



May 4, 2021

To the Residents of Manchester and Essex:

This letter provides an annual update on the status of “Unfunded Liabilities” for the Manchester Essex Regional District (MERSD), specifically employee pensions (excluding teacher pensions, which are funded by the Commonwealth) and retiree health insurance, which is also known as Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB).

What Are Unfunded Liabilities?

Pensions and retiree health insurance are benefits that are offered as a requirement of Massachusetts General Law to employees of MERSD. Because these benefits are legally mandated, government entities must include in their financial statements an estimate of the value of future obligations (i.e., liabilities) related to these programs.

In the past, most school districts and towns in the State paid the cost of these benefits as they came due each year. This approach is often referred to as “pay-as-you-go,” and does not include any pre-funding of future obligations. This lack of pre-funding is the origin for the term “unfunded” liabilities. Pre-funding is considered important by many because actuarial estimates indicate that the cost of these obligations could potentially grow faster over time than taxpayer funded budgets can absorb.

There are two common approaches to reducing unfunded liabilities. First, pension and OPEB cost growth must be contained to ensure that benefits are appropriate and affordable for taxpayers. Second, government employers must begin to move from the “pay as you go” approach towards a strategy that pre-funds future year obligations, and invests those funds to ensure that larger obligations due in future years can be afforded without undue pressure on the annual operating budget.

In recent years, MERSD has increased its pre-funding of pension and retiree health insurance obligations, and has also restructured its health insurance plans considerably, putting the district on a clear path to full funding over time.

How Big Are MERSD’s Unfunded Liabilities?

Estimates of these liabilities are updated each year and published in MERSD’s financial statements which are audited by an outside accounting firm. The financial statements for the most recently concluded fiscal year (which ended on June 30, 2020), contain the following estimates.

Pensions

The unfunded portion of the pension liability attributable to MERSD is estimated to be \$5,770,239.

Most pension programs require contributions from employees and employers. The large majority of MERSD employees are teachers and other licensed personnel (e.g. principals and district administrators), who participate in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' Teachers Contributory Retirement System (MTCRS). For these employees, the Commonwealth pays 100% of the employer share of pension expense, and employees also contribute directly by way of an 11% payroll deduction. As a result, MERSD has no expense, nor any liability whatsoever, for pension costs related to licensed employees.

A smaller number of employees, who are not licensed by the Commonwealth (e.g. custodians, and administrative, school building and teaching assistants), participate in the county pension program, known as Essex Regional Retirement System (ERRS). In the current fiscal year, MERSD's employer-share obligation for ERRS annual contributions totaled \$578,315. ERRS has begun to require its members, including MERSD and the Towns of Manchester and Essex, to pre-fund future pension liabilities and the program is on track to achieve full-funding by 2036, in accordance with Massachusetts General Law. Doing so requires MERSD to increase its annual pension contribution by 6-7% each year through 2030, and by slightly less than 4% thereafter. ERRS has adjusted this funding schedule on several occasions with a general trend of increasing the number of initial years with required higher percentage contribution growth.

The estimate referenced above for MERSD's portion of ERRS' unfunded pension liability is based on applying 1.370% of ERRS' \$421,315,930 unfunded liability to MERSD. This percentage represents MERSD's percentage of total ERRS payroll. ERRS applies this percentage to the total annual required contributions from its members to arrive at MERSD's employer share obligation for the year.

Because pensions, by law, are guaranteed contracts, benefit levels cannot be changed. Although MERSD does not establish benefit levels, we do have the ability to manage pension costs by carefully controlling staffing levels for pension eligible positions. For example, outsourcing custodial services at the new Middle High School when it first opened and at the elementary schools in subsequent years has helped to lower MERSD's percentage of ERRS payroll and, as a result, MERSD's percent of ERRS' pension obligations. MERSD has also outsourced all food service and transportation positions, which further mitigates its future pension liability. As noted in its financial statements, MERSD's current share of ERRS payroll and required contributions has declined steadily over the past several years.

