

Regular Meeting of the Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committee

March 24, 2015

6:00 p.m.

Library, Amherst Regional High School

In Attendance:

Trevor Baptiste, Chair

Sarah Dolven

Rick Hood

Lawrence O'Brien

Katherine Appy

Stephen Sullivan

Amilcar Shabazz (by SKYPE)

Maria Geryk, Superintendent

Mike Morris, Assistant Superintendent

Sean Mangano, Finance Director

Faye Brady, Student Services Director

Debbie Westmoreland, Recorder

Press and Public

Absent:

Dan Robb

Kathleen Traphagen

Myles Olmstead, Student Representative

1. Welcome

6:04 p.m.

A. Agenda Review—Mr. Baptiste called the meeting to order at 6:04 p.m. and reviewed the agenda. He noted that two items have come up within the past 48 hours that need to be added. The Capital Plan that was approved at the last meeting needs to be revoked due to an error on the part of one of the newspapers that posted the wrong notice. The second item is an initial discussion of the OPEB Liability Trust document that was finalized by the Budget Subcommittee at their meeting last night.

B. Approve Minutes—Mr. O'Brien moved to approve the minutes of March 10, 2015. Ms. Appy seconded and the motion was approved unanimously with Ms. Dolven abstaining.

2. Announcements and Public Comments

6:08 p.m.

Mr. Fonsh spoke about regionalization, noting that the RAWG report is the result of three years of investigation and compromise. He noted that every element has impact on other elements within a "conceptual tapestry" so he asked that the School Committee recognize the extraordinary complexity of the concepts as they deliberate about regionalization. Jeff Singleton, Montague reporter, spoke about the Chapter 70 formula and an analysis he has completed regarding the problems with the formula. He provided the School Committee members with copies of an article he wrote about the analysis and encouraged them to consider passing a statement about the inadequacy of Chapter 70 as some other districts have done. Since tonight is the last Regional meeting before the election on March 31, Mr. Baptiste expressed appreciation to Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Shabazz for their incredible public service to the School Committee.

3. New and Continuing Business

6:15 p.m.

A. Capital Plan Revote

Mr. Hood made the following motion:

VOTED: That the District hereby appropriates the sum of \$310,000 for the purpose of paying costs of the following projects, including the payment of all costs incidental or related thereto: (i) High School Access Control Upgrade in the amount of \$ 75,000; (ii) High School Gym Bleachers in the amount of \$ 60,000; (iii) High School Intercom System in the amount of \$100,000; (iv) High School Storage Trailers in the amount of \$ 25,000; and (v) Middle School Elevator Upgrade in the amount of \$ 50,000, said sum to be expended at the direction of the Regional School District School Committee. To meet this appropriation, the District Treasurer is authorized to borrow said amount, under and pursuant to Chapter 71, Section 16(d), of the General Laws and the District Agreement, as amended, or pursuant to any other enabling authority. The amounts indicated above for each project are estimates and the Director of Finance may allocate more funds to any one or more of such projects, and less to others, so long as, in the judgment of the Director of Finance, each of the projects described above can be completed within the total appropriation made by this vote.

FURTHER VOTED: That within forty-eight hours from the date on which this vote is adopted the Secretary be and hereby is instructed to notify the Board of Selectmen of each of the member towns of this District in writing as to the amount and general purposes of the debt herein authorized, as required by Chapter 71, Section 16(d), of the General Laws, and by the District Agreement. In addition the Committee shall cause the same information to be published within 10 days after such authorization as a paid notice in a newspaper circulating in the District.

Ms. Dolven seconded and the motion was unanimously approved with Mr. Shabazz abstaining.

