

2025-05-08 Public Comments for Northampton School Committee

By: Nathan Chung, Northampton resident

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Introduction

Dear School Committee, I am submitting written public comments for the 5/8/2025 regular meeting of the School Committee. It covers my personal opinion and analysis on topics such as the financial difference between Amherst and Northampton; ESSER spending; and the role of the School Committee. Thank you.

Comparing Amherst and Northampton

During the Monday 5/5 Budget and Properties Subcommittee meeting, Member Stein talked about how Amherst spends significantly more than Northampton on schools and the Mayor’s April 28 statement did not mention it (<https://northamptonma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/30765/Statement-from-Mayor-Gina-Louise-Sciarra-Announcing-489-Million-Direct-Contribution-to-Northampton-Public-Schools-for-Fiscal-Year-2026-PDF>). The context he left out is that Amherst has significantly higher average and median property tax bills and housing costs that reflect the higher tax bills. Also, it has a much higher percentage of renters. It is not an apples-to-apples comparison. Perhaps, the Mayor’s Office can clarify the differences.

In 2025, per DLS, the average single-family tax bill in Amherst was \$9,693 compared to Northampton's \$7,479. Income per capita is much higher in Northampton but note that Amherst has three colleges compared to Northampton's one college. That would imply that Amherst has a higher number of students. I did not look deep into the student population of the two cities. The following is a screenshot for the Average Single-Family Tax Bill table from DLS showing the past five years' data for Amherst, Easthampton, and Northampton.

(https://dls-gw.dor.state.ma.us/reports/rdpage.aspx?rdreport=averagesingletaxbill.singlefamtaxbill_wrange)

| DOR Code | Municipality | Fiscal Year | Single-Family Values | Single-Family Parcels | Average Single-Family Value | Single-Family Tax Bill | Single-Family Tax Bill as % of Value | DOR Income Per Capita | Average Tax Bill as a % of Income | Rank |
|----------|--------------|-------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|------|
| 008 | Amherst | 2025 | 2,225,328,852 | 4,121 | 539,997 | 9,693 | 1.80 | 23,779 | 40.76 | 62 |
| 008 | Amherst | 2024 | 2,094,881,352 | 4,118 | 508,713 | 9,416 | 1.85 | 20,969 | 44.90 | 60 |
| 008 | Amherst | 2023 | 1,837,872,122 | 4,112 | 446,953 | 8,984 | 2.01 | 19,441 | 46.21 | 61 |
| 008 | Amherst | 2022 | 1,663,169,622 | 4,109 | 404,763 | 8,609 | 2.13 | 19,921 | 43.22 | 61 |
| 008 | Amherst | 2021 | 1,542,255,922 | 4,109 | 375,336 | 8,190 | 2.18 | 19,545 | 41.90 | 54 |
| 087 | Easthampton | 2025 | 1,588,388,900 | 4,056 | 391,615 | 5,353 | 1.37 | 36,112 | 14.82 | 243 |
| 087 | Easthampton | 2024 | 1,543,814,200 | 4,052 | 381,001 | 5,166 | 1.36 | 33,894 | 15.24 | 248 |
| 087 | Easthampton | 2023 | 1,387,990,000 | 4,055 | 342,291 | 5,015 | 1.47 | 32,264 | 15.54 | 238 |
| 087 | Easthampton | 2022 | 1,203,880,700 | 4,056 | 296,815 | 4,906 | 1.65 | 31,498 | 15.58 | 233 |
| 087 | Easthampton | 2021 | 1,114,047,300 | 4,052 | 274,938 | 4,822 | 1.75 | 30,618 | 15.75 | 209 |
| 214 | Northampton | 2025 | 3,083,444,183 | 5,743 | 536,905 | 7,479 | 1.39 | 45,873 | 16.30 | 128 |
| 214 | Northampton | 2024 | 2,741,941,983 | 5,740 | 477,690 | 7,256 | 1.52 | 43,997 | 16.49 | 124 |
| 214 | Northampton | 2023 | 2,432,540,683 | 5,730 | 424,527 | 6,725 | 1.58 | 37,315 | 18.02 | 135 |
| 214 | Northampton | 2022 | 2,011,092,100 | 5,708 | 352,329 | 6,303 | 1.79 | 39,191 | 16.08 | 142 |
| 214 | Northampton | 2021 | 1,900,125,186 | 5,688 | 334,059 | 5,803 | 1.74 | 36,175 | 16.04 | 141 |

Amherst has a higher housing cost

Amherst has notably higher housing costs and a higher percentage of renters according to Census data. Please note that renters also pay property taxes, albeit indirectly through their rents. Higher property tax bills would be reflected in higher rents.

