Town of Groton, Connecticut

Meeting Minutes - Draft

Town Council Committee of the Whole

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Mayor Bruce Flax, Councilors Dean G. Antipas, Diane Barber, Joe de la Cruz, Greg Grim, Karen F. Morton, Bonnie Nault, Deb Peruzzotti, and Harry A. Watson

Tuesday, November 15, 2016 | **6:00 PM** | **Town Hall Annex - Community Room 1**

SPECIAL MEETING

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Flax called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Flax, Councilor Grim, Councilor Antipas, Councilor Morton, Councilor Nault and Councilor Watson
Members Absent: Councilor Barber, Councilor de la Cruz and Councilor Peruzzotti

Board of Education: Andrea Ackerman, Gretchen Newsome, Andrea Kim Shepardson Watson, Katrina Fitzgerald, Gary Baker (6:32 p.m.)

Also present were Town Manager Mark Oefinger, Superintendent Mike Graner, Assistant Superintendent Susan Austin, RTM Moderator Scott Newsome and Administrative Secretary Lisa Hylton.

3. NEW BUSINESS

2016-0009 Joint Meeting with Board of Education (2016 Standing Referral)

Discussed

- Passage of School Referendum

Mayor Flax opened the meeting by congratulating the Board of Education for the passing of the Groton 2020 Plan referendum. Dr. Graner expressed his appreciation for the passing of the referendum noting it as a huge milestone for the Town and the largest referendum in the history of Connecticut.

Discussion began about the next steps and the outcome of the project if the wavier for the cost per square footage fee was not approved. Dr. Graner mentioned the school project was on the priority list for the Department of Administrative Services. There are a lot of variables to move the project forward. Dr. Graner indicated 47% of the funds for a new middle school and 57% to convert the former middle schools to elementary schools will be funded by the State. Dr. Graner stated that the district will approach legislators for another $5 to $5.25 million and is hopeful with the new legislators that it will come to fruition.

Councilor Antipas asked the outcome if the state figures are not what were expected. Dr. Graner informed him that if the $450 per square foot wavier is not approved the Groton 2020 Plan will not go forward. At that point the project would be $12.5 million dollars short. The Board of Education is moving forward assuming it will obtain the diversity grant and the cost per square footage wavier. The State will not contribute any money toward the project if the wavier is denied.

The process was discussed. In February the Town will hire an architect and move forward with a design plan in the spring. The Town will be paying cash for the bills created to get the process started and will have to wait on the commitment letter from the State to see if the funds will still be available. Dr. Graner will keep the Council updated as he acquires more information.

Discussion began regarding the State's responsibility to build schools. Support from politicians, teachers and union leaders in the district will be helpful.
It is anticipated that as soon as the district receives the letter of commitment, the work will begin. The middle school is slated to be complete by the fall of 2020 and the elementary schools by the fall of 2022-2023.

Town Manager Mark Oefinger stated this is a business decision. The money will come from the Capital Reserve Fund Balance until the funds are returned by the state

- Out of District School Enrollment Figures

Figures were noted for magnet school enrollments as 364 students attending Learn and New London magnet schools. This number is down from roughly 35 students from the previous year. Dr. Graner noted as an example of cost for students to attend Winthrop Stem School the Town of Groton pays $3,000 per student. The magnet schools have a limit on the number of students from each town although the Marine Science Magnet High School in New London does not have a limit of students from each town.

Special education students that attend schools out of district were reduced from 103 last year to 86 this year. Dr. Graner noted it is hard to estimate the costs for special needs students outside of district. It was also mentioned that a special needs child could cost the district $30,000 to $40,000 depending on their needs.

Groton Public Schools is in competition with New London Public Schools due to the programming New London provides through their magnet school. The Groton Board of Education has hired for a public relations position and that person is helping to make an effort to compete with schools outside of district. It appears that residents of Southeastern Connecticut want to have school choices.

Councilor Grim asked what the reasoning was behind children returning to the district. Dr. Graner informed the Council that some parents were concerned with the length of the school day and noted that the competition with other school districts is at the elementary level. Currently 52 students are returning to the district, 17 of them being special needs children. This will save the district significant costs.

- Student Population in Navy Housing

There are roughly 45 children that live in Balfour Beatty that are not military. Dr. Graner stated if more than 10% of the population are civilians, the district will get 10% in reimbursements for funding. Children whose parents are employed on federal property will get $3,500 for that child in aid, less for a child whose parent works on the SUBASE. It was noted as a complex issue. Currently the district is around 5% civilian but some children can count toward the 10% with the reimbursement going on top of the military reimbursement. With this, the district could obtain another $1 million dollars in aid.

Councilor Antipas questioned the pupil impact aide going from $4.5 million down to $3.4 million and asked what could be expected in the spring. Dr. Graner predicted it to be more modest around $3.7 million. It is unknown if the impact aide will be closer to $4 million under the Trump Administration.

2016-0260 FYE 2018 Budget Discussion

Discussed

- Board of Education CIP Projects

Dr. Graner believed that the CIP Projects for the 2018 Budget will move forward as planned. He stated they were all unrelated to the Groton 2020 schools to be closed. He mentioned that the 2018 CIP Projects for the Board of Education costs were around $1 million and in the current fiscal year the Board of Education received no funds at all.

Town Manager Mark Oefinger voiced his concerns that CIP inflates unnecessarily and then are stripped away due to funding. At this time it is too soon to project revenues. There is some concern of the State cutting 30 million from municipal aid and unaware where that reduction will come from. The CIP for information technology is falling further behind with the Client First Initiative and it is important to pursue it now.

Discussion began amongst both the Board of Education and the Town Council about the reduction in budget and the Board of Education making more conscious decisions. Mayor Flax feels there are still places where the Board of Education can make reductions and states the Town cannot take more reductions currently running on a 33% of the budget.

Dr. Graner stated there is a projection of 19 teachers retiring at the top salary step and will hire new teachers that will come in on the bottom of the salary step. One area he mentioned that would be risky to make reductions in would be special education. This is an area that is a bit of a guessing game as it is hard to figure the students' needs that are new to the district and which students are moving in and out of the district. It was mentioned there are strategic plans and lots of initiatives, some linked to grants. The Board of Education is much more thoughtful with spending and costs.

It was mentioned that there are a number of special needs students that graduate from high school but still need job coach training and skills. Dr. Graner informed the Council that there is a transition academy in the district that offers training to these young adults preparing them for a career and independent living. There are currently 9 students in this program housed in a 3 classroom school built in the gym of the Board of Education Central Office. It was noted there is some State connection and is maintained with the Department of Developmental Services.

Town Manager Mark Oefinger noted there is a big uncertainty in the money the Town will receive at the State level. The Town's budget is a process and the staff still has to provide the services within the Town. The Town Council may have to decide what services the Town wants to provide and alternative scenarios if more cuts are done to the budget along with the impact it will have to the Town.

Mayor Flax voiced his concern on looking for more places that cuts can be made within the Board of Education. Dr. Graner understood that concern stating that staff and maintenance reductions will happen with the Groton 2020 plan and noting that there is the possibility of another elementary school closing. One elementary school closing in the district could save $1.5 million in costs. Dr. Graner ended the conversation stating he is 100% aligned with the Town Council's outlook when it comes to the budget.

4. ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Councilor Nault, seconded by Councilor Grim, to adjourn the meeting at 7:28 p.m.

The motion carried unanimously.