

**Amherst School Committee Meeting
Monday, September 11, 2017
Library, Amherst Regional High School
21 Mattoon Street
Amherst, MA**

****Amherst Media did not record this meeting****

PRESENT

Phoebe Hazzard
Anastasia Ordonez
Eric Nakajima
Peter Demling

Dr. Michael Morris, Interim Superintendent

ABSENT

Vira Douangmany Cage

1. Call to Order

6:05 p.m.

The Chair called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. She welcomed everyone, then reviewed the agenda and outlined the two topics on the agenda: the listening session for the Ft. River Feasibility Study; and discussion of a warrant article at Town Meeting opposing the expansion of Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School.

The Interim Superintendent also asked that the Committee add an item to the agenda regarding the approval of gifts, which were time sensitive. The Committee agreed to review the gifts following the other items on the agenda.

2. Second Listening Session re: FR Building and Site Feasibility Study School Building Committee 6:10 p.m

The Chair asked everyone to introduce themselves, then offered a few remarks explaining the purpose of the School Building Committee, the format of the forum, and the interest from the Committee in receiving comments and questions from the community. Ms. Hazzard first explained that the process was put into motion by Amherst Town Meeting authorizing the town to borrow \$250,000 to fund the initial phase of a feasibility study for the Fort River School building and site. The Chair then explained that the Amherst School Committee's first step in the feasibility study is to select a School Building Committee that will oversee this study and its budget. The Amherst School Committee decided to wait to make final decisions about the composition and membership of the School Building Committee until it had offered ample time to solicit input on the process from the community.

The Chair then invited the Interim Superintendent to speak about the feasibility study deliverables; the status of environmental studies and boiler replacement; and Enrollment Working Group review. He reviewed the language that Town Meeting voted on at the most recent TM on behalf of this feasibility study and the chart [see printout from agenda]. Dr. Morris then explained that requests for proposals (RFPs) for contractors to do the physical work of replacing the Wildwood boiler have been issued, and are awaiting bids to begin this work. All final work is expected to be completed next summer 2018.

Dr. Morris then explained that the Enrollment Working Group has met for two morning sessions (8 hours total); and that there are 23 members of the Group including one Amherst School Committee member, parents/guardians/grandparents, community members, and staff members including the Interim Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Principal, and teachers. A few of the agenda items discussed so far include using protocols, developing norms of collaboration, envisioning the future of enrollment, a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), and offering feedback on developing subgroup areas for further study this fall (such as the Language Immersion and World Languages subgroup). The

Enrollment Working Group most recently met to complete a root cause analysis and to articulate a problem statement that will be used to guide future work by the group and will be shared with the School Committee.

The Chair then asked Ms. Ordonez to review the School Committee's discussion to date on the composition and selection of the School Building Committee. The Vice Chair reviewed the history behind the School Building Committee discussions, and explained that following the listening sessions, the Amherst School Committee will begin deliberation about the School Building Ccomposition at its meeting on September 19, and then will have the final vote on its composition (but not the actual members) at its meeting on September 25. At that point, the district will advertise the membership profiles and invite applications from individuals who wish to be on the School Building Committee. All final members will be selected and voted on at our meeting on Oct. 17, though the process for that selection is yet to be decided.

Ms. Hazzard turned to a few questions that have come up as a result of the last listening session. Top issues hit on were the educational plan, wherein the Chair clarified how the educational plan represents the educational needs of the school community, in this case the Fort River K-6 community, which informs the architect's designs. The content of the educational plan is primarily derived from assessing the needs of educators in the building. Examples include: Needs of co-teaching classrooms; flexible spaces for collaboration; small group differentiation; technology needs in classrooms.

Another top issue that has emerged is the scope of the feasibility study, and the Chair clarified that the scope of this 16-20 month-long study examines the Fort River building and site only, with initial schematic drawings presenting multiple options for a comparable K-6 building. This process will not involve considering reconfiguration.

Ms. Hazzard then asked the Committee to share any additional thoughts they had before opening up the floor to discussion.

Mr. Demling echoed that the community is feeling concerns about the scope of this feasibility study, and he reminded that the more we can limit the scope of this study, the better off. He also offered that the scope of the feasibility study could serve as a mission for this School Building Committee so that it's clear what it's attempting to do.

Ms. Ordonez expressed that the Committee may consider the concept of "sunsetting" this particular School Building Committee when this feasibility study is finished, and then looking to start with a new SBC when the last phase of the feasibility study goes into effect. She explained that this will be particularly important because funding sources for a new building or renovation are unknown, and there may be some time between the first phase and later phases of the study.

