g., Mr. Turner, City staff). Ms. Dahlin will take a first stab at a list of questions and will invite Mr. Turner to the next BAC meeting. She will also ask Mr. Turner for a recommendation for a City counterpart to interview.

BAC Meetings – 2020-2021 - Finally, before concluding the meeting, Chair Dahlin asked committee members about preferred meeting dates/times for the remainder of the academic year. All decided to look at the third Tuesday of the month, with confirmation from the School Board Clerk re: availability.

**The meeting adjourned at 8:13 p.m.**