

TOWN OF GROTON
PHASE II SCHOOL DESIGN COMMITTEE MINUTES
THURSDAY, MAY 14, 2009 – 7:00 P.M.
TOWN HALL ANNEX, CR3

1) ROLL CALL

Present: Scott, Lange, Kolnaski, Koehler, Webster, Kane
Staff: Kadri, Greenleaf, Schneider, Norris, Bresnyan
JCJ: Greg Smolley

Chairman Scott called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m.

2) RECEIPT OF CITIZENS PETITIONS / COMMENTS - None

3) APPROVAL OF MINUTES of March 26, 2009

A motion was made by Koehler, seconded by Kane, to approve the minutes of March 26, 2009 as written.

The motion carried unanimously.

4) ITEMS OF BUSINESS

A. Update on Discussions with the Board of Education by Superintendent of Schools Paul Kadri

Kadri reported that he has received information from the architect and they will be looking at the alternatives. The Superintendent expects to do a presentation for the Board of Education on different grade configurations, specifically as they related to early childhood education. The presentation will be televised on Channel 19. Kadri attended a presentation in Hartford on stimulus funding and noted that the Obama administration is focusing on early childhood education. Kadri noted that he would like to move forward smartly and quickly to take advantage of the pots of money that are available. In response to a question from Koehler, Kadri noted that the money will be distributed through competitive grants as opposed to formula funding. Groton will be competed against county-based systems so there have also been discussions about teaming up with Waterford and New London on proposals. Kadri noted that the state and federal priorities are aligned on early childhood education.

Lange asked if the increased funding for early childhood education will short change other grades. Kadri sees a shift in funding to the “ends” – early education and graduation. Also, technology funding is going to be reduced and made competitive.

Kadri reiterated that he would like to move as fast as possible to take advantage of funding opportunities.

B. Grade Configuration

C. Building Programs

After the last School Design Committee meeting where members reviewed different grade configurations, Kadri met with the architect about needs from a building standpoint.

Smolley noted that early childhood education is based on ability rather than age. It has been determined that retention in the primary grades does not impact a child's future success. The first grade configuration reviewed was pre-K-1 (2 schools); 2-6 (6 schools); and 7-8 (1 school). Smolley noted there is money available for complete renovations at the same reimbursement rate as new construction. He suggested that the School Design Committee needs to determine how this proposal meets the original plan, especially with respect to the size of the two new schools. The new schools should be not be undersized nor oversized for this new proposal to avoid any public backlash. Smolley explained that the grade configuration is not as important as school size because Groton's programming can be accommodated in the pre-K-6 grades.

The impact of grade configuration on the middle schools is that a 7-8 grade configuration favors a single school. Smolley noted that by looking at early childhood education and grade configurations, the group is taking a step back and looking at the overall master Plan rather than just focusing on the middle schools. In the above noted configuration, the pre-K-1 program would be divided between two 560-student schools of approximately 73,000 square feet. The program would fit space-wise, but not programmatically into West Side. Cutler is a good second site, although a new building would be more cost effective than renovation.

Smolley noted that a pre-K-2 configuration was also analyzed, and would result in three pre-K-2 schools, and five 3-5 schools. This configuration results in the worst funding scenario for 3-5 and also makes the two new schools oversized.

Smolley explained that the next step is for the Board of Education to decide if they want to pursue pre-K. If so, the pre-K-1, 2-6, 7-8 configuration is the most economical from an educational and facility standpoint. With a single middle school of 700 students, the Town can justify an auditorium to the public, even if the size of the school is slightly over the state guidelines. Also, a pre-K-1 program based on ability provides flexibility. Under this scenario, the construction program for Phase II is looking like a new pre-K-1 school; a retrofitted pre-K-1 school, and a new middle school.

Committee members were enthusiastic about the potential program and asked Kadri to relay their support to the Board of Education. The Committee feels that a pre-K-1, 2-6, 7-8 program works well with the facility and funding programs.

With respect to available sites for a middle school, Smolley noted that the Kolnaski site might be tight with a single 7-8 school, but further analysis needs to be done. Scott questioned the budgetary considerations of starting a pre-K program. Kadri noted that the Board of Education would use private providers for the pre-K program and the challenge will be to bring them under Groton's educational umbrella. He feels that the costs can be absorbed with the closing of two

additional schools. It was noted that pre-K is optional and can not be mandates. Smolley suggested that if the program is more than just childcare, parents may be willing to share in the cost. In addition, instituting the program is at least three years out and budget changes can be anticipated and planned for.

With respect to obtaining support from parents, Kadri noted that the West Side community is adamant that they do not want the school closed. People already understand that Fitch Middle School and Pleasant Valley will close. And finally, there is community support for uniting students in the 7th grade rather than the 9th grade. Kadri shared his dream of “Groton United Middle School,” complete with recreational fields and a community center.

Kadri added that this program does not make the racial balance worse and legitimizes the Kolnaski School. He feels that pre-K will bring in support from more parents and if the increased program is achieved with flat funding, the program can be sold to the public.

Discussion followed on integrating private pre-K providers into the school system.

Kadri reiterated that federal funds are available for construction. Additionally, since the state is pro-early childhood education, there is an opportunity for legislation to allow the use of both federal and state grants.

Greenleaf noted that the program discussed will require expansion of Northeast Academy as originally envisioned.

D. Other

Discussion followed on meeting with the Board of Education and providing an update to the Town Council. The next meeting of the School Design Committee will be held on June 25th to review the program with the architect. A joint meeting with the Board of Education was tentatively scheduled for July 13th, with a presentation to the Town Council Committee of the Whole on July 28th.

5) ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Kolnaski, seconded by Kane, to adjourn the meeting at 8:13 p.m.

The motion carried unanimously.