

HAMPDEN-WILBRAHAM REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
Middle School Task Force Meeting
Wednesday, January 13, 2016 @ 6:00 p.m.
Minnechaug Regional High School
Information Research Commons/Library

Members Present: Sandra Sheehan, Co-Chair; Sue Bunnell, Lena Buteau, Courtney Derosia, Allison DiGrande, John Flynn, Nick Fyntrilakis, Pat Gordon, Karen Grycel, Lisa Morace, Tricia Murphy, Eric Panasci, and George Semanie

Members Absent: Tod O'Brien, Co-Chair; Marty McQuade

Ex Officio Members Present: Peter Dufresne, Steve Hale, Marty O'Shea, Noel Pixley, and Beth Regulbuto

Ex Officio Members Absent: Ed Cenedella

Attendees: Vinnie Villamaino, *Hampden Board of Selectmen*; George Gordon, *Wilbraham resident*; Katherine Provencal, *Hampden resident*; Suzanne McLaughlin, *The Republican*; and Tyler Witkop, *The Wilbraham Hampden Times*; .

1) Call to Order

Co-Chair Sheehan called the meeting of the Middle School Task Force to order at 6:10 p.m.

2) Report from Co-Chairs

Mr. O'Brien was unable to attend this evening. Mrs. Sheehan reported that unfortunately neither of them was able to attend the last two School Committee meetings.

3) Public Engagement

a) Feedback from Public Forum

There was a Middle School Task Force Public Forum on January 7, 2016. Mr. O'Shea said he thought it went well and that there was a polite, respective tone that was generally supportive of the Task Force and there were some good questions, particularly about the logistics. Mr. Panasci agreed that it was a supportive crowd, but he later had comments from a parent who although she is in favor of the unification, she said she would vote against it at this time as she does not feel we have a long term plan. Mr. Dufresne heard similar feedback with questions on the long-term plan. One of the suggestions that Ms. Bunnell heard was to hold an open house soon to get people into the buildings for themselves. Mr. O'Shea has heard similar feedback so we will need to arrange this. Mrs. Sheehan's feedback was that there needs to be a new identity for the unified middle school so that it is not seen as Hampden students coming to a Wilbraham school but rather all middle school students attending a unified school. Mr. Dufresne agrees that these conversations need to take place in order to shape a new identity. Mr. O'Shea believes that we have addressed much of the *why, where, when*, so now we need to focus on the *how*. One of his thoughts is to pull together members of the community to address the logistics of how to do this - such as scheduling, transportation, and security. There is a lot of discussion going on, so we need to channel this so we can hear as many of those questions as possible. He said he would like to take that on - a group focused on the HOW.

Exhibit(s): None

b) Review Survey Responses to Date

Mr. O'Shea asked about the distribution of the survey, where does that stand and should we consider extending the response deadline past mid-January? Mr. Semanie suggested giving people at least another week as the survey was posted a little later than anticipated. Hard copies were distributed, as planned, to town halls, libraries, and senior centers, as well as Village Mart, Village Store, Rice's and the Y. Now that the holidays are over, Mrs. DiGrande suggested sending out another mass notification to remind people about completing the survey. Mr. O'Shea said he could do one for the District to remind people about completing the survey and that the deadline has been extended - hoping the towns could do this as well. Mrs. Regulbuto said the survey was also being mailed to homes in Hampden and Wilbraham. Mr. Semanie recommended extending the deadline to January 31, 2016. Mrs. Sheehan asked if any survey hard copies had been collected and entered but Mr. O'Shea did not believe any had yet. Ms. Bunnell suggested that any members on Facebook could reach out personally and ask people to complete the survey and Mrs. DiGrande noted there is a MSTF Facebook page. Mr. O'Shea then reviewed the results to date of the 258 surveys completed online. He noted that there were comments concerning the wording of the questions, but that shows people are looking at it. Mrs. Regulbuto referenced the intent of the survey - to gauge the public's knowledge - so some of their comments indicate that people need and want more information. Mr. Dufresne agreed that some of the responses show us where we need to do more work. Mr. O'Shea then distributed a compilation of the open responses received thus far and it was noted that not having a long-term plan is a concern expressed in many of the comments. Ms. Bunnell suggested putting responses to some of these comments on the website, a new FAQ document, and Mr. Fyntrilakis agreed - boil down these comments and questions and post responses. Mrs. Sheehan thought this provided interesting information and thanked Mr. O'Shea for putting it together.

