

**REGULAR Meeting of the Amherst School Committee
November 9, 2015
Library, Amherst Regional High School**

IN ATTENDANCE

Katherine Appy, Chair
Vira Douangmany-Cage (arr. 6:02 p.m.)
Phoebe Hazzard
Rick Hood
Kathleen Traphagen (arr. 6:06 p.m.)

Maria Geryk, Superintendent
Mike Morris, Assistant Superintendent
Sean Mangano, Finance Director
Jim LaPosta, JCJ Principal Designer
Tom Murphy, JLA Project Manager
Faye Brady, Student Services Director
JoAnn Smith, Student Services Administrator
Nick Yaffe, Wildwood Elem School Principal
Community members & Press
Kimberly Stender, Recorder

1. Welcome

6:00 p.m.

Ms. Appy called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. and reviewed the agenda. Mr. Hood made a motion to approve the minutes from October 20, 2015 and October 26, 2015 (3:30 p.m. and 7:00 p.m.). Ms. Hazzard seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

2. Announcements & Public Comment

6:02 p.m.

Mr. Morris read the following statement to clarify the vote regarding the Education Program (dated November 9, 2015):

I would like to clarify the vote that the School Committee is being asked to take tonight. This vote on the Educational Program is part of the Preliminary Design Program, a set of documents that the School Building Committee has to vote on prior to the submission in early December. It is not a vote on selecting one particular grade configuration or on whether to renovate or build a new school. It is an update to the MSBA on the progress the district is making in that regard as well as many others.

All options that were approved for study by the MSBA will continue to be analyzed as per the process if the School Committee will support the district's Educational Program. To emphasize that point, the language in the Educational Program has been clarified to show that all options will be studied over the next few months.

In terms of why the School Committee is being asked to vote on this document at this juncture, there are many elements of the Educational Program with significant implications for what initial design plans will look like that are not just connected to the grade configuration. The Educational Program is a roadmap that the architects use in developing initial plans and a document the MSBA will vet to ensure that any building project meets the identified educational needs of the community. The architects need to gain clarity on the options to be considered so they can do their work in the feasibility stage over the next few months; they have been incredibly flexible in supporting the desire to have more time to discuss the configuration options, but the other aspects of the document are quite important to the project.

For instance, the science section details specific aspects of classroom and outdoor spaces that architects would need to use in the development of their plans. Similarly, the Special Education section also details the district's commitment to inclusive practices, which has major implications for classroom and school design. There are a great many examples similar to those in the 25 page document.

After the Preliminary Design Program is submitted to the MSBA, they will offer feedback and the architects will provide detailed analysis of the options. The next submission after the PDP in the MSBA process is the Preferred Schematic Report, which is due in mid-February. The purpose of the Preferred Schematic Report is to summarize the process and conclusions of the Preliminary and Final Evaluation of Alternatives and

substantiate and document the District's selection and recommendation of a preferred solution. Prior to this submission, the School Committee as well as the School Building Committee will be asked to take a formal vote on the grade configuration issue. At the time of these votes, estimates of the costs of renovation or rebuilding will not just be based on other MSBA projects, but based on work done in our community. We expect those votes to take place in late January or early February.

I hope this clarifies what is a long and cumbersome process that will hopefully lead to a better teaching and learning environment for our wonderful students and outstanding staff.

Additionally, you are aware that we have hosted multiple meetings at each elementary school, at school committee meetings, with our Special Educational Parent Advisory Council, and at four public forums in the past few weeks.

Two common themes have emerged in the feedback we have received. One is the appreciation of trying to address the teaching and learning needs of our community due to the poor infrastructure of two of our schools. The second is the concern about changing the grade configuration of our schools. In the current set of options, these themes have been seen as conflicting with one another. Many parents/guardians, staff members, and School Committee members have inquired about whether another option can be put on the table for study, namely to have a larger K-6 school built to address the needs of students in North and Central Amherst, leaving Crocker Farm to serve the students in South Amherst.

