



Town of Groton, Connecticut

Meeting Minutes

Town Council Committee of the Whole

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Mayor Heather Bond Somers, Councilors Dean G. Antipas, Bruce S. Flax, Bill Johnson, Frank O'Beirne, Jr., Deborah L. Peruzzotti, Rita M. Schmidt, James L. Streeter, and Harry A. Watson

Monday, December 19, 2011

6:00 PM

Town Hall Annex - Community Room 1

SPECIAL MEETING - JOINT MEETING WITH BOARD OF EDUCATION

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Somers called the meeting to order at 6:02 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Somers, Councilor Antipas, Councilor Flax, Councilor Johnson, Councilor O'Beirne, Jr., Councilor Peruzzotti, Councilor Schmidt, Councilor Streeter and Councilor Watson

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

Board of Education: Beth Gianacoplos, Kirstin Hoyt, Kim Watson, Shelley Gardner, Beverly Washington, Bob Peruzzotti, Chaz Zezulka, Pat Doyle, Rita Volkmann

3. NEW BUSINESS

2011-0006 Joint Meeting with Board of Education (2011 Standing Referral)

- Fostering Better Communications

Mayor Somers noted that Councilors Flax, Watson, and Peruzzotti have been appointed to the Liaison Committee. The Mayor is hoping that the group can meet on a monthly basis once appointments are made by the Board of Education, RTM and City of Groton.

Mr. Zezulka noted that the Liaison Committee should foster a relationship of working together.

- Goal Setting and Measures of Success

Superintendent Paul Kadri noted that there are indicators that the public is interested in such as keeping taxes down, but at meetings, the focus is on micro issues. He is looking for designed measures of success and mutual goals with the measures based on those goals. Councilor Peruzzotti suggested that both bodies work on their respective goals and then the Liaison Committee can work on identifying mutual goals. Mayor Somers agreed that mutual goals and measures would be beneficial.

Mr. Zezulka stated he would like to know what the RTM and Town Council consider a successful school system for the Town and how is everyone working toward that goal. Ms. Doyle agreed.

Ms. Gianacoplos suggested that the two bodies reach out to the community together, for example facilitating sessions together on what a successful school system looks like. Councilor Watson suggested that the two bodies could have a retreat with a facilitator.

Councilor O'Beirne noted that the Board of Education wants the best for the schools whereas the Town Council wants the best for everyone, which may cause some conflicts.

Mr. Kadri noted he would like to have a discussion about return on investment.

Councilor Flax cited building bridges of communication as well as bridges of trust as a desirable

goal.

- Opportunities for Shared Services

Councilor Watson, who requested a Town Council referral on this subject, noted this discussion is about shared services, not consolidation. The referral was prompted by Councilor Watson's attendance at a CCM conference where this was a workshop topic. Mansfield, Connecticut, for example has one budget, one payroll system, etc. Councilor Watson noted the topic could be discussed in a less formal setting. Maybe there are no efficiencies to be found, but it can be discussed. He noted that PowerPoint presentation could be shared with everyone. Councilor O'Beirne asked that the existing list of shared services be distributed to both groups.

Town Manager Oefinger noted that the RTM has a similar referral. To make a successful program change, all parties must be at the table. The Town Manager suggested this would be a good topic for the Liaison Committee. A successful analysis would involve looking at everything and deciding whether or not it can be done. Ms. Volkmann asked if the City could be included.

Councilor Watson agreed that the Liaison Committee would be an appropriate venue to discuss this topic.

- Long Range School Planning

- Update on Middle School Consolidation Plan

Ms. Gianacoplos started the discussion by noting that the middle school issue has come to a head. There is a need for a short term solution and a long range plan. She encouraged the Town Council to appoint a committee of community members to develop a long range plan for the middle schools. Some form of consolidation is required. Ms. Gianacoplos urged the Town Council to form the committee in the next couple of weeks so that it can begin work in January. Mr. Peruzzotti noted that the revised Vision Committee Report will be turned over to the Board of Education at the next meeting, and then it is up to the Town Council to appoint a committee. Ms. Gianacoplos emphasized that the current middle school consolidation is strictly a short term issue for the Board of Education.