Exhibit(s): Presentation on Survey Results to date and "Open Response Summary"

c) Next Steps for Communications

Mr. O'Shea asked about the next brochure and Mrs. Regulbuto reported that there is a 75% completed draft and that the subcommittee needs to review it before sharing it. Some of the topics discussed are - what a model school would look like, what else do we need to look at, what if we don't do something, etc. Mrs. DiGrande noted that we had talked about more regularly scheduled communications and the survey results will help shape those, such as people keep asking what the long term plan is and what the other options are. Perhaps we need to review the other options, what was considered and why another option was not selected. Mr. O'Shea then brought up the fact that he has been asked about going to a K-8 model, particularly in Hampden. He thinks this doesn't make sense because it would not

result in true educational benefits or cost savings, and neither Green Meadows nor Thornton Burgess could handle that configuration. He believes we have to continue our planning the best we can. Mrs. Sheehan asked about parallel planning and Mr. O'Shea said that he, Mrs. Regulbuto, Mr. Dufresne, Mr. Pixley and Mr. Hale all worked on that today – what would it look like for model staffing in a unified school versus two schools. Mr. Hale suggested that Mr. Dufresne and Mr. Pixley design a schedule so we can show people what their student's schedule would look like. Ms. Bunnell suggested that a transportation schedule also be provided for people. Mrs. Regulbuto noted that they are parallel planning transportation. Mrs. DiGrande suggested a "day in the life" schedule for a middle school student, with and without unification. Mr. O'Shea noted that Cindy Flynn suggested that at the forum and he thinks it is a great idea. Regarding information for future brochures, Mr. Fyntrilakis mentioned that some people feel we were misleading regarding having a high performing schools or a school in their town, why not both? But as we have learned, that is not possible within the budget constraints. We also need to explain why the K-8 model is not the solution because people aren't aware and they need to understand. We need to lay all this out with the costs involved so people can understand why we arrived at the recommendation we did. Mr. Dufresne agrees that we need to synthesize all the information available because although this information is out there, people are not taking the time to read it. He also thinks "the day in the life" idea is great. Mr. Hale suggested prioritizing what communications pieces are essential as we have to determine the best use of our time. Mr. Fyntrilakis thinks it is important to quantify costs and educational impact. Mrs. Sheehan agreed that we need to prioritize our communications ideas, including day in the life idea and what a schedule would look like with and without unification. There was also discussion about addressing the idea of a K-8 model and showing what a 7th grade schedule would look like with that. Mr. O'Shea talked about the staffing options with and without unification and that this is a priority for us. There was further discussion about including costs and assumptions with and without unification, as well as addressing transportation and what the routes would look like if the schools unified. Mr. O'Shea noted that this would be another reason for putting together a group to review the logistical details. There was further discussion about encouraging people to complete the survey and then hosting another open forum. Regarding the forum, there was discussion about combining it with an open house. It was decided that the next Public Forum would be on February 10th, details to be determined.

Exhibit(s): None

4) Planning

a) Short Term Planning

As mentioned earlier, Mr. O'Shea is interested in putting together a logistics planning group so he will work on doing this.

Exhibit(s): None

b) Long Term Planning

• MSBA Statement of Interest Process

Mrs. Regulbuto reported that they have started looking at the MSBA Statement of Interest (SOI) Core program as they are now accepting applications. The deadline for submitting is April 8, 2016, and we will want to get into their pipeline for consideration. The first phase is gathering information on the conditions of the buildings, constraints, and programs. She noted that we have to select one location as the primary one while filing on both. There is much work to be done and she will keep the MSTF updated as it progresses. As a regional school district, the School Committee can complete the application but we will work with our towns to get their support. Mrs. DiGrande asked when we could expect a response from the MSBA and Mr. O'Shea explained that it takes several months and it would probably be January 2017 before getting hearing from MSBA if we are invited in to their program. She then asked if we are invited in, when could we expect a response from the MSBA as to their recommendation and level of funding? As a point of reference, Mr. O'Shea pulled up one of his previous presentations regarding the timing of the MSBA process (which he will update) and it looks like it could take two and half years or more to get that response from MSBA. Mr. Fyntrilakis asked for clarification on the MSBA process – do we tell the MSBA what we want? Mr. O'Shea then explained how a comprehensive feasibility study is required and then the MSBA and the HWRSD work collaboratively to determine the best solution. He believes you can "influence" the process if you have, for example, a location and support of the communities. He would not want to mislead anyone into thinking that we can affirmatively say what the long range plan will be other than to say we are going to work really hard with the MSBA. Mrs. Regulbuto explained that we are not going in without a plan and that we will inform the MSBA what the current situation is - that we have two buildings both in need of work, that there are constraints at both sites and that we are pursuing the middle school educational model in a unified building. She further explained that although we have to select one site as the primary one, choosing WMS will not lock us into anything with the MSBA. Ms. Bunnell is concerned that we will not have affirmative votes from the two towns before the submission deadline, but Mr. O'Shea believes that what we submit to the MSBA could be very assuring to our townspeople. Mr. Fyntrilakis asked if as an advisory board the MSTF could put out their recommendation and then the School Committee and the Boards of Selectman could consider it; in other words, why can't we put our opinions on the table for people to consider. Mrs. Sheehan agrees that we can't bring this for a vote without having a long-term plan and the location is a big concern. Mr. Dufresne agrees that having a long-term plan is an issue that has followed us so we need to either address it or send it to the committee that can do so expeditiously. Mrs. DiGrande noted that we can come up with a plan prior to the vote – we won't have the MSBA response but we will have a long-term plan. Mr. Fyntrilakis agreed that we can recommend an objective and the School Committee can agree or not to our objective, in advance of town votes, even if they can't guarantee it, at least we would have a plan on the table. Ms. Morace suggested the co-chairs attend the next School Committee meeting and bring their recommendation to the Committee. Mr. O'Shea added that the opinions of the MSTF could be incorporated into the Statement of Interest.