We engaged the MSBA on this question towards the beginning of this process and received a negative response to having this option as part of the Feasibility study. Given the feedback from the community, we re-engaged the MSBA in this conversation last week. The MSBA is highly interested in having successful projects, and they heard our concerns about finding the right solution to our unique set of challenges. We shared the feedback we have heard from the community about the project.

Given this, the MSBA is willing to reconsider whether a 710 student K-6 school to replace Wildwood and Fort River can be added to the Feasibility Study. We have placed a formal request for the inclusion of this model for study after our conversation with the MSBA. We also requested that the timeline of the project not be affected too much based on this request. The MSBA understood this factor and believes that a long delay in the process will not be needed for them to respond. Tom Murphy, our Owner's Project Manager, was influential in assisting us with communicating with the MSBA and supporting their reconsideration of this idea.

We will share more information when we hear back from the MSBA on this topic.

Upon conclusion, Ms. Appy asked for questions. Ms. Douangmany-Cage inquired about other options to the proposed 750 student school. Mr. Morris responded that the MSBA would consider one K-6 Grade school rather than a 2-6 Grade school. He explained that the statement advocated all options be explored and that the MSBA is willing to re-consider options. In the meantime, the MSBA asked that the Education Program be submitted as is. Ms. Appy added that the statement reflects that the K-6 Grade option will be considered in the feasibility study.

Ms. Appy read a statement from the Special Education Parents Advisory Council (SEPAC) in support of the Education Program (dated November 9, 2015). "*As Executive Board members of the Special Education Parent Advisory Council, we are expressing our support of approving the Educational Program. We hope the proposals explored take into consideration solutions that benefit all students of Amherst.*" Signed Laura Kent and Nancy Stewart. Although the SEPAC statement was dated November 3, 2015, Ms. Appy ensured the committee that SEPAC members read the updated version of the Education Program and remained in support of the plan. She then clarified an erroneous statistic she stated at a previous meeting: 20% of special needs students are currently enrolled in the Amherst Elementary Schools, not 10% as stated.

Ms. Appy then called for public comment. Laura Quilter (Wildwood PGO) stated that responses from parents/guardians and staff were being compiled and would be sent to all school committee members soon. She anticipated more postcards arriving from the Wildwood community. Russ Vernon-Jones (former principal of Fort River Elementary School) stated that K-6 Grade schools would be best because continuous staff and family relationships are critical to student success. Three K-6 Grade schools should exist in Amherst even if two of these schools share one roof. Vince O'Connor (community member) stressed that parent participation is important to student success and currently there exists a divide between parents and administration regarding a new school. He submitted a financial proposal which places new schools over other proposed municipal capital projects. Janet McGowen (community member) requested that the three major projects currently being considered be intertwined so the community could get a better sense of the information. She called for the creation of a fresh and open process in which more parents could be involved.

3. Superintendent's Update

6:27 p.m.

An update was not presented.

4. New & Continuing Business

6:27 p.m.

A. Letter Supporting HB326

DOCUMENT: Letter Supporting House Bill 326

Ms. Appy read the letter in its entirety and asked that all members support the request. The letter would then be sent to local legislators. Mr. Hood moved to endorse the letter and Ms. Hazzard seconded. Ms. Traphagen cautioned that the letter as written was not completely accurate as some students may benefit from charter schools. She did indicate that she understands that the letter was about financials and budgets. She recommended that the letter be tweaked slightly to reflect the budgetary implications. Ms. Appy agreed to do so. A unanimous vote was recorded.

B. Educational Program

6:35 p.m.

