



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES March 16, 2021

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	March 16, 2021
Location:	Via Webex
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Finance Sarah Wolf, Chairperson Shannon Erdmann, Vice Chairperson Ken Warnock Ann Cameron Eric Bourke Theresa Whitman Matt Harrington
Absent:	
Guests:	Patricia Puglisi, Principal HS, Jason Waldron, Facilities Manager, Joanne Maino, Principal MS
Recorded by:	Gail Hunter

AGENDA

- A. Call to Order** – Ms. Wolf called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:02 p.m.
- B. Business Meeting Open Session**
 - 1) **Public Comment** – There was no public comment this evening.
 - 2) **Chairman’s Report** – Ms. Wolf stated she had spent the morning touring the District Schools and observed teachers using innovative strategies. The kids appeared happy and

adjusting to their new normal. The tour was a last minute opportunity and Ms. Wolf would be happy to plan a tour for interested Committee members.

Ms. Cameron was interested in hearing what the teacher's had to share. Ms. Wolf indicated the teachers seemed great and were enthusiastic about having the children back in the classroom. Teachers demonstrated their white boards and how they projected what was on their screens onto the boards. Mr. Warnock asked if the classrooms appeared crowded. Ms. Wolf said classrooms were meticulously organized and the K-2 rooms although not normal did not appear crowded. Grades 4 and 5 felt full but safe and comfortable. The atmosphere was relaxed and calm. Ms. Wolf committed that the Memorial School is amazing and beautiful.

Ms. Cameron stated "at the end of this" she would like to have a conversation with teachers to hear what the School Committee can do to improve learning going forward and what was learned from the experience from the teachers professional perspective.

Ms. Wolf indicated on thing she had heard from a High School teacher was the students liked the opportunity to ask questions for the teacher one on one and the teacher planned to incorporate that opportunity into planning moving forward. The music teachers utilized a new program developed during Covid and was excited about using technology moving forward. The teacher indicated students got to watch and rewind lessons and believed that was a useful learning strategy.

Ms. Erdman asked for Ms. Wolf to describe what it was like in the Middle High School. Ms. Wolf stated she understood many students in the Middle High School remained remote and not having spent a lot of time in the Middle High School it was more difficult for her to access. She was there during lunch and the small number of students were 6 feet apart but interacting with each other, with teachers and in the classrooms on Zoom with their classmates. Ms. Wolf was impressed with what she observed.

Ms. Wolf did observe Middle School pool testing. There is a nurse on every floor and the process took a few seconds. She added parents and the communities are doing a great job keeping the covid numbers down and there are reminders everywhere to wear your mask, wash your hands and use Med Bot prior to coming to school.

3) Student Report – Lukas indicated there was not too much new to share with the Committee. Course planning was moving forward for Juniors. He thought that the change for students to choose which cohort they were in would help to increase the number of students participating in school. He pitched the Chipotle fundraiser sponsored by his class and invited Committee members to go to the class Facebook for additional information.

4) Consent Agenda

- Minutes – March 2, 2021
- Acceptance of Warrants, Voucher #1036 and #1037

Ms. Erdmann moved to approve the Consent Agenda., Ms. Cameron seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Ms. Cameron noted snow removal appeared to be high. Mr. Urbas stated snow removal was at the high end of normal but not nearly as high as 2015.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- Elementary Facilities/MSBC (Ann Cameron/Shannon Erdmann) – Report

Ms. Cameron stated there was an uneventful meeting of the Building Committee last week and the project remains on budget and on time. The new wing will be ready close to the beginning of the school year. However, in September parents will follow the same path for drop off and pick up as they have been following this year. Ms. Cameron indicated the Building Committee was lucky to be working with a great team and looks forward to the Grand Opening for community members to tour the new Memorial School.

- Finance Committee (Anne Cameron/Shannon Erdmann) – Report

Ms. Erdmann noted the All Boards meeting had been postponed due to some confusion around the agenda. The Committee will discuss the way forward and plans to rescheduled the meeting.

- Policy Committee (Eric Bourke/Theresa Whitman) – No Report
- Negotiation Committee (Sarah Wolf/Ken Warnock) –

Mr. Warnock indicated the Negotiation Committee was meeting weekly working and planning on transitions. Overall, the Committee is moving forward and making progress with the focus on what is best for the kids.

- 6) **Superintendent's Report** – Superintendent Beaudoin's report is part of continued business.

