

SCHOOL FACILITIES INITIATIVE TASK FORCE SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
THURSDAY, JUNE 27, 2013 – 6:30 P.M.
TOWN HALL ANNEX, COMMUNITY ROOM 1

I. ROLL CALL

Present: Bresnahan, Greenleaf (6:58 p.m.), Heller, Koehler, O'Donnell, Semancik, Trejo (6:46 p.m.), Volkmann, Watson, Zod (6:49 p.m.)
Ex Officio: Somers
Staff: Oefinger, Robarge, Bresnyan
Consultant: Mike Zuba, Carly Myers

II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES – June 13, 2013

A motion was made by Somers, seconded by Semancik, to approve the minutes of June 13, 2013 as written.

The motion carried unanimously.

III. PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

Chairman Heller noted that members Jim Streeter and Melissa Roode have resigned.

IV. ITEMS OF BUSINESS

a. Clarification of Board of Education Vision for Schools

Watson noted a full discussion of the middle school vision report by the Board of Education will take place on July 8th. The Vision Report was adopted by the previous Board and the current board has not yet reviewed the document.

Trejo arrived at 6:46 p.m.

Volkmann noted that more people with children in school should be involved in this process. The Board of Education is looking to this Task Force to delve into the issues. Semancik feels that the group has no focus and has made no progress. She suggested that the Task Force should be following the Board's vision.

Zod arrived at 6:49 p.m.

Heller reviewed the Gantt chart for the process noting that the last few months have been a learning curve. He suggested that the current issue is role clarity. Watson noted that she asked that someone from the Superintendent's office attend the meetings and Sean McKenna or his designee will attend going forward.

Somers asked the Town Manager to summarize the issues associated with this process. Town Manager Oefinger stated he is appalled that the group is in the position where this school effort is being characterized as a Town Council effort. Every effort was made early on to make sure that the Board of Education was on board with the school facilities effort. The Board has a vision report for the middle schools, but the middle school issue is interrelated with the elementary schools. It was represented at the beginning of the year that the elementary school vision report was being worked on and it has not been produced.

The School Facilities Task Force has a choice: it can wait for the Board of Education to develop the vision committee reports and disband or the Task Force can move forward and hope that all groups come together. The Town Manager stated that the major reason Phase II was defeated was because the Town Council and Board of Education were not on the same page and it appears that the same thing is happening now. Everyone is in a rush, but the group is not positioning itself to get anything done. His concern is that a lack of consensus becomes an issue for the naysayers and will become a major reason to defeat a referendum.

Greenleaf arrived at 6:58 p.m.

The Town Manager recommended that the Task Force move ahead with what is known and hopefully the groups come together. The middle schools must be addressed, which will have implications on the elementary schools. The intent was originally to get everyone on the same page and take some time to bring everyone up to speed, but now that it is time to develop options, the Task Force is missing important pieces for a successful effort – the vision statements. Heller agreed that the Task Force should put together a proposal that can be adjusted based on Board comments.

Mr. Zuba agreed with developing several courses of action to share with the Board of Education to jumpstart the process.

Discussion followed on affordability versus building for the program and focusing on the middle schools versus the elementary schools.

Mr. Zuba explained after the group develops several courses of action that can address numerous issues, costs will be identified along with pros and cons and fit with the Board of Education's vision.

Volkman questioned reimbursement rates. Mr. Zuba noted that an 80% reimbursement rate is predicated on racial imbalance and designing a magnet school, which is not the case in Groton.

b. Recap of Issues

Mr. Zuba reviewed a PowerPoint presentation on the Groton School Facilities Initiative and provided a recap of issues identified at the last Task Force meeting. He led the Task Force through an exercise to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated

with a two middle school scenario and a one middle school scenario (see attached document prepared by Milone & MacBroom for a more fully developed list of comments).

2 Middle Schools

Strengths: less transportation costs/travel time; different issues at the two middle schools; smaller populations; more management for events; accessibility

Weaknesses: efficiencies; more segregation of students and community; facilities maintenance costs; downsizing of shared facilities; new construction and disposition of abandoned buildings

Opportunities: Divert focus on elementary schools; middle schools not meeting current needs; more parent involvement; expansion opportunities

Threats: Change of previous plan; small kids in big school; not able to integrate early on

Greenleaf asked for information on the size of Groton's middle schools compared to the rest of the state.

