

**Amherst School Committee Meeting
Tuesday, November 15, 2016
Library, Amherst Regional High School**

IN ATTENDANCE

Katherine Appy, Chair
Phoebe Hazzard
Eric Nakajima
Vira Douangmany-Cage

Mike Morris, Interim Superintendent
Sean Mangano, Finance Director
Public and Press
Debbie Westmoreland, Recorder

ABSENT:

Anastasia Ordonez

1. Call to Order and Approve Minutes

6:05 p.m.

Ms. Appy called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. and noted that Ms. Ordonez cannot attend this evening. Ms. Ordonez provided correspondence for Ms. Appy to read later in the meeting. Ms. Hazzard moved to approve the minutes of October 20 and October 25, 2016. Mr. Nakajima seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

2. Announcements and Public Comment

6:06 p.m.

Marla Jamate, Crocker Farm parent, read a letter on behalf of Save Amherst's Small Schools (SASS) which is attached in its entirety. Vince O'Connor, Precinct 1 Town Meeting member, spoke about the process that happened when the high school renovation was done in 1992. He urged the school committee to re-submit the Wildwood school for MSBA funding and take some of the money that was going to become available from Article 5 to possibly have a proposal ready for Town Meeting and the voters within a year, without going through MSBA.

3. Interim Superintendent's Update

6:13 p.m.

Dr. Morris reported on a number of topics including:

- Water fixture repairs were completed over the Veterans Day weekend on the remaining three fixtures that retested above the action level at Crocker Farm and half of the fixtures at Fort River. The repaired fixtures will be retested this week.
- Yesterday SEPAC held a free workshop on the topic of Supporting Teens with Executive Functioning Challenges at ARHS which was attended by about 30 people.
- The ARPS Family Center hosted the first Juntos We Play event at Olympia Oaks last week with about 30 adults and children in attendance.
- The dental van, which provides free dental services for children, will be at Wildwood and ARMS this week.
- The Warm Winter Clothing Share sponsored by the PGOs is happening again this year, in partnership with the ARPS Family Center at the secondary level.
- The electric school bus purchased by a grant to the Amherst District will be delivered this Friday.
- Jennifer Harris of Zaner-Bloser has agreed to meet with Dr. Morris and one or two members of the Amherst School Committee to review the revised illustrations of the Superkids second grade curriculum materials. She will meet with a larger group after any revisions that come out of that meeting are made. Ms. Ordonez and Ms. Hazzard volunteered to participate in the meeting.

4. New and Continuing Business

6:15 p.m.

A. FY18 Budget Guidance Discussion

Mr. Mangano noted that this is an opportunity for the committee to discuss any guidance they want the district administration to consider during the planning of the FY18 Amherst School Budget. Dr. Morris noted that since there was not a positive vote on the elementary project last night, operational savings will be lower than projected in years going forward. He cautioned that he does not anticipate this being a year that can include many additions. Ms. Douangmany Cage noted that she would like to see implementation of the policy on climate data collection and analysis, which requires participatory action research. She stated that she would also like to see how restorative practice can be more deeply supported. Ms. Douangmany Cage also noted that SETF is asking for a moratorium on implementation of the food services collection policy until they can review it and offer suggestions. Ms. Appy invited SETF members to attend the next Policy Subcommittee meeting, which is tentatively scheduled for June 30 at 4:30 p.m., to talk about the Food Service Collections policy. Ms. Hazzard asked if the library paraprofessional positions will be in danger of being cut again since they were restored from free cash this year. Mr. Mangano explained that there is already some free cash amount built into the town's

planning for how much the budget can be increased each year. He noted that no cuts have been considered yet, but it was clear how highly the town values the library paraprofessional positions. Mr. Nakajima noted that he will be able to offer more guidance after he sees spreadsheets and fixed costs. Ms. Appy noted that maintaining class size to the school committee guidance level as much as possible and keeping cuts as far away from the classroom as possible are her priorities. Mr. Mangano noted that field trips are something that has been supported in the past, and the committee expressed their support.

B. Disposal of Surplus Equipment

DOCUMENT: Memo to Michael Morris, Interim Superintendent and the Amherst, Pelham and Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committees from Sean Mangano, Director of Finance, regarding Disposal of Surplus Equipment dated November 15, 2016; List of Surplus Wireless Equipment

Mr. Mangano noted that the list provided to the School Committee is technology devices that have surpassed their useful lives and are ready for disposal. Most of the items resulted from the upgrade to the district's wireless infrastructure last summer. Ms. Douangmany Cage moved to declare the attached list of technology equipment surplus and to authorize the Director of Finance to auction off, donate or otherwise dispose of this equipment in conjunction with provisions of MGL 30B. Ms. Hazzard seconded and Mr. Mangano answered clarifying questions. Mr. Nakajima asked what happens to the equipment that is declared surplus. Mr. Mangano explained that if there is any residual value it will be sold through bids, if not it will be offered to other schools as a donation, and the last option is to throw it away. Ms. Hazzard asked if it is recycled if possible and Mr. Mangano confirmed that it is. The motion was then unanimously approved.