7) Continued Business

- Essex Playground Plan Enhancements

Mr. Urbas stated the equipment for the Playground was scheduled to arrive mid-May with constructions beginning shortly after arrival. Completion of the installation is anticipated by mid-June. Site preparation includes taking down and leveling the site for the poured in place surfacing. The site preparation is estimated at \$30K to \$35K and was part of the original estimate. There is no change in the estimate from Kompan.

Mr. Urbas indicated there had been conversations with the Working Group around site beautification. The group would like to make sure the site is beautiful and is considering options developed by an Essex parent familiar with playgrounds. Additions to the site include a walking loop around the playground, shade trees and furniture. The Working Group has questions for the

School Committee around will the Committee allow for donated services and or funds. The proposed additions could cost as much as \$50K to \$75K. There are people in the Essex community who want to help and take part in the project. Is the School Committee amenable to fundraising and costs beyond the current proposed project.

Ms. Wolf indicated she would like to hear from Jess Yurwitz and Jake Foster. Mr. Foster stated he was excited for the spring build and for all community members to be able to use the site. He would like to see places to sit, shade trees and walkways. The goal is to make the space usable for the community and to have community engagement in the project.

Ms. Wolf pointed out the community effort needed to be consistent with the District policy. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated the project needed to be in sync with future decisions and asked if the policy was wide enough to provide for this type of community engagement. The proposed expansion of the project would allow for two paths in and out of the area and an outer ring for adults or kids to run around. The proposed rings would be constructed with decompressed stone (painted crushed granite) with stations around the ring, picnic tables adding an oasis of quiet from the active play area.

Ms. Erdmann stated she was excited about the plans and about the playground being usable by the community. She believes it all sounds amazing. Ms. Erdmann indicated the Committee would need to discuss the details. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the Working Group was coming to the Committee hoping for a vote this evening and the proposal moving forward to the Policy Committee.

Ms. Cameron expressed concern around accepting the proposal. She had specific questions about the path going through the play area. Additionally, she is concerned the level of investment by the community would open the playground to the public during the school day when the playground is for Essex Elementary students only. Also, the District has a design plan and Ms. Cameron does not believe the plan should be changed until after the structure is built. Additionally, there is the issue of parity with Memorial School. Ms. Cameron does not wish to approve anything this evening requesting time to answer questions and fully evaluate the new proposal.

Mr. Warnock indicated he believes a few things fit within the realm of the existing policy and the budget apportioned for Eagles Nest, particularly benches and places for resting. He will defer to Mr. Urbas and Mr. Waldron about completing the project in two phases. Mr. Warnock is also concerned with parity and indicated he believes it is important for interested parties from both communities to use the same vendor and be very deliberate with the use of donations.

Ms. Whitman had two areas to point out and ask about. The idea that Essex Elementary has a finite life and that life may be 10 to 15 years represents a whole generation of children and she would like that generation of children to have a playground. She also asked about the lease agreement between the Town and the District. Superintendent Beaudoin answered the first point by stating the general site could be reviewed in 2024-2025 not 15 years from now. Mr. Urbas answered the lease question stating the agreement with the Town gives the District the right and

responsibility to take care of the site. It is the District's responsibility and right and the agreements have worked well for the Towns and the District.

Ms. Cameron stated she was concerned about the possibility of a new school in Essex before 2030 believing the Towns will not be ready to accept the costs. Ms. Cameron pointed out the playground is tucked into the perimeter of the property and would not impact decisions around new building.

Mr. Urbas pointed out Mr. Waldron is in charge of permitting for the site and the proposed changes could involve permitting with the Town and the Conservation Commission. The current agreement with the Town and Conservation Commission is the new playground is on the same footprint. The proposed enhancements extend that footprint. Ms. Wolf concluded there was a lot of enthusiasm around the new playground but the Committee will not be ready to vote prior to the April 5, 2021 meeting.

- Elementary In-Person Transition Update –

[Return to In-Person Learning Next Steps](#)

WHY NOW

- It is in the best interest of students' social emotional and academic health.
- Indicators are met and local COVID metrics are highly favorable.
- State/CDC guidance identified returning students to school as a priority and established guidelines which allow for flexibility in social distancing as long as there are robust mitigation efforts in place.
- Three months of local data have shown no in-school transmission. Schools using lower social distancing standards since October have not experienced in-school transmission (examples Gloucester/Beverly)
- Vaccination program is underway but not a prerequisite to return to in-person learning, per DESE and CDC.