B. OPEB Liability Trust Fund

Mr. Mangano distributed and reviewed an outline of the process for setting up an OPEB Liability Trust Fund and a draft of the OPEB Trust document developed by the Budget Subcommittee yesterday. He noted that the Budget Subcommittee recommends that the Board of Trustees be comprised of three or four school committee members, consisting of the Budget Subcommittee members. Mr. Mangano noted that the proposal is for the Regional School Committee to vote to approve the OPEB Liability Trust document at the April meeting. Ms. Dolven said that the subcommittee recommends asking the district's legal counsel, Brian Fox, to attend a future meeting to discuss what it means to be a trustee. Mr. Hood noted that this is an irrevocable trust, so he wants to have more information about whether trust funds can ever be used for administrative costs. After brief clarifying questions and discussion, it was agreed that this will be added as an agenda item for the April 14 meeting.

C. Regionalization Discussion

Mr. Hood noted that he believes that the school committee should continue working on a PreK-12 region with an on-ramp for towns which do not want to join right away. If that fails, a K-6 region could be considered. Ms. Appy agreed, noting that if the discussion moves to a K-6 region, the decision would move from the Regional School Committee to the individual towns' boards. Mr. Hood noted that he is in favor of regionalization because it simplifies things; however, it is important to do some work to make sure that the estimated \$600,000 savings is real since it would be so important. He also spoke about the time that would be freed up for administration to focus on education rather than management. Mr. Hood said his biggest concern is the governance proposal in the RAWG report because he believes a 13 member board is too large. He suggested considering a board of seven made up of four members from Amherst and one from each of the other towns. Representatives of towns that are not in the elementary region would not be allowed to vote on elementary-only issues. Mr. Hood noted that the agreement could build in more explicit powers for School Councils to allow for retention of local control. He also expressed concern about four year terms and suggested consideration of whether candidates could choose to run for two or four years. Ms. Dolven stated that she agrees with Mr. Hood about the governance issues; however, she knows governance is the most heavily regulated area of the agreement. While she believes a board of 13 is too large, she thinks shrinking the board to seven might be too small. Ms. Dolven noted that if a choice must be made between two- and four-year terms, she would prefer two years. She noted that the primary concern for Leverett is the sustainability of their school, although the potential for loss of autonomy and power is a concern for some Leverett citizens. Ms. Dolven noted that she believes it is important for members of the Leverett community to learn more about Amherst and the Amherst elementary schools in order to assuage some of those fears. She also spoke about the salary disparity between the towns at this time, noting that regionalizing would be beneficial to the employees of Leverett in that regard. Mr. O'Brien said that he likes the governance proposal suggested by Mr. Hood, noting that he especially appreciates his comments about freeing up time and realizing efficiencies through a K-12 region. He noted that he would like clarification in a new regional agreement outlining the authority of the administration and the School Committee based on legal advice. Ms. Appy noted that she appreciates Mr. Hood's request to clarify the financial savings because she also sees the savings as an educational benefit. With regard to having only one representative from the smaller towns on the Regional board, Ms. Appy said the RAWG thought it seems like too much for a single individual to take on since the towns currently have an entire board to advise their representative to the Region. Mr. Sullivan noted that the Shutesbury School Committee has spent very little time discussing regionalization because they feel they have very little information to go on. He said the committee feels the financial numbers are old at this point and fresh figures are needed since the change would not be happening until at least 2017. Mr. Sullivan said Shutesbury will not be having any town forums because they do not feel they have sufficient information to do so. Mr. Baptiste noted that, while a board of 13 is unwieldy, having two members from each of the smaller towns was designed to allow for two people to report to other committees in their town and to serve on subcommittees. He spoke about the almost palatable fear from all of the towns, including Amherst, that they will lose the way they do business in their town. Mr. Baptiste noted that if Pelham is to give up their autonomy, he believes it would have to be done in order to ensure that the system can be sustained financially. He noted that he believes a K-12 region has more educational benefits than a K-6 region. Mr. Shabazz said a question he would have going forward is whether an individual community, such as Pelham, can move forward now in regionalizing if they wish to do so. He noted that, as a Region, there are already more than 2,600 students that come from our four communities. Mr. Shabazz said that there are only 283 students and 30.3 teachers from Leverett and Shutesbury that would be coming in completely new to a revised Region, and he believes this can be done well. Ms. Appy explained that Pelham cannot join Amherst in a K-12 Region as part of an amended Regional Agreement unless all four towns vote on two issues—whether to approve the amended agreement and, if approved, whether to join the amended Region. Discussion followed regarding how to proceed. Mr. Hood suggested gathering more information on the anticipated savings of regionalizing, the 4-1-1-1 governance make-up, and the possibility of expanded authority for school councils. Ms. Dolven noted that having only one representative from any of the towns does concern her from a purely practical standpoint. She noted that one of the biggest complaints about the process up until now has been lack of public discussion. Ms. Dolven said that, respectfully, she would ask the Shutesbury School Committee to schedule a public forum to hear from their community members to understand their questions and concerns. Mr. Hood suggested inviting members of the other School Committees to a Regional meeting to have discussions about specific areas of the RAWG agreement. Marylou Theilman, community