C. Amherst School Building Project Update

Dr. Morris read the statement below, noting that the first half will be sent to the School Building Committee and architects tomorrow:

After last night's vote of Town Meeting, which failed to support the elementary building project, I want to update you about moving forward:

Last night, Town Meeting voted and did not approve the borrowing for the new schools. While the member vote was roughly 50/50, the vote required 2/3 approval in order for the project to move forward. I had a scheduled phone call with MSBA this morning. The MSBA has halted funding for the project. In short, the project that was approved by the MSBA after a 2 year feasibility study and was voted by the citizens of Amherst, was rejected by Town Meeting last night. While Town Meeting could reconsider their vote on this specific project in the very near future (that is the only vehicle to stay in the pipeline), I do not anticipate a positive outcome given the opposition voiced last night by Town Meeting members. The MSBA, the Town electorate AND Town Meeting ALL had to say "Yes" for the project to move forward. Despite the MSBA and Town Voters saying, "Yes", Town Meeting emphatically said "No." To be clear, there are no other options with MSBA at the current time and no district or MSBA funds are available to develop alternative options.

The district will re-apply to MSBA, but if it is approved (which is unlikely), it will be a minimum of 5-7 years before a new building is constructed. It is important to note that it took 7 years for the MSBA to accept our application for funding the Wildwood project.

- There are currently critical building needs, such as the boiler at Wildwood, that must be addressed in the very near future. These projects will need to be financed with Town funds without the benefit of MSBA funding. That will be discussed in the coming weeks/months.
- Today, we are taking care of our students and staff as many absorb the deep disappointment and loss for the future of our schools. I have been to Fort River and Wildwood and have interacted with teachers who expressed their opinions to me on what has occurred.
- There are really no "next steps" to be taken in the near term. We have estimates of costs for all possible scenarios. To those in our school and larger community who dedicated years of work to the Wildwood Building Project, thank you for all your work and for your commitment to providing the highest quality of education and learning environment for the students and staff of Amherst.

On an educational level, I am saddened by the result for a few reasons:

- For the 2nd time in a week, the popular vote of a diverse demographic was not honored as an outcome of an election process. While I am not arguing against the electoral college nor town meeting, it calls into question who is disenfranchised in this process
- This vote closed the door on SE programming without busing. Apologize. No solution
- The topic of zoning of students on East Hadley Road may be one that the Committee wants to take up. I see no excellent solution—both the current one that equalized SES between schools by forced bussing of low-income students and the previous one that had wide demographic disparities between schools are inherently flawed.
- This vote closed the door on operational savings. As we enter budget season, we cannot use choice funds as a “bridge” to more efficient days to come as we had planned. We anticipate having to make budget cuts.
- This vote closed the door on adding preschool classes without making other classroom cuts. Given fiscal climate, no solution.
- This vote closed the door on enhanced ELL programming. Given fiscal climate, no solution.
- The issue of the condition of the current school buildings of FR and WW. No quick solution.
- I apologize to the students and staff. You all deserve more than what I can offer.

Ms. Appy thanked Dr. Morris for his leadership on this project, noting that he did it with incredible integrity, keeping the children’s needs front and center throughout the process. There was brief discussion and clarifying questions regarding the possibility of, and process for, reapplying with MSBA. Ms. Hazzard then read the following statement:

I would like to thank all the people who have put thousands of hours into developing and supporting this project, and to all those who voted to support it. To our superintendent, I want to say that I have never worked with a leader who approached everything with the level of thoughtfulness and competence as Dr. Michael Morris. To quote an administrator in our district, which I wanted to do last night but didn’t have the opportunity:

“Mike embodies all the qualities that Amherst education strives to inspire in our youth. He is an exceptionally fair minded and even handed leader, whose humble and thoughtful approach to discourse invites all voices to be heard, and considered. He is well-versed in current research and displays agility in decision making to balance research literature with classroom practice. His dedication to equity and social justice is palpable in every conversation, and each commitment he makes to our community.”

Thank you, Dr. Morris, for putting all that you had into the effort to do right by our students.

