

Groton Dunstable Regional School Committee
High School Library
Business Meeting Minutes
April 13, 2005 Approved April 27, 2005

PRESENT:

Ms Cindy Barrett
Ms Judy Converse
Ms Karen Lofgren
Mr. Chuck McKinney, Vice-Chair
Ms Patricia Murray, Secretary
Mr. Alan Vervaeke, Chair

ABSENT:

Mr. Frank O'Connell

ADMINISTRATION:

Dr. Mary Athey Jennings, Superintendent
Mr. Craig Young, Business Manager
Dr. Susan Rubel, Director of Curriculum/Staff Development
Ms Joan Endicott, Director of Pupil Personnel

STAFF, PRESS, OTHERS: J. Kulesz, Groton Herald; P. Comtois, Groton Landmark;

CALL TO ORDER

The GDRSC Meeting was called to order at 8:15 p.m by the chair, A. Vervaeke.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Dr. Jennings announced Florence Roche Assistant Principal Greg Landry has accepted the position of principal at a two hundred and fifty student school in Melrose and she wished him well.

Dr. Jennings congratulated the one hundred and twenty third and fourth grade students who participated in Wind in the Willows last weekend. Music teacher Jonathan Wiesner had an original number in the play. She noted the book was checked out one hundred and twenty times from the Florence Roche library in the last two months.

Dr. Jennings announced the high school band received the Bronz Medal at the Massachusetts Instrumental Conductor's Association Festival in Foxboro on April 3rd.

Dr. Jennings announced the high school is holding SADD Week. Monday, Sergeant Crosby, from the State Highway Department, talked with students about the importance of wearing seat belts. A rollover simulation was held following his presentation. On Wednesday, the Amica Mutual Insurance Company presented their "Navigate Your Fate" safety program. Students were provided with goggles designed to simulate vision after having too much to drink. GDAY will present some programs on Thursday and Friday students will see a video of true stories about drunk driving.

K. Lofgren announced SpedPAC will meet on May 3rd at 7:00 p.m. in the high school library. Dr. Sandy Jones will discuss reading programs. At 7:30 p.m. on May 10th, they will have a Turning Three workshop which is about children coming into the school system at age three from Early Intervention. It is sponsored by the Federation for Children With Special Needs.

A. Vervaeke announced A Day on the Hill will be held on April 26th. He encouraged members to attend and they may call Ms Magnuson if they are interested.

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS

J. Converse stated at the last meeting they voted to do a temporary eminent domain taking of the Cunningham property and asked if anything has happened with that.

Dr. Jennings said they received communication from Attorney Lennett, Conservator for Ms Cunningham. The bidding process they took part in is going to be redone and for that reason, Dr. Jennings stated she signed a legal agreement with Ms Lennett allowing them to go on the land without having to do a temporary taking. C. Young has coordinated with PLACES Site Consultants, who are ready to go. Dr. Jennings said their legal representative will attend the April 25th bidder's meeting in Jamaica Plain.

P. Murray asked if they have to re-submit a bid and Dr. Jennings said they will bring the original bid. She asked if they will have done the land study by the 25th and

Dr. Jennings said they probably will not have all the information but their bid has contingencies in it about environmental issues. P. Murray noted the attorney says she intends to accept the bid that offers the highest sum of money with the fewest conditions.

C. Young does not believe they will have a report by that time and stated the Committee would have to meet and vote to remove the conditions.

PRESENTATIONS/DISCUSSION

Certification of FY06 Budget

Dr. Jennings stated they are about \$350,000 short of the budget amount voted last month. The towns have come up with \$928,000 in assessments and \$500,000 is being applied from E&D but this leaves about \$650,000 that is not covered. While Budget & Finance did not make a formal recommendation, they discussed cutting another \$300,000 from the budget beyond the \$500,000 all ready cut. A memo showing what the \$500,000 cuts and \$300,000 cuts would entail was distributed.

Dr. Jennings said the issues the Committee needs to decide are if they want an additional \$300,000 cut from the budget, if they go back to the towns and tell them they cut \$650,000, if they want to move more money from E&D and/or if they want to ask the towns to fund the first year of their Capital Plan. She stated a Committee meeting has been posted for Monday, April 25th, prior to Groton's Town Meeting.

C. McKinney asked if they can maintain an adopted budget with an assessment that is higher, and let the FinComs and Board of Selectmen, and by reference the town, make a last minute determination of what their maximum assessment could be and if they pass a lower number, the School Committee could reconvene after the Town Meeting vote to make adjustments. C. Young said they will send notification to the towns as to the assessments associated with the approved budget. The assessment may be within the 2 1/2 cap or it might be above it. The Selectmen and FinComs decide whether to support it or not but he believes they are required to take the District's number to the voters. He stated they can adjust their number right up to town meeting.

C. Young said the district and School Committee can increase the budget if additional revenues are received but they cannot raise the assessments. The Committee has to decide what assessment number they want to send to the towns.

