



Town of Groton, Connecticut

Meeting Minutes

Town Council Committee of the Whole

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Mayor Bruce Flax, Councilors Dean G. Antipas, Diane Barber, Joe de la Cruz, Greg Grim, Karen F. Morton, Bonnie Nault, Deb Peruzzotti, and Harry A. Watson

Wednesday, March 16, 2016

6:00 PM

Town Hall Annex - Community Room 1

JOINT SPECIAL MEETING WITH THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Flax called the meeting to order at 6:09 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Flax, Councilor Barber, Councilor Grim, Councilor Antipas, Councilor Morton, Councilor Nault, Councilor de la Cruz, Councilor Peruzzotti and Councilor Watson

Also present were Town Manager Mark Oefinger and Executive Assistant Nicki Bresnyan.

Board of Education: Kim Shepardson Watson, Lee White, Gary Baker, Jay Weitlauf, Katrina Fitzgerald, Andrea Ackerman, Superintendent Mike Graner

3. NEW BUSINESS

2014-0312 School Facilities Initiative Update

Discussed

Jon Heller, Chairman of the School Facilities Initiative Task Force (SFITF), noted that the group has worked for over three years to address the middle schools and three aging elementary schools. This presentation is designed to address any questions or concerns about the project in anticipation of a November 2016 referendum.

Mike Zuba of Milone and MacBroom reviewed a PowerPoint presentation addressing facility needs, educational needs, and considerations and costs of the plan, with time for comments and questions.

The SFITF is comprised of representative stakeholders. Mr. Zuba provided an overview of the process particularly noting the development of educational specifications and the community survey. The Town is currently seeking special legislation and doing community outreach on the project.

Issues identified by the SFITF to be addressed included the age of facilities, retention of students in district, air quality concerns, and safety. The group's objectives were to develop a long-term plan to modernize schools and increase educational opportunities that also addresses state mandates and racial balance. The proposed plan continues the long term plan for consolidation of schools.

Mr. Zuba provided an overview of the elementary schools (size, age, reliance on portable classrooms, and deferred maintenance). The schools in greatest need are Claude Chester, Pleasant Valley and S. B. Butler. Deferred costs for those three schools (in 2012 dollars) total over \$27 million to address code issues and critical needs only. At the middle schools, deferred costs are \$27.9 million. Grand total of deferred costs for the priority schools is \$55 million with no modernization of the facilities.

Mr. Zuba then discussed educational needs and the goal to provide 21st Century learning

environments. He noted the increase in the enrollment of Groton students in other school districts which impacts Groton's budget. Currently, there is a STEM magnet program in Catherine Kolnaski and plans for a Performing Arts magnet program at Northeast Academy in 2016-17.

The Groton 2020 expands opportunities for Groton's students: a single middle school provides equal opportunity, focuses resources, and allows for shared resources with the high school, while new elementary schools create the opportunity for new magnet programs.

The Groton 2020 plan will also eliminate the need to redistrict for racial balancing. Mr. Zuba reviewed the 80% diversity grant and why Groton is not eligible to apply this year. If this plan does not pass, Groton Public Schools will have to develop another plan for long term racial balance at all schools. The proposal creates operational efficiencies due to the reduction in the number of schools and the amount of administrative staff. Potential cost avoidance totals \$1.47 million and does not include savings from economies of scale. The plan will also will align schools with current and future demographics. The co-location of the middle and high schools will allow staff to travel between schools, and complement community and recreational assets.

Mr. Zuba reviewed a student population density map from the 2014-2015 school year, noting that the readjustment of buildings to align with population areas is necessary. He further explained the racial balance issue. Elementary school diversity in Groton has increased by nearly 20% since 2001-2002. Shifting demographics indicate that the problem will continue without a change. Shifting enrollments make it difficult for Groton to qualify for a diversity school grant. The state recognizes the problem and that Groton has made an effort to achieve balance through redistricting.

Mr. Zuba summarized the Groton 2020 plan as building a new middle school, reusing the middle schools as elementary schools, and closing S. B. Butler, Claude Chester, and Pleasant Valley elementary schools. The plan proposes intra-district magnet elementary schools to manage long term racial balance. Mr. Zuba added that a strong desire to have a middle/high school campus setting was identified during a stakeholders meeting.

Kemp Morhardt of SLAM described the effort to find a location for a consolidated middle school, which was not feasible on the existing Fitch High School site. The Tow-owned Merritt property was identified and a test fit layout developed. The State Department of Transportation is supportive of the Route 1 access, which would also provide emergency access to Fitch High School. Mr. Morhardt reviewed the building characteristics/layout, site circulation, and athletic facilities/fields.

Mr. Morhardt also prepared test fit studies for a new Pre-K-5 school on the Cutler and West Side Middle School sites while the schools remain in operation. He reviewed building characteristics/layout and site circulation. When the schools are complete, the existing buildings will be demolished. There would be four classrooms per grade, meeting the educational specifications. Each school would accommodate 600 students.

Mr. Morhardt reviewed the construction schedule for the program. All three schools would be constructed simultaneously. Design would happen in January 2017. All students would occupy the new facilities by the 2020-2021 school year.

Cost models were developed throughout the process. Mr. Morhardt reviewed recent cost adjustments. Estimated costs (at Groton's base reimbursement rate) for the middle school are \$90 million (\$38 million state and \$52 million local). For the elementary schools, estimated costs are \$52 million (\$19 million state and \$33 million local). Mr. Zuba noted there was a 4% reduction in Groton's reimbursement rate in the last year.