[Elementary In-Person Return](#)

RETURN TIMELINE

- March 22 – ½ Day Remote – Asynchronous for teachers shifting models (3-5 and specialists)
- March 23 – All K-5 students return – All mitigation efforts remain in place – Specialists transition to in-person no later than March 29th
- Monday 1/2 days continue through March 22nd and then revert to original release day schedule (April 5, May 3 & June 7).
- K-5 Enrollment = 449, 2.5% of Elementary students intend to be fully remote until end of year.

REMOTE LEARNING CHANGES

- Step back from hyflex – move to live streaming supported by in room para/monitor
- Serves remote only students & students under DPH/School Quarantine or COVID illness
- Remote access not available for travel or typical absence (sick/appointment. Families must commit to mode of learning – will not be able to shift modes day-to-day or week-to-week.

Livestreaming

- Key change: Primary mode of instruction and lesson design is for in-person classroom learning
- Remote student remains in current class
- Remote student views lessons being taught by classroom teacher
- Remote student aided by an in-classroom education assistant – bridge between school and home.
 - Middle High School Enhanced Hybrid Plan

MHS Enhanced Hybrid Plan Overview

- In-Person Available to all 6-12 students on either April 12th or 26th – Dependent on furniture delivery
- Return – All students able to attend five days per week
- All mitigation efforts remain in place – Average of 4 Feet Social Distancing in Classrooms, Masks, Sanitation Schedule, Handwashing, Distancing, MedBot Attestation, Pooled Testing & Contact Tracing – Maintain 6 feet social distancing at lunch
- At times students will need to work from overflow spaces to maintain social distancing
- Hyflex remains in place – Serves in-person overflow, remote only students & students under DPH/School Quarantine or Covid illness.
- Remote Only Students – MS = 23% HS=50%
- Remote access not available for travel.
- Monday release days continue as scheduled through the end of the year (April 5, May 3 & June7).

Principal Maino pointed out the most significant obstacle for returning to in school is lunch. With a total population of 339 students the building can accommodate 100 students in the gym for lunch and 50 students in the cafeteria. Assuming the MHS does not reach full return, we will be all right but if we are at full student population addition plans will need to be put in place. One consideration is asking juniors and seniors to leave and have their last class of the day remote. Principal Maino concluded it is our desire for students to return to interact with each other and to engage in group work in the classroom. Teachers are excited to have students come back.

Superintendent Beaudoin proposed post April vacation that Monday, April 26, 2021 be a District wide remote day and to request everyone prior to returning to school submit MedBot. It is anticipated there will be a lot of traveling over the April break and this will allow for families to

get tested and give the nurses time to prepare for the return of students. Ms. Wolf stated this is a calendar change and would require a vote of the Committee.

Ms. Whitman moved the School Committee adopt April 26, 2021 as a full remote day, Mr. Bourke seconded the motion. The motion passed with five members in support and two members abstaining.

- FY22 Budget Update

Mr. Urbas provided a quick update of the Covid costs.

In December 2020, the estimate of District Costs including Total Operations, Facilities & Supplies was \$1,054,000 with projected Personnel Costs of \$327K for a total of \$1,381,000 – with projected reimbursements of \$403K CARES/ESSER and \$156K FEMA for a total of \$822K.

In March 2021, the estimate of District Costs including Total Operations, Facilities & Supplies is \$1,005,000 with Projected Personnel Costs of \$436K for a total of \$1,441,200 – projected reimbursement from CARES/ESSER is \$654,729 with no funds from FEMA for a total of \$786,471.

Ms. Cameron asked who was paying the \$786,471. Mr. Urbas replied that cost will come from the District's reserve funds and could go down with help from the Towns. Ms. Cameron asked about new funding from the Recovery Act and how and when will the District know if there is additional support coming. At this time, the new federal funding is anticipated but it is unknown how much funding will be available for the District.

Superintendent Beaudoin indicated the DESE has stated the funds coming may need to offset school funding for programs specifically mentioning summer remediation and the increased cost of the remediation programs not in the FY22 budget. The DESE objective is to keep instruction at the top of the needs list anticipating some students will return to school in need of support. There will likely be mental health concerns, social emotional needs and remedial learning support for students.

Ms. Cameron would like to review the FY21 use of reserve funds. Stating the FY21 use may need to be updated in order to determine what is available for the District's operating budget in FY22 and moving forward. Superintendent Beaudoin stated funds received by the Towns could be used to offset school funding to make up for lost revenue. There has been no specific communication between either Town and the District about sharing resources.

