

**Special Meeting Minutes
Fairfield BoE; April 25, 2017**

Call to order of the Special Meeting of the Board of Education and Roll Call

Chairman Philip Dwyer called the Special meeting to order at 7:05PM. Present were members Eileen Liu-McCormack (arrived 8:35PM), Donna Karnal, Jessica Gerber, Philip Dwyer, Trisha Pytko, Jennifer Maxon-Kennelly and John Llewellyn. Marc Patten was absent. Others present were Superintendent Dr. Toni Jones and approximately 25 members of the public.

Mr. Dwyer thanked the public for attending and gave a brief background as to the history of the town hall meetings, which came out of the Communications subcommittee. He welcomed BoF Chairman Tom Flynn, who would act as moderator of the meeting, allowing Mr. Dwyer to participate more freely.

Mr. Flynn thanked the Board and members of the public. He explained the parameters of the meeting as to how the public would comment and how Board members would respond.

Mary Hogue 165 Stonewall Lane. Concerned about where things stand with the budget, especially as it pertains to what's happening at the state level, and how are we positioning ourselves to prepare for the long-term financial issues that we will be facing.

Ms. Karnal said that she wished she knew what was going to happen in 3-5 years. Town does the best they can do in keeping expenses down but we don't want to impact the education system and other services. Not sure what the latest is from the state.

Mr. Dwyer said that the legislature had basically taken the pension cost transfer off the table but the Board is still looking at a potential \$2.3 million reduction to their budget. Thanked state delegation for keeping us abreast of issues. RTM may vote the budget without knowing what the state budget is. We may be looking at a similar scenario in the coming years. There has been talk of structural changes, which we will have to examine, but we do need classrooms and teachers for our students regardless of what other changes take place.

Mrs. Gerber quoted the *CT Mirror* newspaper's coverage of the state budget situation, which is not very positive for now.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said we need to look to things that are going to provide long-term savings – like the proposed solar carports – which won't impact the school services.

Heather DiGrigorio looking at the hard budget cuts being proposed, noticed transportation consolidation and wondered if we are looking at consolidation of private school buses.

Mrs. Gerber said that this is a topic that has been discussed a lot at the Board table. Private school transportation can be difficult because the students are spread out all over. It's complex and Mr. Ficke is always working on it.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that there has been discussion about possibly changing ES start times to save transportation costs. Also want to push the idea of opting out of busing more – many parents don't use buses often it at all, so perhaps getting more opting out will reduce costs. There's new software for transportation so perhaps greater efficiencies can be found.

Mrs. Gerber said one bus reduced will save \$72,000.

Mr. Dwyer said that many parents drive their children to school every day even though we are required by law to provide transportation. Suggested one idea of having children walking to their elementary school and then being bused from there to their MS or HS.

Mr. Llewellyn said that this isn't just a private school issue; it is more of a universal issue as well. He's heard that this is a HS issue too.

Guy Gleysteen 165 Stonewall Lane. Suggested that the district look into opting in to transportation – might make planning better/easier. Asked about the process in benchmarking – how do you find ideas for cost savings.

Mr. Dwyer said that the district could not do opt in – it would go against state law. Regarding the process for cost savings ideas – we ask the staff to look for ways to improve savings. Also ask union groups, Board members. Board reviews ideas at the table, shares thoughts. We look to other districts, and others look to us.

Ms. Pytko said that the budget is very lean. She understands the ramifications of all of the suggested cuts, and hopes there is another way.

Mr. Dwyer said that all of us want the best possible public education system, and that each town body works together.

Mr. Gleysteen asked if the Governor had the ability to increase the education cut.

Mr. Dwyer said that the Governor has some ability to freeze aspects of the budget, but the impact isn't huge.

Frank Sahagian, 20 Chelsea Street, and 8th grade teacher at FWMS. Was looking at the recent meeting minutes and would like to see more discussions regarding structural changes. The elephant in the room is declining enrollment. It's time to push back against the state re: McKinley racial imbalance. Our numbers don't support 11 elementary schools. Redistricting will easily solve racial imbalance. Middle schools will not have the ability to maintain team system, which is problematic for students and teachers. Would like to hear more about what we're going to do structurally.