The results of last night’s town meeting are devastating for our community. As we are seeing in the larger political theater, narrow self-interest, fear of change, fear of coming together as a unified community, and a deep distrust of any kind of leadership — including leadership we have chosen — has dominated.

I want to extend my apologies to all those children, teachers and staff who will continue to go to school in buildings with poor daylighting, a ridiculous layout that detracts every day from teaching a learning, and recurring mold and moisture problems, with no plan ahead. To our maintenance staff, thank you for all that you do to keep these buildings looking and feeling as good as possible — I know you are being stretched to the limit to do so. Pictures were presented last night to demonstrate how “fine” Fort River is, and I want to give credit to our staff who work so hard to keep it that way and the teachers who do an amazing job teaching in a really difficult environment. Of course you make the best of it, because you care so deeply about the our children and their education. For those impressive efforts to be used as evidence of why you shouldn’t get a new school is incredibly unjust.

What we leave in the wake of last night is huge lost opportunities: the opportunity to finally genuinely integrate our schools — and not in a way that is just most convenient to those who have money, power, and privilege; the opportunity for our children with special education needs to truly be included in our community; the opportunity to give young kids a preschool education who now won’t get it. We are talking about real children here — kids who I know, children of my friends who live this reality every day. That’s who we’ve shut out.

When people refer to the survey last January as evidence that we didn't listen, my response is that not listening is different than not agreeing. I strongly considered the twin k-6 option based on the arguments people were making about k-6 schools — in fact was my family can attest I agonized for many sleepless nights over it. I also went and met with as many people as I could who could give me perspectives on the larger experience of all the children in our district. The more I listened, the more I understood how our current system has fundamental problems in how it serves the more marginalized children in our community. Myself as a parent thinking about the individual experience of my own children, I never would have seen the inequities that exist. I have often been advised that, when faced with a difficult decision, a school committee member must always go back to what is best for the kids. In the end, when I stacked up all the arguments, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the reconfiguration was the best option for the kids. Would k-6 reading buddies be missed? Sure, but given the creativity of our staff there is no doubt they would come up positive inter-class opportunities. Sixth and second graders could be buddies. First graders could become leaders for preschoolers. Young children could have field trips to the new school. This is a problem we could address. Is transitioning after first grade the perfect scenario if we had a blank slate? Maybe not, but children traveling three miles up the road to a beautiful new school with all their friends is a transition we could manage. Compared to the resolution of long-standing unfair busing practices, the opportunity to jump-start the success of thirty more children at the preschool level, and the ability to give our special education and English language learners that much better of a chance at success and integration, these arguments did not hold up. Given these and many other considerations, I voted to support the reconfiguration knowing it would meet with disagreement, and also knowing that we elect representatives to really look deeply at issues and make the best decision given all the points of view. But I believed at the time that others would, as I had, become familiar with the arguments over time and vote in the best interest of all children.

I am deeply disappointed that Town Meeting did not choose to do so last night, against the town vote. Instead, they allowed it to be a forum for misinformation, emotion, and a resentment of authority that goes far beyond this building project. The result was the death of a plan that was born of thousands of hours of careful consideration and research by many experts and the loss of 34 million dollars to help our schools. I think we need to think very seriously about whether a town meeting that can so easily thwart the will of the voters is the best model for our town.

My hope is that Amherst goes forward at least with a new awareness of infrastructural and systemic problems that exist in our schools. May we strive to model for our children honesty, informed, civil discourse, and consideration of the common good.

Ms. Douangmany Cage stated that this project has consumed a lot of energy from district leaders and community members, and we can all appreciate that. She acknowledged that it is difficult to meet tonight immediately after last night's Town Meeting. Ms. Douangmany Cage stated that folks on both sides worked very hard on what they believe in, noting that she hopes we can salvage some of what was learned about the buildings to come together on solutions. Mr. Nakajima noted that this is a very difficult time for those who worked so hard to get to the point the project did. He said he saw a town that was deeply divided by the project so he was not surprised by the Town Meeting vote although he supported the project. Mr. Nakajima noted that as soon as people can take a break and regroup, the reality is that we owe it to the kids, the staff and the community to find a way to fix what are lousy facilities. Ms. Appy then read the following statement on behalf of Ms. Ordonez:

I'm deeply saddened that our Town Meeting chose to ignore the will of our voters by voting down the elementary schools project last night. Our children and our educators have been working for too long in physical environments that don't promote good health or good learning. And while our students and teachers excel despite those circumstances, it's irresponsible to continue to ask them to do so. We demand their best every day, and have delivered little in return.