The public survey measured voter support for the school project at various price points. A net cost to Groton of \$55,000 was identified as the optimal price point. In an effort to obtain a higher reimbursement rate through special legislation, the Town presented the survey information to the state along with Groton's history of failed school referendums. They also discussed the rationale for the plan, facilities improvements, the racial balance issue, programming, and streamlining the operation of the system. The plan was received well, and the state offered its assistance to draft special legislation to help Groton. Groton's one time ask from the state is \$141,000,000. The results of the special legislation should be known in late April. Groton's state legislators are also involved in the process.

Mr. Zuba reviewed implications for Groton taxpayers. The average annual tax increase would be \$88 per \$100,000 of assessed value or \$152 for the median homeowner.

The schedule for a November 2016 referendum was included in the presentation and the next step is a Council resolution to move the project forward to referendum.

In conclusion, Mr. Zuba stated this is the right thing to do for Groton's children, for cost effectiveness, for efficient operations, and for fair educational opportunities.

Mr. Heller recognized members of the Task Force and noted their significant input over the three year period. The group considered all alternatives and combinations and this was overwhelmingly the plan that balanced effectiveness, efficiency, and equity. He expressed the need for Groton to be competitive in the marketplace for schools and noted that reimbursement rates are declining. Deferred maintenance would cost \$55 million and here the Town has an opportunity with the state to get three new schools for the same \$55 million.

Mr. Zuba noted that a new Grasso Tech is being constructed. Access through the site would not be well received by the state and/or it may not be feasible due to the topography. The proposed driveway would also provide secondary access to Fitch High School.

Councilor de la Cruz noted that there were various opinions throughout the process, but restrictions created this plan and consensus. Doing nothing is not an option because of deferred maintenance. New London is continuing to draw students away from Groton.

Councilor Morton stated her skepticism that the plan will solve the racial imbalance problem. Mr. Zuba noted that the school initiative did not stem from racial balance, but from the failure of Phase II and the need to modernize facilities. In that time, racial balance became a more pressing issue. This plan would have new neighborhood attendance zones that would leave space within the schools for a magnet component. The ability to bring in students from other areas of Town with programming will work. Only Northeast would need additional assistance, but that is being addressed with planned programming. Groton needs a flexible program because of extreme change in diversity. Dr. Graner will have to develop attractive programming supported by the buildings and there will have to be a change in how placement is administered. Choice systems are in place in other areas and they work.

The cost to demolish the two middle schools is included in the plan. The plan does not include any recommendations on the disposition of the three elementary schools proposed for closure. With respect to traffic, schedules for the middle school and high school will be staggered and off-site improvements and designs will be incorporated.

Dr. Graner noted that he approached the state about making Fitch an inter-district IB magnet school, but there is a state moratorium on magnet schools.

With respect to parking, Mr. Zuba stated there is no opportunity to use the St. Mary site. The

middle and high school sites will accommodate peak parking needs.

In response to Councilor Antipas, Mr. Heller noted divergent views on the size and number of schools. This proposal emerged as the best alternative that garners the most support. Dr. Graner noted the Board gave a great deal of thought to neighborhood schools and a single middle school, which provides a pathway for students attending the elementary magnet schools. He explained the plan for themed clusters and a middle school IB program. Mr. Zuba added that 25% of all schools in the state are 900 students or larger. The separation of the grades can be accomplished through design. Ms. Watson noted that the single middle school and campus setting were vetted by the Board of Education and included in the educational specifications. Councilor Antipas noted that there are maintenance issues at the remaining schools as well. These costs are being reviewed by Groton Public Schools and costs are being included in the Capital Improvement Program. If this plan is approved, Dr. Graner would not anticipate a major building project for at least a decade. The goal is to retain students and attract new residents who will want to attend Groton schools. Dr. Graner conducted a survey of parents who are sending their children to a magnet school outside of Groton and those that attend Groton schools. Major factors were attendance at themed programs, dissatisfaction with Groton schools, and concern with redistricting.

Councilor Peruzzotti feels there are many positives with the plan and the Town is in a better position than three years ago. Groton officials must be available and accessible to continue to educate citizens about the benefits of the plan.

Councilor de la Cruz noted that a single middle school immediately eliminates racial imbalance. The Town talks about consolidation and efficiency all the time, so the Council should be excited about this plan and get behind it with energy and enthusiasm. \$55 million for three new schools is a ho-brainer."

Kevin Trejo, a member of the SFITF, expressed support for the plan and encouraged the Town Council, RTM, and Board of Education to support it.

Dr. Graner stated that modernization of the facilities is important because of instructional technology, information processing, and infrastructure constraints.

Jim Nault, RTM member, asked about cost avoidance figures and factoring in cost avoidance in implications for taxpayers. Mr. Zuba noted that the plan represents a better use of taxpayer dollars whether the savings are in the budget or redirected to the new schools.

Mayor Flax noted that there is a disparity between Cutler and West Side that needs to be addressed by this plan. He feels the Town is never going to get a better deal from the state and Kicking the can'down the road will only increase the cost.

4. ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Councilor Antipas, seconded by Councilor Watson, to adjourn the meeting at 8:12 p.m.

The motion carried unanimously.