Ms. Pytko said that the Board has discussed this at great length. Holland Hill is being remodeled, it doesn't seem feasible to do something until after that renovation. Our town is changing, more developments are being built.

Mr. Llewellyn said that redistricting needs to be discussed. It is the economic way to balance some of our problems. Perplexed why the Board wants to expand schools. Racial imbalance plan could be adjusted through a redistricting. There are 100s of empty seats in elementary.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that she respectfully disagrees. The Board has spoken to this topic openly many times. Has never heard a board member say no structural changes ever. This board hired a respected consulting firm to do a thorough examination of redistricting and the advice was to wait until at least Holland Hill. Doesn't believe we can just ship a couple of buses here and there to solve the problem. Shouldn't speak of this as an issue that is easily solved. We should build schools where children are.

Mr. Llewellyn said that we need an active discussion or more analysis. Until

analysis is done we don't know. We are still bringing children in from out of town at some cost.

Mrs. Gerber said that we have done analysis. Milone & MacBroom gave redistricting scenarios. The Board has received a plan, but she believes that we need to wait until Holland Hill is done. Does agree that we should talk to the state on racial imbalance – our state reps and senator have reached out to the state BoE and Commissioner of Education about McKinley – maybe that will help,

Mr. Sahagian understands that this is not an easy process. We need to focus on this. Redistricting is inevitable. Let's not fall into the same traps and perpetuating the myths about the differences between the high schools. We should not have the elementary schools decide where children go to HS. Middle school should decide this, not elementary school. It's a perpetuation of the myth that Ludlowe is a better school than Warde.

Mr. Dwyer said that the district has held the idea that an elementary school should determine where a child goes to MS and HS, but perhaps the Board should look at another way of doing this.

Suzanne Miska, 123 Ryegate Road

Suggests that what's missing from the BoE is a Strategic Plan. Dr. Title chose to do a District Improvement Plan, but now that the town is doing a Strategic Plan, so maybe the school district should do that as well. Another issue is the BoE changing how they vote on items – usually they discuss an item at one meeting and then vote at the next meeting, but recently there have been two instances where they have discussed and voted in the same meeting. This isn't fair to the public. How do we go back to the old way.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that in general that is what we strive for. Sometimes there are worthwhile exceptions though she understands the public has an expectation. She respects the point, although she doesn't have an issue with the exceptions that have been made

Mr. Dwyer there have been very few times where the Board has done this, but the Board reserves some flexibility to make exceptions. He accepts the point that some members of the community may have issues and the Board needs to be careful.

Mrs. Miska asked that the public should be alerted that an item may be voted on instead of just discussed. Keeps hearing about community outreach; this is not that.

Ms. Karnal said that a few times the Board has voted more quickly because of tight deadlines.

Amy Mezoff 261 Robin Lane. Thanked the Board. Has come to many meetings and feels that the 70% of people who don't have kids in schools aren't kept informed about what is happening in the schools. Has lived in town for many years, respects education, but feels left out. Would like to see the Board consider how information is disseminated. There are many items on the district website that she can't access because she doesn't have a password. We are one town, we should all be part of a situation and shouldn't be kept separate because we don't have kids in the school system, is very interested in education.

Mr. Llewellyn said that we should have a standard protocol of how we notice meetings.

Mrs. Maxon-Kenelly questioned the 70% number, as there are people who will soon have children in school who are not included in the 30%. Said that there's very little on Infinite Campus that's for the general public. The website itself is quite comprehensive but is always helpful to hear from the public if certain things are difficult to find. We do have a standard protocol for announcing meetings. All meetings are announced on the town and BoE websites. Agrees that we can always make efforts to reach the public better.

Ms. Mezoff said she's talking about the school district in general. Understands security concerns. Has the sense there's a schism between people who don't have children in schools and those who do. There should be an exchange of information. Is concerned about every dollar taken away from the town that goes to the school system. Her mom worked in the school system, She didn't use to have sense of "them and us" but it exists now. Asks there be more inclusion of some kind. Parks & Rec program is geared primarily for kids in town, and not older people. There is pressure in town and there's a large group of people being ignored. Asks for more inclusion, we are one town, She has to reach in her pocket every time this Board makes a decision. There shouldn't be a sense of division. There might be people willing to help out and volunteer, There's a great wall between groups.