Our district and community leaders worked hard to understand how the state's complex funding could benefit our schools, and put together a good plan to help us meet our stated goals. Unfortunately, last night's vote means we must now go back to the drawing board and explore other options that will hopefully fix the schools' well-known problems within the next decade. Our students still need us, and our

educators still need us. I'm hopeful that community members are prepared to roll up their sleeves to work with the School Committee and our district's leaders in good faith so that we can move forward.

Ms. Appy then read her statement as follows:

Last week I felt proud to live in a town where the majority voted to support the public education of all students even though it would have raised their taxes. Many people supported the new school plan who don't even have children in the schools. It was a much-needed affirmation on an otherwise very bleak election night. Town Meeting was the last hurdle in a almost decade long process to build 21st century schools that would have reflected and enabled the best practices of educators and architects committed to equal education for all students. Today, therefore, I feel devastated for the teachers and students of Amherst. Most of them will continue to be stuck in wholly inadequate buildings with no end in sight, and no realistic plan B. I am dismayed that a body charged with being representative of our town took it upon themselves to overturn a popular vote, a vote that was meant to resolve a serious and longstanding problem. More importantly, we lost an opportunity to treat all children equally. Last night I actually heard people talk about creating separate but equal schools. But history tells us how that turns out. We can only be truly equal when we give all children equal access. We failed our kids last night. We failed to listen to a high school senior, our next generation who spoke from experience about separate but equal. It was beyond disheartening to watch fellow community members hug and cheer after they had successfully rejected state money to build two new schools. I wish they had to go today to face the children on East Hadley Road, or the kids in special education programs or the 2 year olds who won't be going to preschool and tell them what they were cheering about.

Dr. Morris noted that he will share the letter he is required to send to the MSBA with the School Committee. He reported that we will be reapplying with MSBA for either Wildwood or Fort River, whichever is determined to have the greatest need.

D. Accept Gifts

DOCUMENT: Memo to the Amherst School Committee from Jill Berry, Treasurer, dated November 14, 2016

Ms. Hazzard moved to accept \$300 from Laurie Rabut for the Laurie Rabut String Scholarship Fund, \$400 from Lucia Spiro for the Crocker Farm Principal Fund for afterschool activities; \$1,000 from the Fort River Parent Council for the FR Principal fund for PE, \$500 from the League of Women Voters of Amherst for the Fort River Gift Fund to purchase library social studies books; \$50 from Allegra Haupt for S. Lott's classroom at Fort River, and \$50 from Allegra Haupt for R. Hornsby's classroom at Fort River. Mr. Nakajima seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

5. School Committee Planning

7:28 p.m.

Ms. Hazzard noted that there had been discussion of having a retreat. Dr. Morris reminded the committee that he would be happy to arrange for updates on things that are happening in the classroom. He encouraged the School Committee to let him know if there are areas of particular interest for such updates, but noted that the Math Recovery training that just took place would be something he would like to share. Ms. Hazzard suggested pulling elements from the District Improvement Plan for such presentations.

6. Adjourn

7:35 p.m.

Mr. Nakajima moved to adjourn at 7:35 p.m. Ms. Hazzard seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully Submitted,
Debbie Westmoreland

Nov. 15, 2016

Dear School Committee, Acting Superintendent Michael Morris, and the Amherst community,

We members of **Save Amherst's Small Schools (SASS)** want to recognize all the hard work and passion that people on both sides of the recent proposal contributed to our schools. We look forward to working together with our neighbors, on our community schools. We urge immediate action on the following three points of concern:

1. Public dissemination of existing air quality testing and remediation efforts at Fort River and Wildwood, up-to-date testing, and immediate efforts to improve air quality by using programs such as the EPA's "Tools for Schools" Indoor Air Quality toolkit and the MSBA's "accelerated repair" program.
2. Begin the process of **inclusionary planning** by surveying the community at large and especially teachers and staff about their values, concerns, and *ideas*. This survey should be developed in an open fashion by a third party with input from teachers and parents, and should be broadly disseminated.
3. Work with SASS and other key constituencies -- for instance, the teacher's union, the School Equity Task Force, SEPAC, SASS, BOLD, the PGOs, and others -- to reconstitute a School Building Committee that is truly open. We will help disseminate an open call THIS WEEK and begin taking volunteers.

We have already begun gathering the names of parents, educators, and community members who would be interested in working in an open, creative process on a new "Educational Program" and "Statement of Interest" for the MSBA's "Model Schools" program.

We recommend moving quickly toward submitting a new Statement of Interest before June 30, 2017, that has the participation and support of the community.

Respectfully,

The members of Save Amherst's Small Schools