

**BOARD OF EDUCATION
RETREAT MEETING MINUTES
November 8, 2012**

The meeting of the West Windsor-Plainsboro Board of Education was called to order by Mr. Hemant Marathe at 5:55 p.m. in the media center at Grover Middle School. The following board members were present:

Mr. Anthony Fleres
Ms. Michele Kaish

Mr. Richard Kaye
Ms. Dana Krug

Mr. Hemant Marathe

Board Member Xu arrived at 7:17 PM. Board Members Feldman Hurwitz and Johnson were absent. Present also were: Dr. Victoria Kniewel, Superintendent of Schools; Dr. David Aderhold, Deputy Superintendent; Mr. Larry Shanok, Assistant Superintendent for Finance/Board Secretary; Mr. Martin Smith, Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum & Instruction; Mr. Russell Schumacher, Special Assistant for Labor Relations; and, Ms. Alicia Boyko, Director of Human Resources.

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.

SUPERINTENDENT'S COMMENTS

Dr. Kniewel welcomed the board to the retreat. Its purpose is to understand and come to consensus on three major issues surrounding the 2013-14 school year.

BOARD PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS

Mr. Marathe welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted that with the October 26, 2012 resignation of Mrs. Walsh, the district has 65 days to appoint a replacement. It was the consensus that an invitation to the community should be extended for qualified candidates. The model followed for the 2008 Stan Katz resignation would be followed. This means soliciting candidate applications, interviewing at the November 27, 2012 board meeting and appointing an individual at the December 11, 2012 board meeting.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

The Superintendent reviewed ground rules for the retreat. She noted that for each of the topics, the goal would be to understand the background of the issue, its associated timeline, and a likely process. She reviewed the "Flame Diagnostic Exercise" as a useful means of reaching deeper into the tone and identity of each issue and sidestepping a premature jump to action. Over the years earlier boards have also had difficult issues to address; some of those were listed to provide perspective.

SCHOOL BOARD ELECTION and BUDGET VOTE

Our goal is not to reach a decision but to understand the background, timeline and process to change. To come to a consensus on a timeline to make a decision/public vote on the issue.

Last April only 73 school districts retained the budget vote, other districts moved to November. Four of the 73 districts were in Mercer County. The Frequently Asked Questions by the NJSBA from last Spring were reviewed. While no rules are now known for April 2013, it appears likely that a district must make such a switch no later than mid-February. February has disadvantages both of getting close to the time that prospective board members must commit for April and of getting rather close to budget discussions. On the other hand discussions in November/December are not likely to attract the attention of the public with the competition of the holidays.

Extensive discussion followed as the board identified “Reasons to Change” the April election date, “Reasons Not To Change” and “Questions to Consider.” A consensus developed to mention this topic at each board meeting starting on November 13, 2012. This will allow for public comment as well as for opportunity for the topic to appear in the media. Expectation would be that a move to November would be on the January agenda.

MIXED USE SPACE ADDITION

The Superintendent outlined a “Consultancy Protocol” for use in this portion of the meeting. It has been used to facilitate several district discussions recently to positive results. She noted Dave Aderhold would present the essential dilemma. The board members would then ask clarifying questions of the administration. Then the board would have an opportunity to talk among themselves about the dilemma, covering probing questions related to the dilemma.

Dave Aderhold noted that the Central Office has long been inadequate as the home of the district’s administrators, with strong reservations being held by staff, especially about the quality of life in the basement. These inadequacies came to a head with the impact of Hurricane Irene in August 2011. The basement had to be evacuated and even with cleanup, is not adequate for eight hours a day, five days a week use by staff. Temporary moves of Community Education, Human Resources and Payroll allowed operations to continue but do not reflect a stable long term solution. Unaddressed over the years of district growth is the placement of administrators all over the district, making chain of command, communication and control difficult. In comparison, Hopewell Valley a district half our size, has a central office four times as large.

Another associated dilemma involves space at the schools. On the one hand there is evidence that Community Education could meet additional unmet needs of the community if space was available. At the same time individual schools covet spaces now used by Community Education. How can these dilemmas be dealt with effectively? The district briefly examined possibilities associated with leasing, renting and buying space and had serious reservations with each option.

What emerged as most attractive was adding space to an existing site. Village was long ago identified with an eventual standalone administration building and shifting to an addition ameliorates some problems associated with a standalone.

Larry Shanok explored the financing dimension of the space issue. The standard approach to a new building or addition in any school district is a referendum; referendums add to the tax levy. The district, if it chooses, can act on the space issue without impacting the tax levy. For the mixed use space, the balance in the Community Education fund now stands at \$5.4 million. The Capital Reserve of the general fund stands at \$4.8 million and the 2012-13 budget will add \$3.6 million to that total. With the June 30, 2012 excess surplus, \$5.0 million could be added during the coming budget cycle. Thus as much as \$18.8 million is potentially available. Other possible additions of funds were touched upon but not added to the total cited.

It was noted in a clarifying question that some would want the dollars spent on teachers. There are two problems with that: one, capital reserve cannot be used for other than for construction; secondly, these are one time dollars, if teachers were added in the first year, the teachers would have to be terminated in the second year after the funds were spent.

The board engaged in a conversation amongst themselves. The positive aspect of not having to add to the tax levy was noted. A consensus emerged that space is definitely needed. It was noted that administrative space is just as legitimate a need as roof repairs. What needs might be served with a \$8-12 million project? A \$15-16 million project? With these discussions the need to develop more specific plans was noted.

BUDGET PLANNING 2013-14

Martin Smith spoke of the need to understand the multi-year approach to budgeting that has so successfully served the district over the years. After that, an effort would be made to reach a consensus on the preliminary big picture target for the budget effort. To facilitate this topic members are asked to think of the data that they reviewed prior to the retreat. State "I observe..." type statements about the data. "I see a pattern or trend of..." statements too. Were any "surprises" noted in their examination of the data?

Board members made such statements concerning the data. Along with the educational successes of the district over the years, it was noted that those successes were accompanied by moderate increases in costs. using comparable state data, where the average large district added \$3,092 to their per pupil costs, WWPRSD added only \$1,728. This leaves our above average academic performance accompanied by cost per student a thousand dollars per student below the state average.

Examination of widely varying increases in some spending areas through the years, such as health benefits, special education and energy demonstrated the wisdom of adequately budgeting and thus avoided sudden changes in programs to accommodate unbudgeted blips in costs. The district has been good at adding such favorable experiences to excess surplus. It has proven prudent to split the excess surpluses between good levels of tax relief and prudent additions to legal reserves.

In recognition of the entire discussion a consensus emerged to target a zero total tax levy increase in 2013-14 by a judicious combination of tax relief, changes in capital outlay and reserves.

SUMMATION OF THE EVENING

The Superintendent asked for board member reactions to the evening's process. Members found the session productive, that it dealt with important issues of the district, that excellent

collaboration was demonstrated and that more meetings such as this would be good. Our committee system is very productive but there is no substitute for all board members engaging together. The Superintendent and Mr. Marathe thanked everyone for their participation.

Upon motion by Ms. Kaish, seconded by Ms. Krug, and by unanimous voice vote of all present, the meeting adjourned at 10:07 p.m.

Larry Shanok, Board Secretary