OPEB (Retiree Health Insurance)

MERSD's unfunded liability for OPEB is \$23,910,132 as of June 30, 2020.

By law, MERSD must provide health insurance to all employees who retire with eligibility for pension. The district contributes 70-80% (based on retirement date) of the cost of insurance premiums throughout the duration of retirement, with retirees paying the remaining 20-30%. MERSD's annual obligation for insurance payments on behalf of retirees was \$988,715 in the most recently concluded fiscal year.

In addition to this "pay-as-you-go" expense, MERSD also contributed \$525,677 towards pre-funding future year obligations, in attempt to reduce its unfunded OPEB liability. This additional contribution is funded from savings generated by a negotiated agreement with the Manchester Essex Teachers Association (META) to change benefit levels. The result of this agreement was a \$1.6 million or 87% reduction in the annual gap between pay-as-you-go costs and full pre-funding of annual OPEB

contributions. This gap reduction has improved in recent years, and as of June 30, 2020, MERSD's OPEB plan now covers 96.48% of the actuarially determined annual contribution needed to achieve full funding, far ahead of most regional school districts.

Negotiated benefit changes included reducing the district contribution for health care premiums to 75% for active employees and 70% for new hires, from 80% previously. Additionally, the agreement migrated all employees to an insurance program with lower monthly premiums (which are split between MERSD and employees, based on contribution percentages referenced above) in exchange for introduction of deductibles and/or higher co-pays (which are paid by employees for each doctor's visit or procedure). The negotiated agreement stipulates that in return, all savings from these changes will be placed into an OPEB trust fund for the sole purpose of paying future OPEB costs.

OPEB trust funds can be invested in accordance with restrictions in Massachusetts General Law to earn higher rates of return, thereby reducing future required contributions from MERSD, staff and taxpayers. In FY-17, MERSD established a relationship with the Pension Reserve Investment Management Board (PRIM) to invest the district's OPEB trust funds in the same diversified portfolio used for the State's pension system, MCTRS, and the large majority of regional retirement systems as well, including ERRS. By sending OPEB trust funds to PRIM, MERSD is able to outsource investment risk to specialized professionals with significant experience in long-term investing. By earning a return on its OPEB trust fund investment, MERSD can further reduce the contribution it needs to make from budget funds each year.

As of June 30, 2020, MERSD has contributed a total of \$2,307,422 to its OPEB trust, and based on budget estimates for FY-21 and FY-22, MERSD is on track to contribute \$3.5 million to its OPEB trust fund in just 8 years, setting the district on a clear path to fully fund its OPEB obligation.

Other initiatives that MERSD has undertaken over time also help to mitigate the cost of OPEB including:

- All retirees who are eligible for Medicare (80% of current retirees) are now required to enroll, so MERSD will no longer be their primary insurer. MERSD pays for some supplemental insurance for these retirees, but implementing this change reduces MERSD's cost per participating retiree by 65%, based on the differential in current rates between the district and Medicare supplemental plans.
- MERSD's most recent contract with META included a move to higher deductible plans, with corresponding savings in the cost to MERSD and employees of monthly premiums. A portion of these savings have been set aside for an employer funded Health Reimbursement Account (HRA). In the first year of implementation, MERSD has seen a significant improvement in claims/utilization, which helps to control costs and limit rate increases in subsequent years.
- Prior year negotiations between MERSD and META have helped to curtail growth in spending on insurance as well. Prior to 2011, the district paid 85% of premiums compared to 70% today.
- A new policy beginning July 1, 2013 prohibited retirees from adding insurance coverage after retirement, which will make changes in enrollment levels more predictable.

For more information about MERSD's unfunded liabilities, please visit www.mersd.org, and follow the Quick Link, "Budget." This site contains presentations regarding MERSD's plans to address these liabilities, and copies of audited financial statements and actuarial reports.