

Amherst School Committee Listening Session
Tuesday, August 8, 2017
Town Room, Amherst Town Hall
4 Boltwood Avenue
Amherst, MA 01002

IN ATTENDANCE

Phoebe Hazzard, Chair
Vira Douangmany Cage
Eric Nakajima
Anastasia Ordonez
Peter Demling

Mike Morris, Interim Superintendent
Debbie Westmoreland, Recorder

1. Call to Order and Approve Minutes 6:05p.m.

Ms. Hazzard called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. She welcomed everyone to the meeting and had each of the School Committee members and Dr. Morris introduce themselves.

2. Meeting Goals: Review of Community Engagement Process & Desired Outcomes 6:06 p.m.

Ms. Hazzard briefly reviewed the goals of tonight's meeting, explaining the committee's desire to honor the community's expressed desire for more input in the make-up of the building committee. She explained that the committee's goal is to hear ideas, questions and concerns.

3. Review of Town Meeting Articles & Other Related Activities 6:10 p.m.

DOCUMENTS: Feasibility Process/Schematic Design Process Flowchart; Article 15 Capital Program Bond Authorization Text

Dr. Morris reviewed the following topics, noting that he is providing a brief overview since there are members of the audience who have followed the building process from the very beginning and others who are new to the process. He noted that he is happy to provide additional information to anyone who would like more. Topics reviewed were:

- Deliverables from the Fort River site and Building Feasibility Study;
- The environmental studies and the Wildwood boiler replacement; and
- The work to-date of the Enrollment Working Group, which has included 23 members and has met for a total of eight hours.

Ms. Ordonez then gave a brief overview of the School Committee's discussions to-date regarding the make-up of the building committee.

4. Listening Session 6:20 p.m.

Mr. Last, community member, asked Dr. Morris if the Educational Plan will be developed by an outside group or the district, noting that he believes it should be done by the experts within the district. Dr. Morris explained that it will be developed by a representative group of stakeholders from the schools. Lee Jennings asked if there will be one building committee or additional sub-committees identified and what the typical commitment is for people on the committee. Dr. Morris noted that most building committees will need some working groups with expertise in specific areas, and he sees the establishment of those working groups as a function of the building committee. He explained that the time commitment is somewhat unknown. A community member asked what the relationship is between the Enrollment Working Group and the building committee; what is different with this building process than the last one; and if a different outcome is expected with regard to the suitability of the Fort River site. Ms. Hazzard explained that the two groups are doing separate work, with the Enrollment Working Group focusing on how to address issues in the schools before a building can be built. Mr. Demling noted that this process is to contour the outcomes to the needs of the town by getting community input from the very beginning. Ms. Hazzard noted that the last process focused on Wildwood and a full site feasibility study has not been done for Fort River. Art Brennon stated that he highly recommends that the design, build and operation costs be built in from the very beginning, focusing on a green building. Chris Riddle noted that the next Town Meeting will include a warrant that all new buildings constructed in Amherst be built to zero energy standards, which means they generate as much energy as they need. He said these buildings balance the amount borrowed substantially through the energy

savings. A Town Meeting member asked if the educational plan is under discussion or if this is just a site study as he thought when he voted. Dr. Morris noted that finding out what is feasible and advisable with regard to Fort River is what was voted. He said the understanding at the end of the 18-20 months of the study will aid in the process of determining where to go next regarding the educational plan. Ms. Ordonez noted that we currently do not know where we are going with the educational plan due to many different factors. She said the last project showed us one possible path, and now that we are not following that path we have to look at other possibilities for moving forward. Eva Vogel, Wildwood and Middle School parent, expressed appreciation for this conversation and that the public has been invited in from the beginning. She said the committee should not be called the Fort River Building Committee but the Elementary Building Committee since it will apply to all three schools once we get to the point of the educational plan. Janet McGowen asked if the educational plan means we are talking about reconfiguration again and about the connection between the Enrollment Working Group and the Building Committee. Ms. Hazzard explained that the educational plan is the nuts and bolts of the educational needs for what is going to be taught. Mr. Demling noted that for any building project, you need to know what is needed to accommodate the educational purposes of the building. Dr. Morris stated that there can be some connection between the Enrollment Working Group and the building committee at some point; however, the Enrollment Working Group must currently work under the assumption that nothing will happen with the Fort River building. A Wildwood parent stated that town elected officials should be involved on the building committee, but not as voting members, and the committee should include parents, students and members of both of the factions from the previous building project. Additionally, she suggested engaging the architecture students from the local five colleges for their ideas and expertise. Connie Kruger noted that she worries people think we are designing a school and that is not how she sees this process. She is less interested in having people on the committee with expertise than with having people who have an open mind. She suggested having some “old timers” from the community, not just focusing on the current parents. Another community member noted that she believes the committee should include a variety of people, but noted that bigger is not necessarily better for the committee. Amilcar Shabazz noted that the committee should include some from the Fort River School, but not exclusively from Fort River. He said that he has eight years of experience with the elementary schools, and someone with an extended number of years such as this would have important insights about the kind of things we need in the schools. Kurt Wise noted that he thinks it is important to determine exactly what the committee will be doing in order to determine the makeup of the committee. He said it should be big enough to get a diversity of expertise and demographics, but small enough to have meaningful discussion, noting he believes it is important to have some members who are not parents and to have representatives from both BOLD and SASS.

