

**HAMPDEN-WILBRAHAM REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
MIDDLE SCHOOL TASK FORCE
MEETING MINUTES
Thursday, March 12, 2015, @ 7:00 p.m.
Minnechaug Regional High School**

Members Present: Sue Bunnell, Lena Buteau, Allison Digrande, Marc Ducey, John Flynn, Karen Grycel, Lisa Morace (arr 7:45), Tricia Murphy, Tod O'Brien, George Semanie and Sandra Sheehan.

Members Absent: Nick Fyntrilakis and Marty McQuade

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

Ex Officio Members Absent: Ed Cenedella

1) Call to Order

Chairman Ducey called the March 12, 2015, meeting of the Middle School Task Force to order at 7:00 p.m.

2) Approval of Minutes (see below)

- December 11, 2014
- January 29, 2015

3) Debrief from Public Forum

There was a discussion about the comments that came out of the recent public forums. Mr. O'Shea made a list of the general themes mentioned by members including:

- Learning curve
- Educational impacts
- Information/FAQs
- Timeline
- Options
- Town-wide impacts
- Why – need to push the info out
- Leverage town communications
- Transition plan for students
- Is problem apparent
- HWRSD budget
- Enrollment

There was then a general discussion about all of these issues. The HWRSD \$1.3 million deficit was discussed. People will need to understand that it is not just about the money, but also about resources. Mr. O'Brien noted there is much misinformation out there and people have difficulty understanding what is being discussed, such as why smaller classes are not necessarily a good thing. That concept alone is difficult to understand and we need to get better information out to the public. FAQs were discussed and it was recommended that they have hyperlinks to additional information and the FAQs should address such issues as financial, educational, parental concerns, and different scenarios. Mr. Ducey agreed that there is obviously a thirst for more information on this and it was good to see so many attendees. He believes we need to "package" our information differently and include different options such as a plan A, B, or C so people can understand what happens with each choice. Mr. Semanie noted that there is much concern about Hampden losing one of its two schools and we need to shine a more positive light on what this could mean. Mr. Flynn talked about the good delineation of where we are in the process and that it is not just about financials and that it is about a proper education and keeping our high educational standards. Mr. O'Shea agreed that we should focus on the *why*, that is key, and we should not be focusing on the *what* at this point. Mr. Ducey mentioned that the WPA has the forum on their "video on demand" and Mr. Flynn noted that the Town of Hampden website has it as well. Ms. DiGrande commented on the need to be more proactive and push information out there. She wondered if we could get an RSS feed and if we could use Edline for notifications? Mrs. Sheehan gets the sense that parents don't understand that there is an issue because the teachers are doing such a great job under the circumstances. However, Mrs. Murphy expressed shock that parents don't understand what it will be like in five years, both educationally and financially. For those who are concerned about the value of their homes, if the quality of our school district deteriorates, everyone's home value will fall. Mr. Ducey believes we need a road map to show where we have been and where we need to go. Mr. O'Shea talked about enrollment trends and property values and that he can understand where the concern is coming from with regards to our educational program. He believes Hampden-Wilbraham has a great opportunity to strengthen its bonds, as well as

its educational offerings. Mrs. Grycel talked about the quality of our educational program and is concerned about the motives behind wanting a new school with all the bells and whistles as she is more concerned with how we can maintain what we have now, let alone improve upon it - we need to appreciate what we have, hang on to it, and not lose it.

Exhibit(s): List of themes from public forum

4) Mass Ethics Findings

Mr. Ducey explained that he was concerned about a recent post regarding a potential conflict of interest surrounding the work of the MSTF. Although he was not specifically named, he sought the advice of the State Ethics Commission. He read an e-mail response from Amy Bressler Nee, Staff Counsel, which confirmed that no conflict of interest exists.

Exhibit(s): E-mail from Amy Nee, Staff Counsel at the State Ethics Commission, dated March 3, 2015 to Mr. Ducey