Ms. Pytko has lived in this town for many years, has owned a home for over 5 years. Started going to all town body meetings and sees the issues past just the BoE. Board needs to be cognizant of taxpayers in decisions they make. Need to preserve our town, she doesn't take only the BoE perspective.

Mr. Llewellyn spoke to information that's disseminated versus information that needs to be sought. Should consider adding BoE info to town emails.

Mrs. Gerber said that BoE website has improved in terms of info provided. People can get a lot of info on schools and PTAs, just not directory info. Only need a password for certain info. Suggested reaching out to specific schools for info that can't be found.

Ms. Mezzoff said that doesn't address divide between people with children in school and those who don't.

Sheila Marmion 214 Fairfield Woods Road. What do BoE members want to accomplish in next six months.

Ms. Karnal – children getting as much education as they can in a fiscally responsible way without cutting programs.

Mrs. Gerber – a lot will be determined by the budget. Also wants to focus on District Improvement Plan

Mr. Dwyer budget is number 1; number 2 is finding good candidates for BoE seats open in November

Ms. Pytko committed to district improvement plan and figuring out budget, also helping republicans campaign

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly District Improvement Plan very important. Has been a tough year in many ways. Important that we do things comprehensively and thoughtfully. What are we improving, what should we set loose?

Mr. Llewellyn Would like to see district move towards greater partnership with their parents. We've drifted away from that, hope we go in the other direction. Parents should take more active role in their children's education.

Jason Hyde 85 Tahmore Court. Curious about demographics. If we have a budget shortfall that will continue over the years and the population is going down, doesn't that help reduce the budget shortfall.

Mrs. Gerber hard to say that the enrollment will decline enough to positively impact the enrollment, Have to be careful how much you reduce things when enrolment goes down. In the past when Fairfield has closed too many schools they spent a lot of money then reopening them. It's a tricky balancing act.

Mr. Dwyer we have 250 classroom sections, and if we lose 1 student per section that won't reduce the number of classes or teachers we need. Board divided on which direction to take. Some districts redistrict all the time, this town tries not to. Standards for the benefit of children sometimes cost money. We will go down but then will go back up again. Don't want to be shortsighted and close too many buildings.

Gary Larkin 134 Wilson Street. Son at Warde wants to know if the high schools will be consolidated in the next couple of years.

Mr. Dwyer said he doesn't think anyone on the BoE wants to go down to one HS. Doesn't see how either campus could handle 3000 students.

Ms. Pytko said that the additional magnet students would also add to the HS student population.

Fred Stokeley has two grandchildren moving from Brooklyn to Fairfield. He is a retired school superintendent. Asked about subcontracting maintenance and custodial. When he was Superintendent in Ridgewood, NJ they subcontracted to realize significant savings. Has also been through redistricting. Recommended not closing a school. It's not easy.

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly welcomed a new perspective.

Closing Remarks

Mr. Dwyer thanked the public for coming out.

Mr. Llewellyn the Board has a lot of difficult decisions coming up, hope the public involvement continues

Mrs. Maxon-Kennelly said that public input is invaluable. We shouldn't rely on status quo. We can always do better.

Ms. Pytko thanked the public, and the town bodies.

Mr. Dwyer – USA is a strong country because of public education system. Members of BoE are advocates for the 10,000 students in town. He is in debt to the town for the education provided by the town.

Mrs. Gerber thanked the public and Mr. Flynn and all the town bodies. She said that she has supported the school system before her children were in school and will continue to support the schools after they are out. It's a difficult job, outreach is important. Need to have a diverse and vibrant community supporting schools.

Ms. Karnal thanked the public. Unfortunate that there has been a decrease in the size of the audience at meetings. Commended Mr. Flynn.

Mrs. Liu-McCormack looks forward to hearing the comments in the FairTV recording. We have a great school system and should always push to make it better. Thanked the public for attending.

Adjournment

Ms. Pytko moved/Ms. Karnal seconded the recommended motion "that this Special Meeting of the Board of Education adjourn." Motion passed 7-0. Meeting adjourned at 8:45PM

*Jessica Gerber
Fairfield Board of Education
Secretary*