

**MINUTES OF BOARD RETREAT HELD  
October 20, 2008**

The Board Retreat of the West Windsor-Plainsboro Board of Education was called to order by Mr. Hemant Marathe at 5:15 p.m. in Room 250c at High School South. The following Board members were present:

Mr. John Farrell  
Mr. Anthony Fleres  
Ms. Anjani Gharpure

Mr. Robert Johnson  
Alapakkam Manikandan

Mr. Hemant Marathe  
Ms. Ellen Walsh

Mr. Kaye and Mr. Tucker were absent. Present also were: Dr. Victoria Kniewel, Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Larry Shanok, Assistant Superintendent for Finance/Board Secretary, Dr. Thomas Smith, Assistant Superintendent for Pupil Services/Planning, and Mr. Steven Mayer, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction.

**CONVENE**

In accordance with the State's Sunshine Law, adequate notice of this meeting was provided by mailing a notice of the time, date, location and, to the extent known, the agenda of this meeting to the PRINCETON PACKET, THE TIMES, THE TRENTONIAN, THE HOME NEWS TRIBUNE, AND WEST WINDSOR and PLAINSBORO PUBLIC LIBRARIES. Copies of the notice have also been posted in the board office and filed with Plainsboro's and West Windsor's township clerks and in each of the district schools.

No members of the public were present.

**BOARD PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS**

Mr. Marathe welcomed everyone to the retreat.

**SUPERINTENDENT'S COMMENTS**

Dr. Kniewel conveyed that by the end of the evening, this retreat will provide an opportunity for Board Members and administrators to articulate priorities and understand the reasoning behind the priorities. The outcome should engage all participants in a way that is meaningful, powerful, and furthers the district's strategic agenda.

**DISCUSSION**

Dr. Kniewel introduced the evening by asking every participant to say a few words on what they see as their strengths and major motivation. The discussion moved to a brief review of the legacy statements from the last retreat; the items included additions from the new board members. Discussion of legacy led to a reminder of Stan Katz's parting advice: be customer friendly; keep the parental override; continue to be the leader in per pupil extra curricular spending; and, to avoid complacency.

The Superintendent emphasized the role in the evening's effort of setting a context and priorities. A year ago this evolved into the resolve to construct the four classrooms at High School South and today we hold this retreat in one of the four classrooms.

Strategic Facilities Discussion: Priorities and Next Steps: Dr. Smith began this discussion with the original planning mockups/concepts for the referendum. From its passage in January 2006 with an original completion target of October 2009, all but the pool structure will have been completed by the end of 2008. Mr. Shanok observed while our recent attention has focused on the considerable referendum construction effort at South, many projects have occurred there in addition to the referendum: \$3.8 million has been spent from the annual budget and capital project fund over the past six years. There was a review of the financial parameters of the referendum effort, which included the hard decisions associated with two rounds of bids on the South project of over \$20 million – well over the project estimate of \$15.8 million. As a result, hard choices were made and difficult negotiations ensued. At this time, less than one million dollars is left in the referendum pool of funds to support all remaining referendum activity. While this can be expected to be adequate under many circumstances, careful attention to change orders, requests for support, and bringing the pool structure to fruition must occur. Consensus emerged to focus remaining dollars on only the most essential needs with a particular emphasis on getting the pool structure completed (it was noted that both district pools would be out of service next summer under the current scenario).

Strategic Discussion: Budget 2009-2010: District annual budgets have averaged a 4.3% increase over the past six years. There was a general feeling that that level of increase may not be acceptable for the next budget cycle. The 4.3% increase generally allows spending to grow a little over six million dollars; while not extravagant, it has allowed us to maintain existing programs while adding certified personnel as enrollment grew.

Even assuming budget increases of zero in utilities, health premium expenditures, non-personnel special services expenditures and personnel, maintaining existing programs and contracts would consume an additional five million dollars in the next budget. With zero increases in the above areas, two things become likely. First of all, any spurt in those expenditures will require use of the recently funded emergency reserve and/or use of the meager 2% fund balance left in the district's coffers by State law. Secondly, the moderate increase in these items each year, when coupled with fortuitous spending patterns (some due to weather, others to the impact of employee copays and deductibles on premium rises), has generated the bulk of the tax relief of recent budgets; without this level of tax relief future demands on taxpayers will rise or programs will be curtailed.

Utilizing the State's maximum 4% general fund tax levy increase limit would raise an additional five million dollars. An initial consensus of the board was that an increase of around 2.8% would be the most to be accepted; such an increase would raise about \$3.5 million. In recent years, the annual budget has included \$0.75 million for the capital reserve fund; eliminating this would partially close the gap between the \$3.5 million collected by a 2.8% increase in general fund tax levy and the expected additional spending of \$5.1 million. **If this preliminary estimate holds up, additional program or personnel reductions of \$0.85 million will need to be determined and implemented in this budget cycle.** In addition to the 2.8% tax levy increase target, it was suggested that we be sensitive to situations that result in a large tax increase for one town while the other has a tax reduction.

Further discussions included class size. Small classes are to be avoided. Though attention will be paid to this, significant personnel reductions are unlikely to occur as a result. Sizeable personnel reductions are found when increasing the most common class sizes – where increases are compounded by many such classes.

Strategic Discussion: Program Review Process: Mr. Mayer discussed our model and schedule for program reviews. An extensive table of reviews over time centered the conversation. Issues relating to obtaining board input into the process and informing the board of progress were covered. There was consensus that informing the board at board meetings would be a satisfactory way of informing the board of progress. The administration was encouraged to involve teachers and supervisors in developing the measures of success.

The Superintendent and Mr. Marathe thanked everyone for their participation. Mrs. Walsh expressed her belief that this was the best retreat that she has experienced.

Upon motion by Mr. Johnson, seconded by Mr. Fleres, and by unanimous voice vote, the meeting adjourned at 10:00 p.m.

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Larry Shanok, Board Secretary

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Kathleen M. Bertram