Ms. Gardner qualified that the long range plan will involve more than just the middle schools. Councilor Flax feels the short term solution could impact the long term plan. Mr. Kadri explained that the consolidation of the middle schools at this time is to identify the best use of district funds. Groton Public Schools will retain the third school as swing space and portable units can be moved, so the short term solution will not handicap a long term plan. Mr. Kadri noted that the Phase II plan that failed addressed both short term and long term issues. If there is no Phase II, there is still a short term budgetary issue and a long term facilities issue. A long term plan is at least two years away so the Board must still have a short term budgetary solution. Councilor Peruzzotti noted that Phase I passed on the third attempt. She feels the community understands there is a need for Phase II. The Town needs to figure out what the key elements are from Phase II that must happen and move that section forward without spending too much money. The Town should figure out what people didn't like about the original Phase II and what the Town can afford to move forward on the middle schools.

Ms. Gianacoplos noted that the Board is reconsidering the vote to close a middle school at their 7:30 p.m. meeting following this joint meeting. Closing a school is a budgetary issue. Consolidation is better than eliminating programs.

Ms. Washington stated that she has suggested doing a survey to determine why Phase II failed. Town Manager Oefinger agreed with that approach. He also expressed doubt that a referendum could be pulled together for November, much less June, as suggested by some Board members.

Councilor Streeter noted that the survey approach was successful for the Thames Street referendum.

Mr. Zezulka stated that if the Board votes to keep the three middle schools open (as the community seems to desire) until a long term plan is in place, they will need millions of dollars or they will have to cut programs. Mayor Somers stated that the Council will wait for the Board's decision and deal with the consequences of that decision.

Councilor O'Beirne is hoping that the Vision Committee report will allow the development of a conceptual plan for the middle schools.

Councilor Flax feels there should be parallel plans approaching budget season: consolidation and keeping the three schools open. Mr. Peruzzotti feels that approach did not serve the Board well last year. Mr. Kadri has alternatives that he will be reviewing with the Board. Ms. Volkman noted that there can be short term redistricting to address overcrowding.

Town Manager Oefinger suggested that a special meeting be held when the Vision Committee Report is submitted to the Town Council. He stated that the educational specifications were never updated for the last Phase II plan, which was a problem.

Councilor Washington asked if the Town Council would support keeping three schools open. Mayor Somers noted the Councilor would have to discuss it. Once the Board makes a decision, the Council will discuss whether or not the community can afford it. Ms. Gianacoplos noted that the RTM is the bottom line.

Councilor O'Beirne noted that if the Board of Education decides to close one of the middle schools, consideration must be given to where the dollars will come from this year.

The Town Manager noted that the Board is giving the impression that one of the middle schools would have been closed years ago, but the Board was waiting for Phase II. The Town Council and RTM do not have all the information that the Board of Education has. It is not possible to pre-judge what will happen at budget time.

- CIP Schedule (Consolidation and Long-Term)

The Town Manager distributed the Board of Education's CIP submittals for FYE 2013. If a decision is made to close a middle school, there will have to be a supplemental appropriation. The cost associated with consolidating to two schools is not part of the CIP. The projects identified in the CIP maintain the status quo, but there is recognition that maintaining the status quo is not enough. Some projects will go away with a new school program. FYE 13 Board of Education CIP projects total \$1.6 million, which is equivalent to what was appropriated for the entire Town in FYE 12.

Mr. Kadri noted that Wes Greenleaf developed the projects, the Board identified priorities, and then the Board reviewed the projects and ranked them.

Mr. Zezulka noted that the total six year plan is over \$65 million just to maintain the existing buildings. Some projects have been around since the 1990s.

Town Manager Oefinger noted that there is a concerted effort to address asbestos, which must be abated. Dealing with the issue by building is better than piecemeal. The plan also identifies the schools that have been identified over the years as "keepers" and avoids the three middle schools in recognition that closing one will necessitate changes to the others.

It is clear from the numbers that there is not an equal distribution of projects over the six years. In one year, there is over \$22 million in projects. The Town cannot pay that amount from capital reserve.

The Board and Town Council need to discuss and begin the supplemental appropriation process as soon as possible. Mr. Greenleaf stated he is working on identifying the costs associated with closing a middle school which includes new and relocated portable classrooms, conversion of spaces to classrooms, and relocation of the school-based health center. Grant reimbursement is possible after local approval of the entire amount. Mr. Greenleaf's estimate (order of magnitude) is \$565,000 to \$1.2 million. Asbestos removal at Cutler is also an issue. He noted there is some urgency because the grants need to be applied for.

- FYE 2013 Budget

This topic was not discussed.