Dr. Jennings stated they can vote to incur debt at any time for capital items but not for an operating budget. If the towns do not hold a town meeting, it is assumed they concur with that debt. The towns would have to hold a meeting to vote against the district incurring debt.

Based on discussions they have had with the Joint Financial Committee, C. McKinney said it is safe to say the towns cannot, under any circumstances, absorb the \$600,000 within the limits of Prop 2 1/2 and C. Young agreed. C. McKinney said they have not settled on the \$107,000 that will be provided to the towns in reduced assessments for this year that will show up as free cash to the towns at the end of the year. The towns cannot spend it until it is certified but they will know it is there since the district has told them it is coming. Since the towns have money in stabilization funds, they could vote to use some of it as supplement income for their budget above Prop 2 1/2 and provide that funding to the district. This would give the district more than the towns' are currently planning against their limit. He stated he does not want to give up on the opportunity to ask the towns to return the "free cash" they are giving them. He again

asked if it is appropriate to leave the budget at the higher amount and have the towns structure a vote that has an assessment amount that fits within Prop 2 1/2 and have a supplemental assessment that would transfer money out of stabilization. Dr. Jennings said this could be structured that way. C. Young said he does not know what each town has for undesignated free cash. The FinComs and Boards of Selectmen could vote to designate \$107,000, between the two towns, to apply to the budget and keep the district below the 2 1/2 assessment.

C. Barrett asked if Mr. McKinney would like to present a budget number that is just \$107,000 higher and C. McKinney said he would like a bit more. He would like to send a message that they cannot cross the \$600,000 gap alone and that the towns have options. He feels \$300,000 above what they think the towns can afford is reasonable.

If the towns vote down spending from stabilization, he stated the Committee reconvenes and makes the necessary adjustments. If they have a budget number that is not supported by the FinComs and Selectmen, Dr. Jennings stated they need to give a simple explanation on town meeting floor as to why they are asking for the \$107,000 to be given back. She noted that half of the stabilization fund is really there to help stabilize the district.

P. Murray feels the towns can support the capital maintenance and would like to continue with that discussion. She would like to leave \$155,000 for the maintenance. She feels the townspeople will say the \$107,000 is "theirs". She noted the Groton FinCom has said they would not support giving it to the district. Dr. Jennings feels they can combine both concepts - they need \$155,000 for maintenance and here is \$107,000 of it. She does not want to open the whole budget to town meeting discussion.

J. Converse asked if there is any news on revenues and C. McKinney said the House Budget was released and they will be getting a zero percent increase in Chapter 70 Funding. He said the transportation number does not look good either.

If they vote to incur debt and then get more Chapter 70 money, A. Vervaeke asked if they can rescind their vote and was told yes. If they spend their E&D down, he said they are looking at 1/4 of a point increase in interest for bonding the middle school and their bond rating would drop to BAA. He asked what the long term interest expense would be to the towns and C. Young said there would be about \$45,000 in additional costs the first year so it could conceivably be about \$200,000 in interest costs over twenty-five years. Costs would also be higher when they get ready to bond a new elementary school.

P. Murray asked how long it takes to get your rating back once you lose it and C. Young said you have to demonstrate the financial situation has been stabilized and this takes more than five years. Their financial advisor has said they do not want to get a down grade and they do not want to drive bonding costs up. He stated they would have a long term financial impact. He noted they have applied \$500,000 from E&D and held to the three percent threshold but forecasting ahead, they know they will have to make up this half a million dollars the following year. He also noted Moody's does not like to see districts funding their operating expenses from surplus. The surplus is for a hedge against the unknown such as increased SPED costs.

A. Vervaeke said he is uncomfortable with some of the budget adjustments and asked if they are looking at a monthly fee to help subsidize some of the costs for the late bus. He also asked if they have looked at a tiered approach for athletic fees. Dr. Jennings said survey responses indicate they could generate \$24,000 based on a \$20.00 monthly fee. The cost of three late buses is \$30,900.

C. Barrett asked what other items from the April 6th memo could be voted for debt. Dr. Jennings said the replacement truck and some of the capital maintenance items.

A. Vervaeke stated they have all ready reduced the capital maintenance from \$310,000 to \$155,000. Dr. Jennings noted a five year capital plan will get them extra points from SBA when they fund a new elementary school.

K. Lofgren stated it would be in the best interest financially not to spend the E&D as it will cost them more in the long run. J. Converse asked if the E&D has been taken down to the 3% and C. Young said there

might be \$10,000 but they are right on the number. She noted they need to explain why it is so important for it to be held there and explain that they do not want to force taxpayers to pay a higher interest rate. They also need to say they do not want to sacrifice programs and staff for the students.

K. Lofgren asked if Budget and Finance had any recommendation and P. Murray said they did not come to a consensus. They also talked about decreasing the salary reserve but they are planning for some salary increases. There was a consensus not to say they will not do the maintenance program. C. Young stated it is important to provide the rationale behind the decisions.

