

SCHOOL FACILITIES INITIATIVE TASK FORCE SPECIAL MEETING
THURSDAY, JANUARY 22, 2015 – 6:30 P.M.
TOWN HALL ANNEX, COMMUNITY ROOM 1

I. ROLL CALL

Present: Ackerman, Ambroise, Bresnahan, Bryer, Cabral, de la Cruz, Dauphinais, Denno, Fitzgerald, Greenleaf, Heller, Koehler, Trejo, Zod
Ex Officio: Watson, Schmidt
Staff: Oefinger, Graner, Kilpatrick, Bresnyan
Consultant: Mike Zuba, Richard Herzer (SLAM)

II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES – October 30, 2014, November 13, 2014, and December 11, 2014

A motion was made by Trejo, seconded by Zod, to approve the minutes of October 20, 2014 as written. The motion carried 14 in favor, 1 abstention (Ambroise). Because there was no quorum at the November 13th and December 11th meetings, no action was taken on the minutes.

III. PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

Town Manager Mark Oefinger distributed communications from Kevin Fiftal, Harry Watson (regarding a natatorium), and Mike Doyle (transmitting suggested FAQs).

IV. ITEMS OF BUSINESS

a. Task Force Housekeeping Items

Trejo expressed concern that the Task Force's efforts are being lumped in with the Board of Education's efforts to address racial imbalance with the state. The plan that is being presented to the state and the public is not the work of the Task Force, but of Groton Public Schools. He suggested that those involved in the process must be clear on roles and who is taking the lead. Discussion followed.

A current list of Task Force members was included in the agenda packet. There is currently a vacancy for a teacher and if Dan O'Donnell resigns, a citizen at large. Oefinger stated that the vacancies can be filled by Town Council appointment, or the Council can be asked to make the group smaller so that there are no quorum problems going forward.

It was noted that Andrew Ilvento, who is a City Councilor and a teacher, and Jackie Massett, who is an RTM member, have indicated a willingness to serve on the Task Force.

b. Recap and Discussion of Middle School on Merritt Property

Mr. Zuba provided an overview of past meetings where those present identified Option D as the preferred option for siting a middle school on the Merritt property. This is the first time that DEEP has received a request to build on property purchased with state funds for open space, but the state is willing to negotiate a trade.

Oefinger stated he would not recommend that the Task Force wait to move forward. Although it may take a year to implement a plan with DEEP, there should be an indication that a plan is approved fairly soon. He summarized four major components of the plan: 1) a single middle school; 2) located on the Merritt property; 3) conversion of West Side Middle School to an elementary school; and 4) conversion of Cutler Middle School to an elementary school. Three out of four of those components do not change if the Merritt property is not available.

Discussion followed on generating local support for the plan, the timing of negotiations with DEEP relative to a referendum, and the need for cost estimates including figures on cost avoidance.

It was noted that a pool is not part of the educational specifications and therefore not part of this plan. In addition, a pool would not be reimbursable. Harry Watson briefly advocated for a pool.

Mr. Zuba explained that the Task Force is charged with test fitting what is in the educational specifications. A pool is not usually located at a middle school. Greenleaf agreed that a pool would be more appropriate at the high school as a separate referendum question. Graner likened a pool to installing a synthetic field at the high school, which is also not reimbursable. Zod suggested that a pool be part of the master planning for the site and that discussions continue. Mr. Zuba noted that a discussion regarding the appropriateness of a pool at the middle school and modifying the educational specifications would be a time consuming process. The consultant can canvass the community on the issue of the pool before the referendum, but before a survey is issued, hard costs and options must be identified.

Graner noted that he attended an IB conference on the middle year program (grades 6-10). It was noted that the program is difficult with two middle schools because teachers need to be in close proximity for training and other purposes.

Heller asked for a vote on Option D and all Task Force members voted unanimously in favor.

c. Cutler and West Side Elementary School Fits

Mr. Herzer has started to look at the details of the elementary school refits at the middle schools. Useable space for different types of spaces and functions totals 55,635 square feet, and a multiplier brings gross square footage to 83,453. Mr. Herzer reviewed a graphic space program and benchmarking for elementary schools (PreK-5, 500 students). The classroom count of the educational specification is higher than the projected capacity based on enrollment. Trejo expressed concern with future space needs for universal PreK.

Mr. Herzer explained the need to identify ways that Groton can maximize the state grant in order to establish a credible cost for the projects. There is a substantial difference between the state standard and Groton's educational specifications (62,300 square feet vs. 80,100 square feet). Reimbursement rate trends show that the rate for Groton has increased from 57.50% in 2012 to 58.57% in 2015; the new construction reimbursement rate is 10% lower. Discussion followed on new construction versus renovate to new. Mr. Herzer indicated he will be doing a hypothetical study of new construction for the state. He then reviewed a list of design goals for the conversions.

Mr. Herzer reviewed photos and first impression of West Side Middle School. There is the possibility for an 8,000 to 10,000 square foot addition.

Cutler Middle School does not have the same grade changes as West Side. Mr. Herzer reviewed photos and first impressions, and noted the possibility for a PreK and Kindergarten classroom addition.

Discussion followed on reuse of the schools and the need for portable classrooms. The Task Force confirmed that the goal is to eliminate portable classrooms at the converted elementary schools.

d. Enrollment Projects

Mr. Zuba reviewed historic enrollments, broken down by elementary, middle, and high schools. A graph showing other public school enrollment by Groton students shows a dramatic rise in students attending New London schools. The dip in elementary school enrollment is directly attributable to the rise in attendance at New London magnet elementary schools. Discussion followed on drawing students back to Groton. Currently the district pays \$1.9 million for 422 students to attend school in other districts. In general, enrollment projections in Groton are fairly stable compared to other communities. The reduction in the number of students from Kindergarten through to upper grades is the Navy effect.

e. Next Steps

For the February meeting, Mr. Zuba will develop costs estimates for the middle school and fit outs/cost estimates for the Cutler and West Side conversions. A public survey will be conducted in March, with the results reviewed in April. The Task Force can then make its recommendations in May.

Oefinger suggested that one of the areas where the Town did not do a good job last time was "taking it on the road". There needs to be a program and consensus building throughout the process. Watson suggested identifying "talking points" after each meeting so that all Task Force members are conveying the same message.

Talking Points:

- 1 middle school, co-located with the high school
- unanimous support of the task force for Option D
- intent to renovate the two middle schools for elementary schools

The Town Manager provided a history and disposition of closed schools and noted the need to correct the public's impression that the Town isn't doing anything. It was suggested that the information be included as a talking point or in the FAQs document.

Discussion followed on the property exchange negotiations with DEEP, which have included closed school sites.

Mr. Zuba suggested updating the cost avoidance numbers associated with closing three elementary schools.

de la Cruz suggested videotaping and broadcasting a message so that it is consistent.

Dauphinais left the meeting at 8:50 p.m.

Graner stated that the community must understand the big plan. Phasing is not possible because Claude Chester (proposed for closure) is a problem with the state. Discussion followed on racial balance and the public survey.

Talking Points:

- The racial balance plan is predicated on moving this plan forward.
- A public survey will be conducted.

Heller suggested that development of a communication plan be put on the next agenda.

f. Adoption of 2015 Regular Meeting Schedule

Discussion followed on meeting dates, continuity of the process, and the needs of the consultant.

A motion was made by Ambroise, seconded by de la Cruz, to adopt the 2015 regular meeting schedule, with the addition of a meeting on February 26th.

The motion carried unanimously.

V. ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Ambroise, seconded by Denno, to adjourn the meeting 9:10 p.m.

The motion carried unanimously.