DOCUMENT: Educational Program (dated November 9, 2105)

Ms. Appy moved to approve the Educational Program for the Wildwood Building Project, as presented, which specifies that all three of the MSBA-approved options, which are to renovate Wildwood, to rebuild Wildwood, or for a reconfiguration, as well as other options approved by the MSBA in the next month, will be included in the Feasibility Study. The motion was seconded by Ms. Traphagen. Mr. Morris clarified several changes throughout the document (page 8 and pages 21-22). He thanks Ms. Traphagen for prompting these changes. Ms. Appy then asked for questions. Mr. Hood clarified why the committee was voting solely on grade configuration while the Building Committee voted on the majority of items associated with the building design. He stated that the MSBA required school committees to vote on local requirements. He requested that a calendar be created which clearly indicates new items and votes. Mr. Morris agreed with Mr. Hood and added that the Education Program is a guide for use by the architects. He urged the committee to make a decision and vote tonight to approve the plan so that the design process can move forward. Mr. Hood understands the MSBA timeline but thinks perhaps the school committee should have more of a voice in the overall voting process. Mr. Morris announced that another community forum was being planned for early December (potentially Tuesday, December 8, 2015). Ms. Hazzard expressed her concerns around community engagement and what specific items will be addressed at the forum. Mr. Morris added that the December community forum would focus on site challenges and barriers (flood plain, topography, plan to re-locate students during construction, etc). He mentioned that the ARPS Family Center will host an event in the ARHS Library at 6:30 p.m. on December 17, 2015 to explain the plan to those who want to learn more. Mr. LaPosta added that the architects can begin designs as soon as the grade configuration is confirmed. Once this occurs, a budget can be created and the community will help decide the vision of a new school. He added that JCJ and JLA will continue to be present at all meetings and forums to clarify information, address concerns and answer questions. He will create a new calendar based upon Mr. Hood's request and provide more specifics as the process progresses. Cost estimates will be provided in January 2016. Ms. Appy added that the community must learn about and understand the educational benefits of a new building. Ms. Hazzard would like to see students involved in the process and Mr. LaPosta indicated that students contribute later in the process when classrooms and common spaces are being designed (perhaps in late 2016). Ms. Douangmany-Cage

