

HAMPDEN-WILBRAHAM REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
MIDDLE SCHOOL TASK FORCE
MEETING MINUTES – OPEN SESSION

Thursday, January 29, 2015 – 7:00 p.m. – MRHS Information Research Commons

Members Present: Allison DiGrande, Marc Ducey, John Flynn, Nick Fyntrilakis, Karen Grycel, Marty McQuade, Lisa Morace, Tricia Murphy and Sandra Sheehan.

Members Absent: Sue Bunnell, Tod O'Brien, Peter Salerno, George Semanie

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

Ex Officio Members Absent: Ed Cenedella, Beth Regulbuto

During the course of the meeting the following exhibits were referenced:

- "Middle School Task Force – January 29, 2015," - "Short Term Feasibility of Regional Middle School"
- NESDEC - Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District Facilities Best Use Study – January 2013
- "Middle School Task Force: HWRSD Budget Challenges – Next Steps" – December 11, 2014

1. Call to Order

Marc Ducey called the HWRSD Middle School Task Force Meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. in the MRHS Information Research Commons, recognizing there was a quorum present.

2. Public Comment

Mr. Ducey was pleased to see so many people in attendance and asked for public comments. Kristen Angelica voiced her concern about the public not knowing about this important meeting. Ann Marie Noel thanked the Task Force for their work and said she came to better educate herself on the short- and long-term solutions. Mr. Ducey introduced himself as the Chairman of the School Committee and also the Chairman of the Middle School Task Force. He then provided a brief background regarding the middle school situation, specifically citing declining enrollment trends in the HWRSD. He mentioned that concerns surfaced a few years ago and steps were taken, including closing Memorial School and reconfiguring the elementary schools in Wilbraham. Work on this MSTF began back in September when the School Committee sought volunteers by reaching out to parents and residents, as well as elective officials, from our two towns. As a result, we have four residents from Hampden, four from Wilbraham, and representatives from the Hampden and Wilbraham Boards of Selectmen, School Committee and HWRSD administrators. The group began meeting in October on Thursday nights and has learned about the current HWRSD middle school programs and the model middle school program, plus they toured and learned about both the Thornton Burgess and Wilbraham Middle physical facilities. He explained that we are early in the process of seeking the best middle school model that is both educationally sound and cost effective. These meetings have been posted public meetings and there has been excellent coverage by our local news media. Serenity Greenwood thanked Mr. Ducey for the information and asked when there would be a forum for townspeople? He explained that he believes the MSTF needs to continue to do its work before hosting forums. Jeff Lemire questioned the decline in enrollment, asking if it's a long-term decline or just a temporary dip. Mr. Ducey cited the NESDEC study, noting that its figures are reliable for the next ten years, factoring in the margin of error over the years, but after that it becomes less clear.

Superintendent O'Shea took the opportunity to show the last slide of tonight's presentation which covered "Recommended Next Steps," including the step to "widen the discussion" and seek community input in the form of surveys, forums, and presentations. He also provided the link to the MSTF information posted on the District's webpage, which has the reports and presentations the group has been reviewing. In terms of declining enrollment, studies show it will continue to decrease through 2021, although the decline over the next ten years will not be as sharp as it has been over the last seven or eight years. Regarding grades 6 through 8 future enrollments, he explained that if you take the current K-1-2 and move them forward through to the higher grades, the low number of students is a startling figure. He went on to explain how the MSTF looked at the educational issues first, while acknowledging that there are obviously budget considerations. He emphasized that we want to use this as an opportunity to improve the services to our middle school students in grades 6 through 8. He noted that we have

our new high school and we reconfigured the elementary schools in Wilbraham, and now it's time to take a hard look at our middle schools. We want to improve the educational experience for our middle school students, plus we need to be more cost effective. He told the audience that we would do a better job at getting meeting notices out and we will have public forums where there can be a free exchange of information.

