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Board of Ed Chair and Schools Sup't Express Shock at Sudden \$250K Hike in Employee Retirement Cost

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Board of Education Chairperson Tara Ochman voiced outrage Tuesday night that the school district was given the news as late as Monday by town officials that the annual contribution for employee retirement benefits just jumped by \$250,000 — a 38 percent increase over last year.

The sudden hike in costs came weeks after Schools Superintendent Dan Brenner presented a 2018-2019 annual district budget 2.75 percent higher than last year's. With the new cost, the budget increase would come in at 3.01 percent, he said.

"We are both frustrated and disappointed," Ochman said at the start of Tuesday night's regular Board of Education meeting. "It is [...] disappointing because I do know the [school district] administration has reached out since January trying to get these numbers" on next year's contribution to the employee retirement fund.

"Let me be clear that this feels like internal [town government] politics," she said. "This board will not play politics with our children's future. [...] We hope to move forward, and we hope to do better than this. I'm sorry to present this to the board and the public this way, but [those are] the feelings we have at this point."

Brenner also was sharply critical of the lack of communication about the budget increase. Despite most of the cost of employee retirement benefits coming from the school district budget, district officials were never made part of the discussions that led to the higher costs, Brenner said.

"We find ourselves in an impossible position around a number that we have absolutely no control over, and frankly, received at a very late date — yesterday," he said. "We received an email and were unable to follow up until the first thing this morning."

Brenner added:

"Needless to say, as we sit and we meet weekly to discuss the budget, we find ourselves, uh, feeling as if it could be interpreted that we are somehow doing bait and switch, and I would like to suggest that couldn't be further from the truth."

"We spent a significant amount of time, [school district Finance Director] Mike Feeney and I, with the actuary who did the study and explained to us that much of the reason for this happening — I'm not going to go into these details. Clearly, the person we spoke to, a bright, informed person who had metrics that they utilized — but we were not part of that process. No one from the Board of Education was part of that process, and I would suggest we received this information at what I would suggest is the eleventh hour, after multiple requests."

Brenner said district officials will continue to look at the education budget for possible savings. He did not say he would definitely propose cuts in other parts of the district budget in order to keep down costs in light of the higher bill for retirement funding.

"We're sharpening our pencils," he said. "We will do everything in our power to bring the budget in to a number that is acceptable."

Finance Board Chairman Jon Zagrodzky, who happened to be at the meeting to speak to the Board of Education about the upcoming budget, said he had been asking about the matter earlier in the day.

According to Zagrodzky, the town recently switched its actuarial consultants from one firm to another, and the new firm had a different determination about how much money that it was prudent to put into the retirement accounts — the new firm said more money needed to be put in. Discussions took place between town officials and representatives of the new and old firms, and the conclusion was that the town needed to increase its payments, Zagrodzky said.

The conclusion from the new actuarial firm came to the town on Friday afternoon, Zagrodzky said, but not

until Tuesday, he indicated, did word of it get out to some town officials. Brenner said earlier that he got word only late on Monday.

According to Kate [Buch, the town administrator], she found out about this in a draft report on Friday," Zagrodzky said. "It would have been nice, I think, for all of us to know about that on Friday, but she had no knowledge these calculations would be changed before that, and today's just Tuesday, so if you're just finding out about this today, Friday would have been better."

But Zagrodzky added: "I'm not sure I would read into this politics or game playing, at least not in the conversations I've had. [...] We struggle to communicate. That's been true ever since I've been in town government. [...] I would urge you to set aside those feelings about this, as Dr. Brenner maybe suggested. Let's work on the rest of the budget [...] and just accept that communications sometimes [need improvement]."

The town administrator's proposed budget has not yet been submitted to the Board of Selectmen. That submission is scheduled for this coming Monday with a presentation to the board.