FEEDBACK TO SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

1. What ideas do you have for the size and composition of the School Building Committee? and
2. What is the role of past/present/future parents? Fort River parents in particular?
 - a. Nicola Usher said she agrees we need to engage old timers, but also future parents such as young families who do not yet have children. She thinks there should not be members from the BOLD or SASS groups from the previous process, citing the need for new faces. She also expressed support for having teacher representation and paraeducators—particularly those who work with special education.
 - b. Lee Jennings expressed support for including a slot on the committee for a zero energy expert and advocate.
 - c. A community member encouraged the committee to think about how to make our buildings much friendlier to bicycles and walkers and to develop a school that is not seen first as a big parking lot.
 - d. Rick Last encouraged the inclusion of historically underrepresented groups from our community, who may not come out for meetings such as these.
 - e. A community member encouraged the School Committee to be careful not to make the committee too large, stating that since we are discussing the fundamental building of a structure, the focus should be on having experts trained in this.
 - f. Janet McGowen suggested including a fair number of teachers and students who have been in those buildings and are familiar with what happens in them. She feels strongly we need people from SASS and BOLD on the committee in order to model how people who strongly disagree can talk to one another.

3. What should be the role of educators/school administrators? and
4. What are your ideas on recruiting and selecting members of the School Building Committee?
 - a. Jean Fay stated that she firmly believes any staff member who works in the schools works in the education of kids, noting that custodians, food service workers and secretaries have a wealth of knowledge and should be engaged.
 - b. Richard Morse said he was confused about what the educators felt about the plan last time and getting some sort of consensus from the educators is essential in the new process.
 - c. A community member asked if there could be open interviews for potential committee members and an opportunity for the public to provide input. Mr. Demling noted that there is a fairly compressed timeframe (October 17) for selecting the members.
 - d. Maria Kopicki said she does not think everyone is in the same place with an understanding of what the School Building Committee will be doing. Dr. Morris re-read the vote from Town Meeting which states “vote to borrow \$250,000 for the purpose of examining site and building feasibility and schematic design options for Fort River School.”
5. How do we maximize public trust in the result, even if it is not the final result everyone wants? and
6. What kind of communications/public engagement do you expect from the SBC to feel that the public is informed and part of the process?
 - a. A community member stated that concerns about higher taxes were as prevalent as concerns about reconfiguration, so the problems are beyond SASS and BOLD.
 - b. Dr. Shabazz stated that there are good community-engaged people involved in sustainability, architecture and landscape architecture at UMass, and he will email their names to the School Committee. Having such experts engaged in the process can build trust.
 - c. A community member suggested publishing an electronic newsletter after each meeting saying what was accomplished, with copies at each library.
7. Are there any items or topics that are non-negotiable to allay the concerns of the community?
 - a. Peter Everett said he would be reluctant to take things off the table in order to allow creativity in the process.
 - b. A community member stated that all members of the building committee should be Amherst residents; custodians and other school employees should be included; long-time town residents should be included; and all meetings of the building committee should be at different times and taped for showing on Amherst Media. For selection she suggested advertising and asking people to submit a blurb to the School Committee about why they would be good candidates and have them meet together to read their blurb for consideration by the community.
 - c. Dr. Shabazz proposed breaking out a third section on the flowchart on site feasibility in order to conduct site feasibility before move forward with building feasibility. Dr. Morris explained why the processes are being done concurrently.

The following questions were not specifically asked and addressed due to time constraints:

8. What should be the role of elected officials (school or town) in the School Building Committee?
9. What would you like to see the School Building Committee accomplish?
10. Are there particular areas of focus that you think the committee needs to explore to be successful: educational infrastructure research, LEEDS certification, etc.?
11. How can future listening sessions like this one be more helpful?

5. Adjourn

8:05 p.m.

Mr. Demling moved to adjourn at 8:05 p.m. Ms. Ordonez seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully Submitted,
Debbie Westmoreland

Approved September 19, 2017