A. Vervaeke feels they should spend the E&D for programs. By being forced to do so, he said it is a tacit approval of the towns to accept a higher interest rate for long term debt for the school building projects. C. McKinney said the current budget level cannot be maintained and some level of reduction is required. He suggested reducing it by \$300,000 is not inappropriate. He noted the towns could vote to use stabilization and the Committee could decide to use more E&D at a later date. P. Murray agreed with the \$300,000 reduction.

K. Lofgren asked at what point they start dipping in the SPED contingencies and Dr. Jennings said this could happen next year. She noted E&D is at \$900,000 and using it for an emergency might make a difference to Moody's.

C. Barrett would like to go to the towns with the number value they say they can afford plus \$155,000 for the capital maintenance improvements. The other \$200,000 would be a cut. She sees the towns giving them the \$107,000 from the reduced assessments, leaving \$48,000. If the towns cannot fund that from stabilization, she recommended that come from E&D. J. Converse feels they should ask for the \$107,000 plus the \$155,000 and feels they have strong arguments for doing so.

P. Murray would like to leave the budget up by \$355,000 and noted they have an unbalanced budget they would need to deal with one way or another.

A. Vervaeke said he is comfortable in voting to incur debt in the fall but is not comfortable going to town meeting floor and playing "fiscal chicken". He stated it has not been mutually benevolent between the Committee and the towns with respect to getting money. He stated the Joint Budget Task Force has said they will not support giving back the \$107,000 and attempting to get additional money may be difficult. He said they may need to look at funding the entire piece through E&D despite the effect it will have on the towns. He does not see them being able to squeeze more money from the towns and crossing the line the FinComs and Selectmen have drawn may not be in the district's best interest.

While there may be people on these particular boards that do not agree with them, J. Converse said it is in their best interest to present the facts to the towns and people can see they are following a reasonable way of supporting the budget and that it makes sense. K. Lofgren agrees they owe it to the townspeople to show them how they gotten here and where they need to go.

ACTION ITEMS

Certification of FY06 Budget

P. MURRAY MOVED THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE ADOPT A FY06 BUDGET IN THE AMOUNT OF \$32,049,088, WHICH IS \$300,000 BELOW THE REQUESTED AMOUNT. SECONDED BY J. CONVERSE

C. Barrett asked what the total above the assessed value is and C. McKinney said it is \$351,652. As the towns continue to refine their budgets, he stated the numbers are in constant flux.

SO VOTED IN FAVOR UNANIMOUSLY BY ROLL CALL

Dr. Jennings suggested they take this back to the towns immediately and that Committee members and administration attend any meetings that might be scheduled next week.

C. Barrett asked if the athletic budget adjustments have been made and C. Young said yes. The high school enrollment numbers were also adjusted.

Superintendent Contracts

Dr. Alan Genovese

C. McKinney stated Personnel and Negotiations is making wonderful progress with Dr. Genovese and they have an agreement on contract language but they do not have a fully compiled contract to provide the Committee this evening.

Dr. Mary Jennings

C. MCKINNEY MOVED THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE APPROVE AN AMENDMENT TO DR. JENNINGS' CONTRACT AND AWARD HER A LONGEVITY PAYMENT IN THE FORM OF \$2000. SECONDED BY K. LOFGREN
SO VOTED IN FAVOR UNANIMOUSLY BY ROLLCALL

Vote to Accept Middle School South

P. MURRAY MOVED THAT THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE FORMALLY ACCEPT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL ADDITION PROJECT, WHICH WAS APPROVED BY THE TOWNS OF GROTON AND DUNSTABLE IN THE AMOUNT OF \$2,300,000, AS COMPLETE. THE ACTUAL DATE OF SUBSTANTIAL COMPLETION WAS NOVEMBER 1999.
SECONDED BY J. CONVERSE
SO VOTED IN FAVOR UNANIMOUSLY BY ROLLCALL

Vote to Disband Superintendent Search Committee

C. Barrett stated the group worked very hard interviewing all the candidates and providing a list of finalists to the School Committee. Now that the new superintendent has been selected, they would like to disband the committee.

C. BARRETT MOVED THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE VOTE TO DISBAND THE SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH COMMITTEE. SECONDED BY J. CONVERSE

Since they do not have a signed contract with Dr. Genovese, K. Lofgren asked what would happen if they do not end up with one. A. Vervaeke said Dr. Genovese is taking a leap of faith this evening with his constituencies on his plan to be here. P. Murray advised they would vote to reconvene the committee if there was an issue.

SO VOTED IN FAVOR UNANIMOUSLY

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS

None

ADJOURNMENT:

K. LOFGREN MOVED TO ADJOURN THE MEETING AT 9:40 P.M.
SECONDED BY J. CONVERSE
SO VOTED IN FAVOR UNANIMOUSLY

Respectfully submitted,

Susan H. Smith
Recording Secretary