5) FY16 Budget

Regarding the HWRSD budget, Mr. Ducey stressed that the towns have been generous in their support of the school budget. Mr. O'Shea then briefly reviewed his FY16 budget presentation (from a previous MSTF meeting), specifically discussing Chapter 70 Aid and that both Hampden and Wilbraham traditionally provide approximately 20% above the Minimum Local Contribution (MLC) and Ms. Bunnell added that the towns have probably been picking up even more than that. There was discussion about the archaic Foundation Formula for school funding that has been in place since 1993 and has not kept pace with the changes in education. Both Mr. O'Shea and Mr. Ducey said they were pleased with the towns' efforts to fund the schools, but they are concerned that this cannot be sustained (Ms. Morace arr at 7:45 p.m.). Ms. DiGrande noted that the "required net spending" is only minimal and Mr. O'Shea agreed, pointing out that we spend 20% more than that and more affluent towns spend 50% to 60% more. There was discussion about the cuts in Regional Transportation Aid and that legislators need to hear from regional school districts about this compounding problem. Mr. Ducey noted that during the last eight years the HWRSD has lost over \$5 million due to cuts in anticipated regional transportation reimbursement. Ms. DiGrande suggested including "what can I do" information in the FAQs. Also discussed was that the projected budget gap of \$1.3 million is for level funding only and how the decreasing enrollment affects funding from the State. Mr. O'Shea discussed the budget preparation process and how it usually takes about five to six weeks and that at the time of the Hampden town meeting in April, we do not have all the necessary information from the State and are working with budget projection figures based only on the Governor's initial budget and our experience. "Addressing the Budget Gap FY17 and Beyond" is certainly not the picture we want to see and Mr. Ducey noted that we need to provide a better education model and be more cost efficient. Mrs. Grycel asked if there was any way to magnify our voices, such as a form letter from Superintendent O'Shea that people could send to legislators. Mr. O'Shea is not sure he could legally do this, but certainly PTOs and other groups could. Mr. Panasci asked about grouping unfunded mandates and regional transportation together in a letter. Mr. O'Shea explained that currently there is a legal defense fund mounting a challenge to this via the Attorney General's Office.

Exhibit(s): FY16 Budget Power Point Presentation

6) Feasibility of Regionalization

Mr. O'Shea discussed the feasibility of a regional middle school, the potential use of modular classrooms, and transportation considerations. He noted, however, that at the end of the day none of us are architects and we need information on the needs, suitability, viability, and feasibility of each site. It may turn out that neither site is cost effective or educationally effective. He provided a draft of what might be involved in a professional study. Mr. Ducey asked about the cost and timing of such a study. Mr. O'Shea estimated \$10,000 and that we could get it by early August. There was much discussion regarding the feasibility of the short-term solution of consolidating at one site and that additional information is necessary. Mr. Ducey asked if the group thinks getting this study is a good idea and if so he would need a recommendation for the School Committee. Mrs. DiGrande made a motion for a study to explore the feasibility, viability and potential costs associated with developing a single regional middle school using modular construction at the Thornton Burgess site and the Wilbraham Middle School site. Mr. Semanie seconded. During discussion, Mr. Flynn talked about the short term and the long term, the need for a "road map" and that there should be "no stone left unturned" with regards to other potential solutions. There was general discussion regarding MSBA involvement, the timing of town votes - fall of 2015 or spring of 2016, the need to look at other possible options, and asking the professionals to "look outside the box." Mrs. DiGrande withdrew

her original motion and Mr. Flynn seconded. Mrs. DiGrande then made a new motion for a study to explore the feasibility, viability and potential costs associated with developing a single regional middle school for the Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District. Mr. Semanie seconded, there was no further discussion and it was unanimously approved. (Mr. O'Shea left at 8:45 p.m.)

Exhibit(s): Middle School Task Force Next Steps Potential Scope and Elements of Professional Study

7) Next Steps

Mr. Ducey mentioned he has heard transportation concerns and Ms. DiGrande requested that the FAQs include information on a transition plan. Mr. Ducey also mentioned he has received e-mails voicing ideas on other options, such as regionalizing earlier in 4th grade and keeping K-3 "local." Another e-mail received concerned the composition and length of service of the MSTF group so he asked that if anyone on this committee has any concerns about continuing their commitment, please let him know.

Exhibit(s): None

8) Future Meeting Dates

TBD

Exhibit(s): None

Approval of Minutes (see above)

- December 11, 2014

The Minutes of the December 11, 2014, meeting were reviewed. Mrs. Sheehan made a motion to approve, Mr. McQuade seconded, there was no discussion and the motion was approved.

Exhibit(s): Minutes of December 11, 2014

- January 29, 2015

The Minutes of the January 29, 2015, meeting were reviewed. Mrs. Sheehan made a motion to approve, Mr. McQuade seconded, there was no discussion and the motion was approved.

Exhibit(s): Minutes of January 29, 2015

9) Public Comments

Several attendees made comments and brought up their concerns, including:

- Concern about regional transportation
- Wonders how a vote can be done on the short-term solution without knowing about the MSBA
- Concerns about educational value, timeframe with the MSBA, feasibility of the short term and long term
- Suggest that we reach out and see how other recently regionalized schools others are doing
- Concerned that we are not acting more quickly on this and that there needs to be an alternative plan as a back-up
- Questioned if people will get to vote on which location is chosen, what will happen to home values if we close a middle school
- Concern about pitting two towns against each other
- Concern that if you rush the vote you will get a no vote, so you need to get the right information out there for people

Exhibit(s): None

Adjournment

After public comments, Chairman Ducey asked for a vote to adjourn the meeting. Mrs. Buteau so moved and Mr. Flynn seconded. The MSTF meeting adjourned at 9:18 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen W. Belsky
Recording Secretary