- Fitch High School Baseball Field Update

Town Manager Oefinger noted that a letter has been sent to the team and they have responded. The Town feels that under the agreement, the team is liable for the expenses. The team's response did not acknowledge any liability and the Town is working on a response to the team. Town Attorney Eileen Duggan, who has been in contact with the Board's attorney, feels the discussion must now turn to paying the vendors who were hired by the Town. The Town still has issues with the team, but that is on a different time track than making the vendors whole. Mr. Kadri expressed that he would appreciate it if the vendors could be paid.

In response to questions by Mayor Somers, it was noted that the vendor invoices are over 120 days past due and the invoices are from a total of four local and out of state vendors. The contracts with the vendors were signed by the Board of Education. The Town actually received \$380,000, with \$80,000 for lights, \$50,000 for engineering being paid directly by the team. The total amount due to vendors is approximately \$139,000. Groton Public Schools managed the whole project and issued the contracts. The vendors performed the work satisfactorily.

The Town Manager would like the Town Council to adopt a resolution acknowledging the agreement, but allowing the Town to make the vendor payments.

A motion was made by Councilor Watson, seconded by Mayor Somers, to authorize the Town Manager to pay the vendors for the work performed in association with the Fitch baseball field.

The Town Manager stated that payment will be made from Department of Defense (DOD) funding. Councilor O'Beirne suggested that the federal education grant not be used. Mr. Kadri explained that these are not the federal education dollars, but a reimbursement grant from the DOD that is not targeted for educational purposes. This is a separate grant that has historically been used to purchase equipment and supplies. Ms. Gardner asked if the Board will be liable for any further work and Mr. Kadri stated that Town is not obligated to do any additional work.

Councilor Flax questioned why the Town Council must authorize the expenditure of Board of Education funds. The Town Manager explained that because the Town is a party to the agreement which states that there will be no cost to the Town, which he interprets to mean any Town dollars regardless of the source, he feels the Town Council should authorize the payments. The agreement dictates another set of standards and the Town Manager is attempting to uphold that agreement. Town Manager Oefinger further explained that he is looking for the Town Council's concurrence that the vendors should be paid. He would have expected a similar action from the Board of Education, but Mr. Kadri does not agree that is necessary. Mr. Kadri does not view this as Town money because it is not generated by local tax dollars.

A motion was made by Councilor O'Beirne, seconded by Councilor Streeter, to amend the motion to pay the vendors for the work performed in association with the Fitch baseball field, subject to the passing of a similar motion by the Board of Education.

Councilor Watson asked for input from the Board on the issue. Councilor Zezulka supports paying the vendors because he believes the Town will be reimbursed. A number of other Board members also expressed their support. Mr. Kadri noted that the Board will not be able to consider this item until January, which means an additional delay in paying the vendors.

The motion to amend the motion passed by the follow vote:

In favor: 7 - Mayor Bond, Councilor Antipas, Councilor Flax, Councilor Peruzzotti, Councilor Schmidt, Councilor O'Beirne, Councilor Streeter

Opposed: 2 - Councilor Johnson, Councilor Watson

Discussion followed on the delay paying the vendors and the need for formal Board of Education action versus a consensus.

A motion was made by Councilor Flax, seconded by Councilor Peruzzotti, to amend the motion to eliminate the requirement that the Board of Education pass a similar motion.

Councilor O'Beirne does not feel that waiting until January is an issue if it means a proper approval. Councilor Flax feels making the vendors wait is a hardship. Councilor Peruzzotti suggested a verbal indication from the Board of Education of their concurrence with the action. Six board members (Mr. Zezulka, Ms. Washington, Ms. Watson, Ms. Hoyt, Ms. Gianacoplos, and Ms. Doyle) expressed support for paying the vendors.

The motion to amend the motion passed by the follow vote:

In favor: 7 - Mayor Bond, Councilor Antipas, Councilor Flax, Councilor Johnson, Councilor Peruzzotti, Councilor Schmidt, Councilor Watson

Opposed: 2 - Councilor O'Beirne, Councilor Streeter

The original motion as amended passed by the following vote:

In favor: 7 - Mayor Bond, Councilor Antipas, Councilor Flax, Councilor Johnson, Councilor Peruzzotti, Councilor Schmidt, Councilor Watson

Opposed: 2 - Councilor O'Beirne, Councilor Streeter

- Joint Meeting Schedule

Mr. Peruzzotti suggested that the two bodies also meet with local legislators.

The next meeting date will be determined by Mayor Somers and Ms. Hoyt.

4. ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Councilor Watson, seconded by Councilor Peruzzotti, to adjourn the meeting at 7:57 p.m.

The motion carried unanimously.