

TOWN OF WESTFORD
Budget Task Force - Benchmarking and Efficiency Working Group
MEETING MINUTES

Date: Monday June 26, 2023

Location: Virtual Meeting

Members Present: Kristen Las, Kristina Greene, Amy Lundquist, Vibhu Jain, Jenny Lin, Valery Young

Las called the meeting to order at 12:33pm.

Benchmarking List: Members discussed the proposed lists of benchmarking communities for both the municipal and school comparisons. The consensus was to edit the list of towns that has long been used for town contract negotiations and other comparisons by removing Wakefield, and adding Shrewsbury and Franklin, resulting in: Acton, Andover, Bedford, Belmont, Billerica, Burlington, Chelmsford, Concord, Dracut, Franklin, Lexington, North Andover, Reading, Shrewsbury, Stoneham, Sudbury, Tewksbury, Wellesley, Westborough, Westwood, Wilmington. The consensus was to use the school's "DART + Adjacent" list of DESE-generated DART districts plus geographically adjacent districts, resulting in: Acton-Boxborough, Arlington, Chelmsford, Carlisle, Groton-Dunstable, Hingham, Holliston, Littleton, Milton, Natick, Needham, Sharon, Tyngsborough, Wellesley, Winchester.

Action: Greene suggested adding a more thorough updating of the benchmarking list to be considered as a final recommendation from the task force.

Municipal Budgets: Members reviewed Greene's preliminary compilation of FY24 town budget data from all of the benchmarking towns, initially started by normalizing by population, but could be done per capita. Department expenses were compared as a percentage of the total budget. By digging into individual town budgets, Greene noted several challenges in the comparisons – for example, how health insurance is reported in each municipality, where vehicle maintenance is categorized, how utilities are charged back or separated. Jain offered to help apply analytical tools to find areas to investigate. This overview dataset could help identify a few towns to investigate further or what questions to ask when interviewing counterparts in other municipalities.

Greene's data set uses town population numbers from 2021. Las suggested using US Census data. Lundquist wondered if operating hours varied between towns for services like Council on Aging and Library, which could show up in spending differences.

Action: Lundquist to research town service operating hours

School Budgets: Lin has started to look for datasets within the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) reporting website but it is not as easily found as the Division of Local Services Municipal Databank. Found per pupil expenditures, and teacher salaries for all DART + Adjacent districts. Greene wondered how DESE reporting would reflect some differences in school expenses, for example whether all districts have their student devices separated to a shared capital budget.

Interviews: Members discussed the value in a list of questions to ask Westford town department heads as well as counterparts in other municipalities to identify possible budget learnings. Las disclosed that as part of her entry plan she did sit-downs with department heads and therefore does not want to participate.

Action: All members should attend next subcommittee meeting with suggestions of questions to ask in interviews.

Action: Las to create list of data sources.

Action: Greene/Las to continue to refine municipal dataset.

Taskforce Feedback: Young shared a draft feedback form to solicit citizen and employee input. Members suggested adding a tick box to indicate resident or employee; information on how to watch Taskforce meetings; and an open spot to indicate willingness to be contacted for follow up.

VOTE: Young MOVED and Greene SECONDED to adjourn at 1:48pm. Approved by unanimous vote.



Town Manager

Date: 7/18/23