1 Middle School

Strengths: early integration; new facility; resources in one place; ability to offer more choices; collaboration of educators; more community center based; avoid split teams; stable class size; redistricting; cost; expand programs; parity; space maximization; security; operational efficiencies; bigger core facilities; better reimbursement rate; more vision

Weaknesses: large space, small kids; transportation; new construction and disposition of abandoned buildings; location

Opportunities: repurposing; new construction; funding; whole Town tax benefit; community center; better quality facilities; equalized opportunities

Threats: might never pass; marketing; hard sell

Mr. Zuba then asked Task Force members to consider changes to the middle schools as they relate to elementary schools.

Opportunities: west side becomes elementary school; cutler takes over for butler; pre-K location; balancing/redistricting; no feeder school issues

Greenleaf explained that the Town has only ever closed schools that had significant issues. West Side and Cutler have always been identified as "keepers" so there would have to be a significant educational reason to close them.

Semancik left the meeting at 8:40 p.m.

The group reviewed a map of potential middle school sites identified in the previous school effort and decided to eliminate sites 2 (Claude Chester), 6 (Fitch Middle), 8 (Hazelnut Hill Road), 9 (Merritt Property), and 10 (New London Road). Discussion followed on adding Sutton Park to the list for consideration. The Town Manager explained that the park requires major improvements. He cautioned that the site has not been vetted at all. Mr. Zuba stated he will identify vacant land parcels for the next meeting.

At the next meeting, Mr. Zuba will revisit this discussion and seek a consensus on direction. Then he can start putting together information on alternatives for the group's consideration.

c. Discussion – Potential Courses of Action (COAs)

This item was not discussed.

V. ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Somers, seconded by Trejo, to adjourn the meeting at 9:02 p.m.

The motion carried unanimously.

Committee Input (prepared by Milone & MacBroom)

2 Middle Schools

Strengths:

- Smaller schools
- Teacher familiarity with different student populations; like to “know what they’re dealing with.”
- Different schools currently have different issues.
- Transportation and accessibility
- More manageable for school events such as concerts

Weaknesses:

- Less efficient
- Miss out on early integration opportunity
- Higher building costs in terms of staff and cost per student to operate
- Concerns of parity and equity with 2 facilities

Opportunities:

- Facilities are fine. Should Focus on elementary schools which are NOT meeting current needs
- More places for community to gather
- Better Parent Involvement
- Expansion at two facilities

Threats:

- Going against the vote from Phase I and some of the promises made at that time.
- Students not integrated until high school

1 Middle School

Strengths:

- Early integration
- Consolidate resources
- Improved District Operational Efficiency; Better use of Fiscal resources
- One less facility to maintain
- Students have more choices re: academic and after-school activities

- Greater opportunity for Teacher Collaboration
- Opportunity for a community center
- Avoid split teams
- Stable class size – larger grade cohorts
- Redistricting advantages
- Cost
- Ability to expand programs
- Parity
- Better Space utilization
- Easier to address Security
- Bigger core facilities, i.e. auditorium and cafeteria
- Opportunity to leverage State funding for larger core facilities

Weaknesses:

- Large space for small kids
- Transportation (???)
- New construction is expensive
- Calls into question the uses of the old schools
- WHERE? Very location-dependent
- Demographics

Opportunities:

- Opportunity to repurpose West Side & Cutler as Neighborhood elementary schools
- New construction – lower capital expenditures and operating costs
- Leverage Funding
- Whole town benefits from new unified school (property values, education)
- Opportunity for Community Center
- Better quality facilities
- Equal opportunities for all middle school students
- Opportunities for more efficient sharing of resources including: social workers, teachers, special education, and other rec. opportunities.

Threats:

- Difficult to pass referendum
- Perception that Smaller kids in a bigger school can feel less safe

- Uninformed voters tied up in emotions vs. facts
- Need to effectively market the idea with 3-4 targeted messages to different

Changes to Middle Schools as they relate to Elementary Schools

Opportunities:

- West Side could become an elementary school, Butler could be converted to an appropriate use
- Pre-K could be redistributed to fit in existing buildings
- Eliminate need for future Racial Balancing/redistricting at Middle level
- Elementary students will know their cohort going forward – no split schools
- Fiscally responsible

Middle School Sites

Sites 2, 8, and 10 were rejected (Claude Chester, Hazelnut Hill Rd, and New London Rd).

Site 7, Flanders Road, has some private interest so it might not be suitable.

Site 9, Merritt Property, may also be unsuitable due to other interest and deed restrictions

Site 11, Sutton Park, had a lot of interest for the committee, being a central location near other schools. MMI will explore initial site feasibility and potential constraints.

Site 5, Farquhar, should be renamed Eastern Bus Site.

MMI will compile a list of potential sites based on the Plan of Conservation Development's land use inventory, focusing on privately held vacant land.