Mr. Nakajima said that all this was very helpful to hear. Eric said he's hoping we can vote on a formal standing of the Amherst School Committee soon. He also said that he's being very intentional about calling this a single K-6 school (or similar creation), and said that his hope is that this building is seen as having a shelf life of 40-50 years and that the educational plan—a shorter term undertaking—can and will be figured out.

The Chair then asked Mr. Demling to read the first question for the listening session. Mr. Demling read: What ideas do you have for the size and composition of the School Building Committee?

Mary Sayer (Town Meeting member, precinct 3) asked about the previous size of the SBC and what they said would be the ideal size. Dr. Morris clarified that the previous size was 18, and that he shared earlier in the summer about how average size tends to be from 8-13 regionally. But that size isn't the only consideration

(through that's important), and also that previous School Building Committee members felt that the group was too large and that attendance was often spotty as a result.

Karla Rasche (Fort River parent) said that smaller group size is better, preferably 9 or 10. Would like a balance between parents, teachers, professionals, etc.

Jennifer Page (Crocker Farm parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 8) said she would like the School Building Committee to be larger because there might be some attrition over the course of such a long time period of a feasibility study, and would like a larger group even though it may be harder to manage them. Ms. Page also expressed the importance of recruiting people of color, and said that sentiment should be a part of the invitation.

Bruce Coldham (Town Meeting member, Precinct 3) said "smaller is better". He shared his experience working on a large visioning committee for the Town of Amherst, and said he lasted "5 years longer than he should have" because he didn't feel obligated to attend. Large groups tend to have variable attendance, and then when members do attend they have to be brought up to speed over and over. May even go as far as to say smaller is necessary.

Christiane Healey (Fort River parent) said she served on a 24-person committee to search for a UMass faculty, and her experience was that most meetings had to be scheduled for 7am in order to ensure better attendance. She also serves on conservation commission where there are 9 people, and even with this smaller group, very hard to get all people to attend because of schedules. Urged POC to be recruited, and for it to be done at the application process. She asked the Amherst School Committee to remind the community about the composition of the previous School Building Committee; the Chair reviewed the list of former School Building Committee members, including SEPAC member, local architects, educators, the Town Manager, and Superintendent.

Alison Bleyler McDonald (Fort River parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 6) stated that 10-12 members of the School Building Committee is probably large enough.

Maria Kopicki (Crocker Farm parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 8) stated that rather than being hung up on numbers, composition should be the most important thing. She stated that the average attendance for previous School Building Committee was 12 members, and urged the Committee to emphasize the composition and qualifications of School Building Committee members.

Jeff Lee (Town Meeting member, Precinct 7) asked what the deliverable of the SBC is? Mr. Demling reviewed the PowerPoint slide handed out at the meeting. The Interim Superintendent also reviewed the language of the Town Meeting warrant, as a reminder about the actual deliverables that Town Meeting voted.

Mr. Demling then moved on to ask question 2: What is the role of past/present/future parents? Fort River parents in particular?

Karla Rasche (Fort River parent) said that as scope of this Feasibility Study is limited, then the members of the School Building Committee should be limited to Fort River parents.

Christiane Healey (Fort River parent) echoed Ms. Rasche, and said there should be an exception if another school's parents have a particular expertise, but otherwise the School Building Committee should be limited to Fort River parents.

Ms. Hazzard then reviewed question 3: What should be the role of educators/ school administrators?

Christiane Healey (Fort River parent) stated that parents want to contribute and that's important, but the educators and administrators have background and knowledge and should play a central role in the SBC.

Heather Sheldon (Fort River parent) stated that educators "do the work" and need a voice, but administrators also have the broadest view and most knowledge of how educators do their best work, and therefore should be included in SBC.

Mr. Demling commented that there are many roles for administrators and the School Committee was exploring options.

Karla Rasche (Fort River parent) said educators are the ones with the knowledge and should have an equal number on the School Building Committee, as well as administrators.

Mary Sayer (Town Meeting member, Precinct 3) suggested the School Committee should think about including educators from lower grades and one from higher because kids' needs change throughout time.

Jennifer Page (Crocker Farm parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 8) stated that the previous School Building Committee seemed to have a higher number of town employees and so the new SBC should have fewer town employees, or maybe just have them be non-voting advisors. Teachers are a crucial voice and should be involved. Like the idea of having at least one past, present and future parent involved in the SBC.