The data I looked at is the Census QuickFacts at

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/amhersttowncitymassachusetts,northamptoncitymassachusetts/LND110210>. Screenshot is below.

| Housing | Amherst Town city, Massachusetts | Northampton city, Massachusetts |
|--|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Land area in square miles, 2010 | X | 34.24 |
| PEOPLE | | |
| Housing | | |
| Housing Units, July 1, 2023, (V2023) | X | X |
| Owner-occupied housing unit rate, 2019-2023 | 45.9% | 57.7% |
| Median value of owner-occupied housing units, 2019-2023 | \$454,000 | \$398,000 |
| Median selected monthly owner costs - with a mortgage, 2019-2023 | \$2,768 | \$2,316 |
| Median selected monthly owner costs -without a mortgage, 2019-2023 | \$1,207 | \$988 |
| Median gross rent, 2019-2023 | \$1,570 | \$1,404 |
| Building Permits, 2023 | X | X |

Note that Amherst has a higher median value for owner-occupied housing units and higher monthly housing costs. For Amherst, median owner cost with a mortgage is \$2,768 versus \$2,316 for Northampton. Median gross rent is \$1,570 for Amherst versus \$1,404 for Northampton. Amherst also has a significantly lower owner-occupied housing unit rate of 45.9% compared to Northampton's 57.7%.

Below is a screenshot of the Census Quickfacts Income & Poverty section showing that Amherst has a higher poverty rate. Amherst is a college town with three colleges - Amherst College, Hampshire College, and UMass. Northampton has only Smith College. The higher student population in Amherst likely has an impact on its higher poverty rate and housing costs.

| Income & Poverty | Amherst Town city, Massachusetts | Northampton city, Massachusetts |
|--|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Land area in square miles, 2010 | X | 34.24 |
| PEOPLE | | |
| Income & Poverty | | |
| Median households income (in 2023 dollars), 2019-2023 | \$65,938 | \$78,467 |
| Per capita income in past 12 months (in 2023 dollars), 2019-2023 | \$29,347 | \$48,960 |
| Persons in poverty, percent | ▲ 24.1% | ▲ 12.5% |

Chapter 70 data

Annual Chapter 70 and Net School Spending data is downloadable using the "Chapter 70 District Profiles" link under <https://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/chapter70/default.html>. The link below it, "Chapter 70 Trends in Aid and Local Contribution", shows the key factors influencing Chapter 70 aid. There are the listed factors: Foundation Enrollment, ELL enro, ELL %, Voc enro, Vocational %, Lowinc enro, Lowinc %, Lowinc Group, Labor Market Area, Wage Adjustment Factor.

The data does show that for FY25, Amherst's Actual Net School Spending is 224% of Foundation requirement while Northampton is 144%.

Amherst

Percentage of Foundation

| | | |
|--------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Ch 70 | Required NSS | Actual NSS |
| 47% | 130% | 224% |

Northampton

Percentage of Foundation

| | | |
|--------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Ch 70 | Required NSS | Actual NSS |
| 23% | 104% | 144% |

ESSER Analysis

The City of Northampton was awarded about \$5.2M total in federal ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds from 2020 to 2024 to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19.

In December of 2024, I got ESSER spending line item data covering up to April of 2024 from the business manager of Northampton Schools. After cleaning up the data, I did a rough analysis, assigning each line item to one of three broad categories - Administration and Training, Instruction and Support, Supplies. Instruction and Support involves hiring or payroll. The data was not clear whether the hiring was permanent or temporary. Based on my rough analysis, 21.4% of the funding was spent on Administration and Training, 62.3% on Instruction and Support, and 16.3% on Supplies. I am attaching the full Excel file of my analysis and the two source files. Below is a snippet.

ESSER I, II, III Combined Analysis

| Category | Amount | Percentage of Total Spent |
|-----------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| Administration and Training | \$ 963,933.00 | 21.4% |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|-------|
| Instruction and Support | \$ 2,809,453.00 | 62.3% |
| Supplies | \$ 734,555.00 | 16.3% |
| Total Spent as of April 2024 | \$ 4,507,941.00 | 100% |
| Unspent Remaining as of April 2024 | \$ 721,581.00 | N/A |
| Total Awarded | \$ 5,229,522.00 | N/A |

The analysis brought up for me multiple questions, such as:

1. Was it clearing in the hiring contract that the funding comes from a limited-time grant?
2. Were the ESSER employees transitioned to permanent employees while making sure there is sufficient funding?
3. Were the employees that were laid off last year ESSER-funded employees or ones funded with general funds?

Moving forward, it might reduce confusion if job titles make it clear whether positions are temporary grant-funded ones.

The Role of the School Committee

Questions have come up for me about the role of the School Committee. I noticed that many documents on the role of the School Committee are available. Some are the school charter, DESE’s advisory, the School Committee’s own policy documents. While the foremost is on the wellbeing of the students, the policy documents also imply fiscal responsibility.