stated that she is leaning more towards rejecting the educational program because the edits were not reflected in the current motion. She stated that she believes in the mission of education in Amherst but does not support a 750 student mega school. Mr. Morris clarified that the MSBA recommended that the K-6 Grade option not be included in the current Educational Program and that it could be added later. Mr. Hood asked if the Educational Program would 'lock us in' to one specific type of building design. Mr. Morris referred to the Guiding Principles (page 3) which will help establish core values throughout the building process. Ms. Traphagen suggested adding a bullet point indicating multiage peer mentoring. She will send a sample sentence for Mr. Morris to include in the document. She also would like the committee to have a conversation regarding the cost of building two new K-6 Grade schools to replace Fort River and Wildwood as the MSBA grant pertains only to Wildwood. Mr. Morris agreed that this would be an interesting conversation involving many facets with grade configuration being the priority. Ms. Traphagen was curious to know what would happen if the school committee fails to agree with the building committee. Mr. Murphy replied that the school committee votes on the educational program and the building committee votes on all other aspects of the process. The MSBA requires approval of the building committee and not necessarily the school committee. Ms. Douangmany-Cage is concerned because the building committee is not elected but selected by the Central Office. In this way, the committee seems stacked. The building committee may not be entirely representative of the community as most residents may not agree with a new mega school. She added that the process seems sloppy and is confusing to many. She thought it might be helpful to invite the MSBA to speak with community members. Ms. Appy asked Ms. Douangmany-Cage to use caution and discretion regarding comments directed towards building committee members. She stated that the intentions of the building committee and the MSBA's role are clear. Mr. Morris pointed out that the individuals listed in the report (page 25) are the working group and not the actual building committee on which town officials, administrators, parents and UMASS faculty sit (as stated in a letter to the MSBA dated May, 15, 2015). Ms. Traphagen asked if the building committee will have all information by January 2016 and suggested that the school committee also vote on all components of the plan. Mr. Murphy indicated that the building committee will vote prior to January 19, 2015 because the MSBA must remain on their timeline. Mr. Morris added that if the grade configuration is changed, a vote by the school committee is required. Mr. Murphy stressed that the MSBA would like one vote which reflects the voice of the school committee, building committee and community. Ms. Geryk suggested that the school committee review and comment on the plan first so that the building committee will be aware of the school committee's position on the plan. Ms. Appy stated that the school committee would vote on a preferred option. Ms. Traphagen stressed that the school committee's decision must be very clear. Ms. Geryk requested that the school committee weigh different options and the ultimate decision will be extremely helpful to the building committee. Ms. Traphagen stressed that however the school committee decides to vote, it must be aligned with the building committee and crafted to go before Town Meeting for a possible override. Mr. Morris agreed that this was a complicated process and the option to build a second school outside the purview of the MSBA would also mean it is outside the purview of the school committee. Ms. Hazzard asked if there was a financially viable way to re-build Fort River by the town and not with assistance from the MSBA. Ms. Appy added that more information will come regarding the K-6 Grade building costs associated with town money. She reminded the group that the only decision by the school committee will be grade configuration and all other votes by the school committee are simply advisory in nature. Ms. Douangmany-Cage remains firm in her belief that the 20 member building committee is stacked with individuals aligned with Central Office. She added that the MSBA will review any new plans and that Amherst would not be placed in the back of the line as the needs of Amherst schools remain obvious. She concluded that Wildwood and Fort River are mentioned in the same program so it would be easy to re-submit a plan if necessary. Mr. Hood stated he was not too concerned about MSBA funding Fort River in the future but is concerned about potential overrides. Mr. Morris clarified that the people listed on the Building Committee in the Education Program (page 25) are different from those on the form sent to the MSBA on May 15, 2015. He added that \$30 million in grants were awarded to the communities of Plymouth and Newton to fund new school buildings. Amherst could potentially be awarded a similar grant. Ms. Appy thanked Ron Bohonowicz, Mr. Morris and Ms. Geryk for their leadership throughout the process. She called for a vote and re-read the motion: I move to approve the Educational Program for the Wildwood Building Project, as presented, which specifies that all three of the MSBA-approved options,

which are to renovate Wildwood, to rebuild Wildwood, or for a reconfiguration, as well as other options approved by the MSBA in the next month, will be included in the Feasibility Study. The motion passed with one opposition (Douangmany-Cage).

C. FY 17 Budget Guidance

7:39 p.m.

DOCUMENT: Budget Guidance Examples (dated 10.27.15)

Mr. Mangano reviewed the document and asked the committee if this seemed in line with expectations for fiscal year 2106. Mr. Hood reminded that guidelines were put in place in 2012 so the community was not surprised by changes and suggestions. He added that cuts and adds matter most in the process. Ms. Geryk stated that guidelines are helpful when a gap exists and reductions must be made. The District Improvement Plan and goals are in place and Mr. Mangano can use them to format budgets. Mr. Mangano explained that all three budgets (Amherst, Pelham, Region) are identical in base but are adjusted per district. Ms. Geryk asked if the budget could be reviewed by school committee members prior to the Four Town meeting (scheduled for December 5, 2015). Mr. Mangano agreed to this request.

D. Accept Gifts

7:50 p.m.

There were no gifts to accept.

5. School Committee Planning

7:50p.m.

Mr. Mangano asked that the fee review be added to the November 17, 2105 agenda. Mr. Morris invited members to submit specific questions and comments for Mr. Murphy and Mr. LaPosta so a school building project calendar can be created. Mr. Hood thanked Amherst Media for filming all school committee and town meetings. Ms. Douangmany-Cage thanked everyone for their continued work and commitment.

6. Adjournment

7:53 p.m.

Mr. Hood moved to adjourn and Ms. Traphagen seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Kimberly Stender