There was then discussion about the modification to the Regional Agreement, which would include only a couple lines and that maybe a "sunset provision" could be included. In other words, we want to address a near-term critical need in a timely manner but cannot say we

want it to stay that way forever – perhaps just for a set period of time. Mr. O’Shea believes most people could support such a short-term solution. Mr. Pixley is concerned that people feel they cannot vote until they have all the answers because the critical need is now, now is the time for our middle school students so they can all move up to MRHS with the same educational background, so perhaps the sunset provision is the way to go to assist with the short-term solution. Mrs. Sheehan agreed that we don’t want to wait another year and that the sunset clause may be the way to go in order to get the short-term solution started. Mr. O’Shea suggested that the MSTF bring this recommendation to the School Committee and the members agreed. (Mr. O’Shea left the meeting at 7:40 pm)

There was discussion about the process for getting a vote to the town meeting – Hampden’s is in April and Wilbraham’s is in May. Ms. Bunnell explained that “petition articles” are allowed, but Mr. Flynn said that we would not want to get into an adversarial position and there is plenty of time left before Hampden’s ATM warrant is closed. He said the MSTF and the School Committee have time to prepare something for the warrants in conjunction with both Hampden and Wilbraham. He thinks the sunset provision is great. He also pointed out that the District’s reputation with the MSBA is great – citing the success with the Mile Tree, Green Meadows, and Minnechaug projects.

Mrs. Regulbuto asked that in light of the comments and feedback from the communities, does this group want to make another recommendation to the School Committee expanding or modifying the recommendation already made to them? Mrs. DiGrande suggested that the co-chairs talk to the School Committee. Mr. Semanie made a motion that Mrs. Sheehan and Mr. O’Brien attend the School Committee meeting with the recommendations discussed today, Mrs. Grycel seconded, there was no further discussion and it was unanimously approved.

Exhibit(s): None

5) Timeline and Next Steps Discussion

After some discussion, it was decided that the next MSTF meeting will be Wednesday, February 3rd, at 6:00 p.m. Survey results will be discussed, as will the next brochure and the School Committee’s response to the proposed recommendation.

Regarding the next Public Forum on February 10th, Mrs. DiGrande recommended that the MSTF members should speak up more. She also thinks that as previously discussed we will want to come up with a new name for the unified school and we will need to address the issue of how the modulars will be connected to the school with the use of awnings.

Exhibit(s): None

6) Correspondence

a) Letter from Concerned Hampden Citizen

Tabled

Exhibit(s): None

7) Public Comment

Katherine from Hampden mentioned that Hampden residents need to understand better what happens to the two town votes regarding the MSBA recommendations and she is concerned that 5th grade needs to be discussed, what is going to happen to 5th grade curriculum? Mr. Fyntrilakis said this brought up a good point – that if the unified school is in Wilbraham, does Hampden get to vote on any of that and Ms. Bunnell explained that nothing can be done without that being considered a regional school for both towns.

8) Adjournment

Mr. Semanie made a motion to adjourn the meeting, Mr. Fyntrilakis seconded and Mrs. Sheehan adjourned the meeting at 8:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Karen W. Belsky
Recording Secretary