From the 1995 web page “Advisory on School Governance”

[Link: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/advisory/cm1115gov.html>]

“Department of Elementary and Secondary Education recommendations: We view the school committee as the publicly elected or appointed equivalent of a board of directors of a corporation, which in this case is a school system. The school committee has oversight of and responsibility for the school system, sets the direction in which the system must go, and establishes criteria to determine if its goals and policies are being met.” [Next paragraph explains the role of the superintendent as the educational leader for the school system.]

Also from the same document:

“Just as a corporate board of directors seeks information and recommendations from the CEO and from others with expertise in a particular field before making policy decisions, an effective school committee solicits information and recommendations from the superintendent before establishing policy. After reviewing and discussing this information, it is the school committee's duty to make the best decision possible based on the information available. Similarly, an

effective superintendent keeps the school committee informed about major administrative decisions and procedures, enabling the committee to assess whether those administrative actions conform to school committee policy.”

From the City of Northampton Charter

[Link: <https://ecode360.com/26839083>]

SECTION 4-5 SCHOOL COMMITTEE POWERS AND DUTIES

The school committee shall have all powers which are conferred on school committees by the General Laws and the additional powers and duties provided by charter, ordinance or otherwise and not inconsistent with the General Laws. The powers and duties of the school committee shall include:

- (1) electing a superintendent of the schools who shall be charged with the administration of the school system, subject only to policy guidelines and directives adopted by the school committee and, upon the recommendation of the superintendent, to establish and appoint assistant or associate superintendents under section 59 of chapter 71 of the General Laws;
- (2) making all reasonable rules and regulations for the management of the public school system and for conducting the business of the school committee as deemed necessary or desirable; and
- (3) adopting and overseeing the administration of an annual operating budget for the school department, subject to appropriation by the city council...”

What the School Committee Policy Documents Say

https://northamptonschools.org/140428_2

Policy BCA, SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEMBER ETHICS (Massachusetts Association of School Committees Code of Ethics), Adoption date: March 13, 2003

A School Committee member in his/her relations with the community should:

1. Realize that his/her primary responsibility is to the children
2. Recognize that his/her basic function is to be policy making and not administrative
3. Remember that he/she is one of a team and must abide by, and carry out, all Committee decisions once they are made
4. Be well informed concerning the duties of a Committee member on both a local and state level
5. Remember that he/she represents the entire community at all times.
6. Accept the office as a Committee member as means of unselfish service with no intent to "play politics," in any sense of the word, or to benefit personally from his/her Committee activities

Policy Section D on Fiscal Management

Policy DA - Fiscal Management Goals: “1. To engage in thorough advance planning, with staff and community involvement, in order to develop budgets and to guide expenditures so as to achieve the greatest educational returns and the greatest contributions to the educational program in relation to dollars expended.”

Policy DB - Annual Budget: “The preparation of the annual operating budget shall be the responsibility of the Superintendent, who may delegate certain aspects of this task to other administrators. The three general areas of responsibility for the Superintendent as budget officer will be budget preparation, budget presentation, and budget administration. Review and adoption of the budget by the School Committee shall conform with applicable requirements, including deadlines imposed by statute and city charter.”

Policy DBD - Budget Goals and Objectives: **“The first priority in the development of an annual budget will be the educational welfare of the children in our schools consistent with the interests of the taxpayers**

Before voting to adopt the budget, the Committee will scrutinize it thoroughly so that it may be adhered to as adopted. However, the Committee recognizes that unforeseen circumstances may require transfers between accounts during a fiscal year.

The Superintendent will have overall responsibility for budget preparation, adhering to deadlines set forth in the city charter”

Suggestions Moving Forward

1. The School Committee (SC) seems to be in need of improving its processes, relationships, and understanding of its power. At the last 4/10 regular meeting, I heard members saying expressions like, “I’m going to vote for the strong budget even though I know it’s totally fiscally irresponsible.” (4:11:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3bLaOrlpfl>) and “I have no power. The School Committee has no power.” (4:15:40 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3bLaOrlpfl>). The SC is the elected policy maker for the biggest department in the City of Northampton in terms of both the number of employees and the budget. Focusing on its lack of the power of appropriation and forgetting its core power and duties sounds to me to be depowering and demoralizing. Some kind of ritual to reorient itself might be helpful. The committee can read through some core laws, policy documents, and advisory documents together to clarify together what they mean. Many of the policy documents were adopted in 2003, so arguing that these are new or not adopted would not be a valid argument.
2. Identify sources of its issues and hire help as necessary. I understand that it is behind many years of meeting minutes. The needed catchup workload is not normal to the point

that regular staff might not be able to do it. The committee might consider hiring temporary help and consultants and even consider using AI to speed up the creation of transcripts and minutes.

3. What I personally observed is deep fissures in relationships and conduct. I observed conduct such as depowering statements as mentioned above, lack of focus on wise policy making, yelling, and using a personal email account to debate a constituent over a public comment made on 2/13. Issues in relationships and conduct might be nearly impossible to solve, but they do need to be talked about for a chance of improvements.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Nathan Chung