Bruce Coldham (Town Meeting member, Precinct 3) said that he attended most of the previous School Building Committee meetings even though he wasn't officially on the SBC because he wanted to make sure students had the most daylighting possible. Public comments at beginning of SBC meetings are helpful and encourages people to utilize these.

Christiane Healey (Fort River parent) stated that she hopes that Fort River teachers have a vote. She also asked what was meant by administrators—would they be from Fort River or elsewhere, principal, etc.? Ms. Hazzard answered that there would be a mix from Fort River River and district-wide. The Interim Superintendent explained that the MSBA has special requirements which dictated the previous composition of the School Building Committee, which will not necessarily hold true in this SBC.

Mary Sayer (Town Meeting, Precinct 3) stated that it was important to include someone who takes care of the facilities (maintenance) in this process.

Suzanne Parker (Fort River parent) stated that she was wondering what is the role of the School Building Committee, specifically because she keeps hearing the phrase "voting", but is not clear on what this means? She also asked how important information from the parents/educators/etc. is transmitted to the SBC? Dr. Morris clarified that there are critical decisions that the School Building Committee makes, such as hiring the Owner Project Manager to facilitate the process; oversees the community engagement process: hires the designer and architects; and basically, creates a feedback process with the community to ensure they are kept up to speed on the entire process.

Mr. Nakajima then reviewed that the questions 7 & 9 may shed light on how to think about this process; wanting to ensure that people are kept fully apprised of any major decisions being made by the School Building Committee should be one of its top priorities.

Janet McGowan (Former Fort River parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 8) said that she was wondering what was wrong with former School Building Committee, and who the "key stakeholders" are? Ms. Hazzard reviewed again that the previous School Building Committee was too large to have effective meetings and

conversations. Dr. Morris talked about the need to have discreet roles for individual SBC members to better share expertise.

Ms. McGowan pressed on what the ASC thought of the former composition of the SBC and its work. Ms. Ordonez explained that since none of the current Amherst School Committee members were on the previous School Building Committee, and that since this is a different project than the Wildwood/ Elementary School Building Project—and we don't even have funding for it yet—the process and composition of this School Building Committee are to be different. Mr. Nakajima stated that what he had heard was the definition of mission needs to give a much stronger structure to this process.

Ms. Hazzard asked the community about their ideas for recruitment of School Building Committee members.

Toni Cunningham (Crocker Farm parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 3) expressed that all School Building Committee members should be residents of Amherst, and that one member of the SBC should be a green building expert to ensure that expertise could inform the SBC's process.

Rebecca Kennedy (Fort River parent) said she would like to see the Fort River principal serve on the School Building Committee, but the principal is a resident of Leverett. However, her expertise of the specific issues affecting Fort River are critical to this process.

Bruce Coldham (Town Meeting member, Precinct 3) stated that professional associations are a great way to recruit expertise into the School Building Committee.

Christiane Healey (Fort River parent) suggested the Amherst School Committee create a list of required qualifications and preferred/ desired qualifications for the SBC, and then make decisions about composition based on this.

Heather Sheldon (Fort River parent) stated that many members in our Ft. River school are not from Amherst, and would not want to exclude anyone.

Andrew Parker Renga (Town Meeting member, Precinct 5) stated that ultimately by the end of this process we should have a real plan, and stated that if we're going to be spending 18-24 months just to look at the site, that's too much time. We need a plan in 20 months because so much time is being spent just on the initial discussion.

Mr. Demling acknowledged that he feels the same urgency, and said that the unfortunate reality is that we have no way of doing this right now because we need to answer the question of funding. Andrew expressed frustration and asked who was going to be making

Ms. Ordonez echoed the sentiment and stated that while we don't have the answers now that we're hoping to bring the community along with the Amherst School Committee every step of the way as it works to meet deadlines and keep moving forward. Mr. Nakajima explained that we need as close to consensus on this project as possible in order to get the project built; also, that nothing will go as planned unless we can get funding for the project itself.

Janet McGowan (Former Fort River parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 8) stated that she sits on SPP and would like the ASC to post to the TM listserv a report about "This is What We Heard This Summer", so that people can hear what was discussed at these listening sessions. On the SPP, consisting of nine members, it is a collaborative process that disagrees and works together on a common goal; the SBC needs to have members who disagree and are unafraid to take a hard look at data.

Alison Bleyler McDonald (Fort River parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 6) echoed the importance of political planning and outreach for the new project and SBC; it doesn't matter what composition of Committee is if we don't get the community piece right.