member, noted that she appreciated hearing the discussion and expressed her disappointment that ACTV was not in attendance so the full community could hear the discussion.

D. Data Trends Report

Mr. Hood presented an updated draft of the District Trends report that has been produced by the Data Trends subcommittee, noting that the purpose is not to discuss the data but to get feedback about the data being tracked and the format being used. He reviewed the highlights of the draft, which includes data related to demographic trends, academic achievement trends, climate trends and miscellaneous trends (currently including only spending trends). Mr. Shabazz asked if the Data Trends subcommittee still plans to disaggregate local district data such as reports on staffing and discipline in addition to the state data. Mr. Hood noted that such discipline data is definitely forthcoming, and they can look at the possibility of disaggregating staffing data. Mr. Shabazz noted that looking at staffing patterns with regard to affirmative action hiring in more defined areas such as core subject teachers, coaching, and other areas is important in order to understand what is happening in our schools. Ms. Geryk noted that this staffing information is available now and can be sent to Mr. Hood immediately. The detailed discipline data will be presented at the April 14 Regional meeting. Ms. Appy thanked Mr. Hood for his work, noting that the report is really wonderful and very helpful. Other members of the committee also expressed their appreciation.

E. Advocacy

Mr. Baptiste noted that he would like to discuss potential issues on which the School Committee could advocate. He explained that the meeting at The Collaborative tomorrow night will be an opportunity for the School Committee's representatives to talk with school committee members from other towns about these issues. Discussion followed with suggested topics including Chapter 70 funding, high-stakes testing, charter school reimbursement, regional transportation reimbursement, and unfunded mandates. Ms. Appy suggested that the Regional School Committee invite Max Page to a meeting to discuss the MTA advocacy agenda as he did at the Amherst School Committee. Mr. Baptiste noted that he would like to invite Mr. Page to a future meeting. Mr. Hood suggested bringing issues to Town Meetings for votes and utilizing petitions that can be submitted to the appropriate officials. Mr. Shabazz noted that it would be beneficial to enlist the assistance of Representative Story and Senator Rosenberg around advocacy issues. Ms. Dolven noted that *Day on the Hill* is an excellent annual event in Boston that is a very good opportunity to speak with our state representatives. Mr. Baptiste asked each member to write one or two paragraphs about an advocacy issue for consideration by the full committee.

4. School Committee Planning

Ms. Geryk reviewed the updated School Committee meeting calendar and topics. The April 14 meeting will include a presentation from the MSAN students, the discipline data report and SETF recommendations, the OPEB trust document vote, the Regional transportation vote, and the Superintendent's Mid-Cycle Review. Mr. Sullivan requested that co-teaching be added to the June meeting. A legal services report will be added to the April 14 agenda as requested by Mr. Shabazz. Ms. Geryk asked to add a discussion in May about forming a task force to explore the potential to consolidate grades 7-12 in one building and to potentially add vocational-technical programming at the high school. It was agreed that times for public forums/discussion about regionalization should be added in the next few months.

5. Adjourn

8:49 p.m.

Mr. O'Brien moved to adjourn at 8:49 p.m. Mr. Shabazz seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully Submitted,
Debbie Westmoreland