In the meantime, Mr. Ducey explained that this is a working meeting of the MSTF and there is still much work to be done. Mr. Fyntrilakis suggested a quick recap. Mr. O'Shea explained that the MSTF gave a directional recommendation to the School Committee in December regarding how they believe the HWRSD can educationally and financially best meet the academic, social, physical and emotional needs of our middle school students in a single regional middle school. Mr. O'Shea referenced information from the last MSTF meeting addressing the potential educational benefits including the true middle school model, equity and consistency in our middle school programs, scheduling flexibility, social benefits with earlier integration of Hampden and Wilbraham students and improved teacher collaboration and specialization, among other benefits. He then reviewed some of the demographic and projected enrollment information, indicating a steady decline in future enrollments. Lisa Zeno, a local realtor, reported that three months ago there were 43 houses for sale in Hampden and now there are only 16 and that many of those sold were to families with children. Joe Zeno also commented on the aging population in Hampden and when they move, they are being replaced with families. Mr. Ducey understands these concerns and again referenced the NESDEC study. Jennifer Dunn asked if the study took the new casinos into consideration and also where these enrollment figures come from. Mr. O'Shea does not believe the casinos were a factor when the study was completed and he's not sure how much effect they will have here in Hampden and Wilbraham. He then described some of the sources of the data from the NESDEC study, including birth rates, death rates, and real estate sales and rentals, adding that this is not just a Hampden-Wilbraham issue, it is a regional issue – there are other school districts in Massachusetts closing schools and regionalizing.

Mr. Ducey said that while we want to provide the best education possible, we just cannot do it at any cost as we just don't have those resources. The District has to do what is smart and efficient, both educationally and cost effectively. Kathryn from Hampden asked if the 5th grade would be moved back to Green Meadows and what year is this being considered for? Mr. Ducey said some of this will be discussed this evening. Another Hampden resident mentioned that probably so many people are here this evening because we have heard about the potential of using modulars, and they are also concerned about the impact of not having a middle school in Hampden. She added that TWB was designed to be expanded. Mike Allegrezza from Hampden asked about the reasons for the declining enrollment, and Mr. O'Shea said there are many reasons, citing the decreased birth rates, the migration out of Massachusetts, and the regional economy, among other factors - noting again that these issues are being discussed throughout the area. Deb Marcelina from Hampden commented that she is a nurse and although birth rates had been declining, they are now increasing. Mr. Ducey understands the concerns, but believes the committee owes it to everyone to objectively and strategically investigate the issues. He stressed that the intention is not to close a school, but to provide the best educational model at a cost-effective price. A comment was made by a Hampden resident that once the move is made, it will be hard to reverse it and what would happen to the school? Mr. Ducey responded that the schools are owned by the towns and that would be their decision, not the MSTF's. For additional information, Mr. O'Shea referenced Table 6H of the NESDEC presentation dated January 2013, (online) regarding "Number of Dwelling Units and Persons Per Unit" comparing Massachusetts, Hampden County and Hampden between 1990 and 2010 – which shows Hampden's growth behind the slow growth of Massachusetts and Hampden County. Mr. Ducey reiterated that no decisions have been made and that if there is any change, the Regional Agreement would need to be amended and voted on at town meeting.

Mr. O'Shea then began his planned meeting presentation, per the agenda: "Middle School Task Force – January 29, 2015," with a focus on the "Short Term Feasibility of Regional Middle School" – specifically space requirements, transportation, food service, programming and scheduling.

3. Minutes – December 11, 2014

Minutes of the December 11, 2014 were not available for approval.

4. Transportation Services

Mr. O'Shea reviewed "Busing 101," regarding the LPVEC transportation services, tiered bus runs in the HWRSD, and the transportation cost formula, which is dependent on the number of buses, time on road, and mileage. He touched upon the ongoing inadequate Regional Transportation Reimbursement from the State. He mentioned that having fewer students does not necessarily equate to lower bus costs, since the size of Hampden-Wilbraham isn't changing and our buses still have to cover their routes. He reviewed information regarding current WMS and TWB average route time for the bus (not riders) and average mileage, compared to projected information for a single school located at TWB and WMS, based on current population. He believes that the transportation issues appear to be ones that we can overcome, noting that the first meeting with the LPVEC to discuss possible changes was encouraging, although much more work is needed.