Ms. Erdmann asked if the costs of new furniture to reopen the MHS were reflected in the new numbers. Mr. Urbas stated those numbers are not included but he did not anticipated that was going to be a big number.

Mr. Urbas stated the final Health Insurance number has come in and is less than projected in the budget. Projections were based on a 6% to 8% increase and actually Health Insurance came in at

a -1% increase for the District. This means the District budget can be adjusted to reflect the renewal at \$215K less than originally projected. Mr. Urbas asked what this means for the FY22 budget.

There are options available for the District. Use the funds to reduce the use of reserves and or use the funds to reduce the apportionment to the Towns. In the current budget the District is using funds from OPEB and reducing small capital in that fund. The additional funds can be used as a spending offset or a revenue offset. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated the District was getting money back in the budget and with that the School Committee needs to weigh the short and long term benefits of the funds.

Option one is using the funds to reduce assessments to the Towns, option two is using the funds for replacement of reserves and a possible option three is to put funds back into the OPEB account. Superintendent Beaudoin pointed out if all of the funds go back to the Towns it will lower long term number required in a correction. When the District is careful with reserves the correction, is used to replace reserves and not develop program enhancements. Superintendent does not believe a decision should be made this evening.

Mr. Urbas proposed a middle road for \$214K by using some to reduce reserve usage and some to reduce the assessment to the Towns, taking the assessment from 3.5% to 3.0%. Final analysis question for the Committee is do we use the funds all here, all to reserves or someplace in the middle. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the big picture may not be solved and the District will likely be in the same position next year and more than likely there will be a higher cost for Health Insurance next year. Superintendent Beaudoin stated the most conservative approach would be to put the funds in reserves. On the other hand, short term is may be wise to reduce the assessment to the Towns.

Ma. Cameron asked if the Committee needed to make the decision this evening. Superintendent Beaudoin does not believe that is necessary. Ms. Cameron stated looking at columns J and K either decision helps the Towns but one decision uses more reserves and asked again if there were funds coming from the Federal package. She indicated she is leaning toward OPEB and stabilization. Ms. Erdmann stated she believes a 50/50 split makes sense and that decision is in the collaborative mode that has worked well for the District and Towns.

Mr. Urbas pointed out that for FY22 the District was below the multi-year average for annual increase in the District budget at 3.5% for assessments. And it is important for the District to be careful with spending reserves. It helps the Towns for the District to have a good credit rating and a good credit rating reduces interest on money borrowed to support building projects.

Ms. Erdmann indicated the District was setting the stage for an override and the starting point for the ask was \$356K. Ms. Cameron stated there were \$800K coming from the District reserves. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated municipalities have funds and other Districts were receiving funds. Ms. Erdmann would like that ask to remain on the back burner while Ms. Cameron would like to ask for funds. Mr. Urbas indicated when the deadline was extended the District took a break and has not raised the question again.

Mr. Harrington asked if there was a way for either Superintendent Beaudoin or Mr. Urbas to spend an hour reviewing the current options for him to have a better understanding of the decision that needed to be made. Superintendent Beaudoin indicated she would set up a workshop for interested Committee members.

Superintendent Beaudoin stated the collaborative effort lives in the total assessment line and to push it below 3.5% sets the District up for long term debt. The 3.5% total assessment impact Essex at 3.9% this year and in the past has impacted Manchester at a higher rate. If the District keeps trimming every year there is a point when we come to a reckoning. Ms. Erdmann indicated we are not at level services and the School Committee has trimmed the budget to a point below level services. Ms. Wolf concluded the School Committee needs additional time to make this decision.

8) School Committee Comment

Ms. Cameron thanked Mr. Urbas and Superintendent Beaudoin for the effort in presenting the options available for the Health Insurance funds.

Additionally, Ms. Cameron stated both she and Ms. Erdmann are currently serving on the School Building Committee and would like to stay on the Committee to see the project through to conclusion. If that was acceptable to the remaining members on the Committee. Mr. Warnock stated he would need to think about it and Mr. Bourke indicated he had been considering a hostile takeover of the Building Committee. There was in fact no objection to the plan for Ms. Cameron and Ms. Erdmann to remain on the Building Committee to see the project through to completion. Superintendent Beaudoin will confirm if there is any protocol that would require a different decisions.

9) Adjourn –

Mr. Warnock moved to adjourn the meeting, Ms. Erdmann seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