Mary Sayer (Town Meeting member, Precinct 3) stated there have always been questions about the Fort River site is on health and possibility of building on that site; this is a critical question that needs to be answered right off the bat. Dr. Morris clarified that a good OPM and feasibility study process begins with looking at the current site, and needs to assess

Christiane Healey (Fort River parent) expressed that someone from special education should be on the School Building Committee; also that outreach is critical, but also it needs to be a dialogue and exchange of information especially when the feasibility study is about two-thirds done.

Ms. Ordonez then asked question 6: What should be the role of elected officials (school or town) in the School Building Committee?

Bruce Coldham (Town Meeting, Precinct 3) stated that elected officials would be ideal advisors on the SBC.

Janet McGowan (Former Fort River parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 8) asked who do we mean by elected representatives--not the Jones Library or Select Board? Ms. Hazzard and Ms. Ordonez clarified that, who might be considered for the SBC would have to make sense for the project, and could be based somewhat on the previous list to include a School Committee member, Finance Committee member, and the like.

Stacey Beganny (Fort River parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 6) thought the previous SBC was very heavy on town officials, and less on community members. The Interim Superintendent clarified that the MSBA doesn't require parents or community members be a part of an SBC. Ms. Beganny asked if a lot of people applied for the previous SBC? The Interim Superintendent said he wasn't sure what the application process looked like.

Maria Kopicki (Crocker Farm parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 3) stated that there are a lot of questions about the former SBC composition, and the MSBA guidelines should be read closely.

Christiane Healey (Fort River parent) expressed that the SBC needs experienced finance people.

Suzanne Parker (Fort River parent) commented that we need this building to exist 30-40 years, and must select people who are experts and truly visionaries about what we will last decades to come.

Jennifer Page (Crocker Farm parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 8) suggested that it could be responsibility of one ASC member to do formal outreach to specific communities in town to solicit their input and participation.

Andrew Parker Renga (Town Meeting member, Precinct 5) worried about focusing so much on Amherst experts and maybe focus on other people who are less emotionally invested in this process.

Christiane Healey (Fort River parent) stated that having an outside member is really important to offer a different perspective and is required at UMass.

Mary Sayer (Town Meeting member, Precinct 3) commented that the architect should be a "visionary", not just someone who has experience with schools.

Mr. Nakajima commented that one of the joys of being in this community is because we're often challenged to think creatively. He then read question 8: Are there particular areas of focus that you think the committee needs to explore to be successful: educational infrastructure research, LEEDS certification, etc.?

Jennifer Page (Crocker Farm parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 8) stated that she would like for the Fort River River PGO to partner with the SBC and host events that proactively engage families and members of the community.

Mary Sayer (Town Meeting member, Precinct 3) stated that the broader Town Meeting community needs to hear about this process and provide input.

Rebecca Kennedy (Fort River parent) commented that the PGOs were deeply engaged with the previous building project dating back as far as three years ago.

Heather Sheldon (Fort River parent) commented that we elect representatives to handle this work, and we all need to be listening.

Bruce Coldham (Town Meeting member, Precinct 3) suggested that we should be thinking about these buildings in context of a "post-petroleum" economy, and that none of us should think that this project is limited by the technology and energy of today.

Mr. Nakajima commented that when people get fixated on LEED certification, they can give up on any environmental/ "green building" if they find they can't afford it.

Bennet Hazlip (Fort River parent) asked what was the likelihood that we will find out that we can't build on the Fort River site.

Mr. Nakajima stated that the probability was low that we can't build on it all, but the true question was whether that site would meet the goals of the town and budgetary restrictions.

Janet McGowan (Former Fort River parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 8) commented that we need to reach out to different families and community members, perhaps using more traditional and direct means (phone calls). The Interim Superintendent replied that the new SBC will need to ensure it's using multiple media to communicate with all community members.

Andrew Parker Renga (Town Meeting member, Precinct 5) urged that the SBC use a website to spread information easily. He also commented that this process is more about finding a financial way forward and not as much about "an actual plan". Finances played a large part in the failure of the previous school building project, and many elderly people were very concerned about taxes going up. Urged that the SBC engage older community members in this new feasibility study.

Maria Kopicki (Crocker Farm parent and Town Meeting member, Precinct 3) agreed that this is a class problem we need to solve for, and stated that we do want at the end of this process to have a successful project.