5. Space Considerations

Mr. O'Shea then reviewed "Space Considerations" referencing the 2013 NESDEC Study information on TWB and WMS including capacity information, enrollment history, building square footage, number of classrooms, instructional space details, and core facilities information. He reviewed grades 6-8 enrollment projections compared to the WMS and TWB capacities. He then discussed "Additional Space Requirements" and the possibility of using modular classrooms. He reviewed "Modular Classrooms," noting the spectrum of options available and the various considerations in the decision-making process, such as portable vs permanent, detached vs integrated, used vs new, and leased vs purchased. This research has just begun and there is much more information needed.

Mr. O'Shea reviewed "Recommended Next Steps," such as widening the discussion, continuing a feasibility study internally by discussing transportation services, food service, programming and scheduling, procurement process for modulars, and also visiting districts that are currently using modular classrooms. One of the questions for this committee and the School Committee is whether or not to get a professional study regarding the feasibility of using modulars at either TWB or WMS. Lastly, he noted that ultimately this is a community decision and we are working to provide the best information to people and to give them an idea of the timeline that may be ahead of us.

Mrs. DiGrande questioned short term versus long term solutions and feels she needs more information. She wants to be sure it is possible to slow down or stop the process if this group isn't comfortable with what it is learning and needs more information. She is wondering if maybe money would be better spent on the long term, while saving it in the short term. She feels she can support the long-term solution, but she is not sure she is on board with the short term without a better understanding. Mr. Ducey talked about the current educational experience and the financial considerations, so he believes the sooner we do something educationally, the better off we will be. Mr. O'Shea assured the group that there are plenty of potential "stop signs" along the way to allow for more deliberation. Mr. Fyntrilakis wondered about the idea of foregoing the short-term solution, and its related costs, in favor of the long-term solution. Mr. O'Shea would welcome the opportunity of bringing a larger long-term solution to this group if that is something they are interested in, as had been discussed at some point.

Mr. Flynn asked about the MSBA involvement and if Mr. O'Shea had the opportunity to find out what their inclination would be toward participating in another new school project for Hampden-Wilbraham and what would the timeline look like? Mr. O'Shea explained that he did have an opportunity to talk to reps at the MSBA about a different District matter and he told them about the work of the MSTF. They were impressed because they said the job of the HWRSD is to get our educational program in order and then the job of the MSBA is to figure out the facility that fits it. After that conversation, Mr. O'Shea feels we would be well positioned to work with the MSBA to look at possible options and find the best solution, if that is what is decided. Mr. Flynn briefly reviewed the extensive upgrades that would be needed at both TWB, approximately \$2 million, and WMS, approximately \$7 million, and wondered if we can exist with the current educational model, while Superintendent O'Shea is saying we can provide a better educational experience by going down this road. He cautioned that the decision may be that the status quo is acceptable and that people want to keep middle schools in both communities – in other words, there is no dictated solution so far.

Mr. Ducey then asked the MSTF how they wanted to proceed – did they want more information on the issues mentioned in the “Recommended Next Steps?” Mr. Flynn believes we need to define our long-term before talking more about the short-term and how to get there. People will want to know where we are heading. Mr. Ducey asked Mr. O’Shea for more information about the MSBA programs. He explained the potential timeline for the Core Program, which is for renovations or new buildings. He described some of the steps in the long process involved in getting in to the MSBA funding queue, if we are accepted. The applications are due in April and it could take six to seven years for a major renovation or new building. There was more discussion about having the long-term solution in mind before proceeding with short-term solutions. When asked about getting a response from the MSBA regarding acceptance into their program, Mr. O’Shea said that it typically takes about nine months to hear back as to what the MSBA would be willing to participate in with the district. He would want to do more research on this for the MSTF.