The Chair thanked everyone for their participation and reminded the group about the timeline for Amherst School Committee votes on this topic (9/19 - Review feedback, deliberate on SBC composition; 9/25 - Vote composition; Invite applications for membership; 10/17 - Select individuals; SBC is formed) and adjourned the topic for a break at 8:06 p.m.

3. Discussion of warrant article at Amherst Town Meeting Opposing Expansion of Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School **8:10 p.m**

The Chair reconvened the meeting at 8:10 p.m. She opened the floor for public comment and apologized that public comment had not been officially posted on the agenda, but was being used at the Chair's discretion.

Toni Cunningham commented that she does not think Town Meeting is the right avenue for this topic, because it is not Town Meeting's role; she prefers that School Committee focus on survey data.

Max Page commented that it is very important to have this warrant article, and hopes it will be put forward to Town Meeting because Town Meeting is ultimately responsible for funding schools, and this is an enormous amount leaving our schools to go to charter schools;

Christiana Healey echoed Max Page's comments, and thinks it's good to both improve our schools and express concern for this expansion.

Dana Carnegie stated that she is an Amherst parent and her children attend PVCICS, and she would rather the ASC focus on the poor state funding formula than on this expansion. She stated that Rep. Goldstein-Rose has bills on this topic, and that there are other charter schools in the area as well as vocational schools so PVCICS should not be the focus.

Tracy Zafian echoed other concerns about singling out the PVCICS, would feel more comfortable if ASC would take a position regarding overall charter school funding; she has kids at ARPS and PVCICS.

The Chair thanked the commenters, and turned the Committee's attention over to Mr. Demling, who had brought the draft resolution forward. Mr. Demling made a presentation of slides he prepared describing the process and content of the proposed Town Meeting article.

Ms. Ordonez thanked Mr. Demling for bringing this topic to the Committee. She commented that Charter Schools in our region have been woefully inadequate in educating low-income and special education students. She stated that PVCICS works like a magnet school but does not serve the students it should be serving, and that we have the responsibility to protect our budgetary priorities; no easy fix for the funding issue. She also stated that there is no state-level resolution likely anytime soon, and that ASC must meet needs of students who need additional staff support consistent with our community. Ms. Ordonez stated that the town voted firmly against charter expansion (Question 2) at statewide level. Finally, Ms. Ordonez explained that the PVCICS Executive Director has emailed a video to the ASC today; while there were exceptional students featured, as Latina, she noticed lots of white faces in the video, reinforcing the widescale criticism heard about the lack of student diversity in this school. Ms. Ordonez stated that she emailed the executive director with her concerns, but did not receive a reply.

Mr. Nakajima commented that it is appropriate to bring topic to Town Meeting as it's related to Town Meeting's budgeting functioning. He stated that it is responsible to do so given budget impact on town. He stated that he heard explanation from PVCICS Executive Director about reason for expansion: that the school needs tuition/cash flow in order to pay for an expanded facility. Mr. Nakajima stated that this is reasonable and logical for PVCICS, but it's also reasonable and logical to town leaders in Amherst to argue against that expansion given the potential loss of resources. He stated that these are compelling reasons to oppose the expansion regardless of the demographics.

Ms. Hazzard echoed comments from colleagues and agrees Town Meeting is an appropriate forum for discussion about the proposed expansion, because it would have major negative impact on teaching and learning in our schools.

Mr. Demling replied that he agrees with everything said, and feels strongly about this issue.

The Committee then turned to the language of the draft warrant article/ resolution. Ms. Hazzard wanted to focus on 5th and 6th "whereas" for edit; Mr. Nakajima agreed and added that PVCICS' low enrollment of SE students exacerbates ARPS's ability to meet those students' needs. Ms. Ordonez suggested language in state funding formula paragraph be expanded to explain the facts about lack of adequate reimbursement to districts for Charter Schools. Dr. Morris added that an odd element in the charter funding formula that disincentive districts from building robust-in district special education programs.

Further comments were made about adding specific data to integrate into the article. Mr. Demling will integrate commentary into a revised draft for vote consideration tomorrow night. On closing the topic, Ms. Ordonez noted that the PVCICS board has had struggles with attendance since 2015. Ms. Hazzard thanked everyone for their discussion of this topic.

Mr. Nakajima made motion to accept gifts, and Ms. Ordonez seconded; the acceptance of gifts was passed unanimously.

Mr. Nakajima made motion to adjourn, and Mr. Demling seconded. The meeting adjourned at 9:34 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Anastasia Ordonez

Approved September 19, 2017