Mr. Fyntrilakis questioned that if we wait for the long term to play out, what are the costs involved in providing the appropriate middle school model educational experience at TWB when you have such low enrollment? Mr. O’Shea agrees – how can we cost effectively provide the educational services we envision for our students at both schools with the projected low enrollment patterns. Mr. Fyntrilakis believes it’s important to present this type of information to the communities – the costs involved in providing an adequate educational experience and what happens if you don’t spend the money to get that adequate educational experience. Mrs. DiGrande talked about the frustration of not knowing what long-term solution the MSBA would decide and what that does to our ability to plan for the short term. Mr. McQuade cautioned that if we don’t do anything, there will be significant changes in both towns as the numbers show the current situation cannot continue. The MSTF’s decision to recommend a single regional middle school was based on the middle school model and what is best for the students. If the communities don’t approve this, things will still change. Mr. Flynn talked about the need to educate people as to what is happening to the education as they don’t understand that there is a problem – they are probably thinking why find a solution to a problem that doesn’t exist. The MSTF is now aware of the problems and now we need to educate the public, we need to get the information out there. Mr. O’Shea agreed that we need to widen the discussion, but Mr. Ducey is concerned that although it is important to hear people’s questions, we don’t have answers yet so he believes the MSTF needs to continue on the path and look at options so we can share that information. Although not having answers can be frustrating, Mrs. DiGrande and Mr. Flynn believe that people need to know what the problems are. Mr. Fyntrilakis believes we need to show enrollment trends and extrapolate from there, explain what happens if nothing is done, what the impacts would be and what the timelines could be.

Mr. Ducey asked how the group wants to proceed – is there consensus as to what information we want to explore. There is agreement on getting community input, but what else does the MSTF want to pursue – what do they want the Superintendent to investigate? Regarding public input, Mr. Fyntrilakis suggested that there could be public input at each of these public meetings and Mr. Ducey agreed and said that time will be allocated for questions and answers. Mr. O’Shea said that information on future meetings – date, time and place - would be sent out to parents, and Mr. Flynn suggested a more suitable location for these meetings so people in the audience can see and hear the presentations better.

Mr. Panasci reiterated how difficult it is to define short term plans when you don’t have the long-term decided, such as the use of modulars. Mr. Ducey agreed but then pointed out, however, that when looking at the decreasing enrollment numbers, not many modulars would be needed in five years. Mr. O’Shea again reviewed the two directional recommendations – the short term discussed at tonight’s meeting - and then the long-term facility solution, working with our towns and the MSBA to be sure we have a facility that we are proud of for the long term. He understands that at the next meeting this Committee wants to hear more about the potential timelines for the long-term needs of the buildings, while we also continue to review the short term feasibility. He was also asked to provide the impact of doing nothing or maintaining the status quo. Mr. Ducey said at the next meeting, the first hour will be spent on questions and answers from the audience and then we will launch into the MSBA information. At a future meeting, more time could be spent on the short-term options.

Mr. Connor would also like to present his educational impact presentation again at the next meeting for the public and Mrs. Murphy agreed that this information is critical for others to hear. Mr. McQuade recommended that people review the information provided on the MSTF website. Mr. Ducey agreed to an audience member's request to also allow for questions and answers at the end of the next meeting so they could ask follow-up questions on what was presented during the meeting.

6. Next Meeting Dates

The next MSTF meeting is scheduled to be on Thursday, February 5, 2015, at 7:00 p.m., location to be determined.

7. Adjournment

Before adjournment, Serenity Greenwood talked about people may not understand how the short-term decisions could affect the long term, and the fear that short-term decisions may lock them in to long-term goals that they don't necessarily agree with -people will want to know what this will all look like down the road. Her hope is that this doesn't pit the two towns against each other – we all want what is best for our children. Mr. Flynn stressed that it is up to us, our committees and volunteers, to make the case for the changes because the decision has to go before Town Meeting for approval. Lastly, Mr. Ducey stressed that there have been no decisions – this group has been assembled to do the research and make a recommendation to the School Committee and we will continue to do our work and look for people's input.

Mr. Ducey asked for a motion to adjourn. Mrs. Murphy so moved, Mr. Fyntrilakis seconded and it was unanimously approved. The Meeting adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Karen W. Belsky
Recording Secretary