

Amherst School Committee
March 20, 2012
Library, Amherst Regional High School

In Attendance:

Irv Rhodes, Chair
Katherine Appy
Rick Hood
Rob Spence
Solomon Goldstein-Rose

Maria Geryk, Superintendent
Jerry Champagne, Information Systems Director
Rob Detweiler, Director of Finance
Ron Bohonowicz, Director of Facilities
Mike Morris, Crocker Farm Principal
Monica Colley, Fort River Principal
Debbie Westmoreland, Recorder
Public
Press

1. Welcome

7:00 p.m.

A. Call to Order and Agenda Review—Mr. Rhodes called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. He welcomed everyone and reviewed the agenda.

C. Approve Minutes—Mr. Spence made a motion to approve the minutes of February 14 and March 6, 2012 as presented. Mr. Goldstein-Rose seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

2. Public Comments

7:03 p.m.

Angela Mills, Crocker Farm parent and PGO Co-Chair, made a statement about the need for an additional third grade class at Crocker Farm next year. She cited concerns about the impact of crowding in the current third grade classes. Valerie Cooley, current Wildwood and former Marks Meadow parent, made comments regarding the closure of Marks Meadow two years on, requesting that an analysis be done of the impact of the closure. She noted that there needs to be accountability on the part of the School Committee and school administration for such a huge decision, including the actual savings versus the cost to students. Mr. Goldstein-Rose noted that this is his last meeting in his role as a School Committee member and spoke regarding the benefit of having a current student as a voting member of the School Committee. He encouraged students to run for a three year term who meet the candidacy requirements and can serve because they are staying in Amherst after graduation. Ms. Geryk thanked Mr. Goldstein-Rose for his service on the School Committee, noting that she is working with him and other members of the Student Council on issues of particular interest to students.

3. Superintendent's Update

7:14 p.m.

DOCUMENTS: Superintendent's Updates to Amherst School Committee dated March 20, 2012

Ms. Geryk noted that she is currently monitoring enrollments and projected class sizes for a few particular grades, including third and sixth grade at Crocker Farm, second grade at Fort River and third grade at Wildwood. She provided an update on the Time and Learning study the School Committee voted to conduct, noting that Dr. Rhonda Cohen, Director of Teaching and Learning, is overseeing the work. Dr. Cohen has been in contact with Dr. Carolyn Burke of the New England School Development Council (NESDEC) to discuss the parameters of the study, and is now awaiting a cost proposal from NESDEC. Mr. Geryk briefly mentioned several other events including:

- The League of Women Voters' Candidates Night on March 27th;
- The Ron Ferguson visit to Amherst on March 28th;
- Student winners of the Town of Amherst Public Shade Tree Committee's Arbor Day poster contest; and
- Student activities and news from each of the schools.

4. New and Continuing Business

7:18 p.m.

A. FY12 Second Quarter Report

DOCUMENTS: Amherst Schools Operating Budget FY2012 Second Quarter Report

Mr. Detweiler said he understands that the School Committee members have had the FY12 Second Quarter Report for two weeks and have already reviewed it. He noted that the budget is set to come in on target and offered to answer any questions that may have arisen based on the information in the report. There were no questions from the School Committee about the report.

B. Wildwood/Fort River Facilities

Mr. Bohonowicz provided a brief overview of the specific requests that were included in the Statement of Interests (SOI) submitted to the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) for Fort River and Wildwood, as well as the process for submission. He noted that the district has submitted SOIs for both schools each year from 2008 to 2012. The major areas of concern for which funding has been requested are air quality, noise, the open classroom structure, and lack of space for

special programs. Ms. Appy asked when MSBA last visited the schools and assigned the building rating. Mr. Bohonowicz said they assigned the rating in 2007 and have declined his request to reevaluate the buildings since then. Mr. Spence asked if the issues associated with the open classroom structure were outlined for MSBA in the SOI. Mr. Bohonowicz confirmed that the issues were outlined in the SOI; however, MSBA's response to him is that there are many other schools in the state with the same problem. Mr. Spence asked if Mr. Bohonowicz is aware of any districts that may have dealt with the open classroom issue in a creative way. Mr. Bohonowicz said he has not researched that topic. Mr. Hood asked if the funding for the projects included in the SOI is so substantial that it could not be done without state funds. Mr. Bohonowicz noted that the project costs would be quite substantial, running in the millions. Mr. Rhodes stated that he asked Mr. Bohonowicz to present this information because at some point it is essential to do this work. He noted that it is the extraordinary efforts of the teachers and administration that have made it possible for teaching and learning to take place in a difficult architectural environment. Mr. Rhodes said he will be asking for a more in-depth discussion about the possibility of setting aside funds for an architectural analysis of Fort River and Wildwood.

C. Per Pupil Cost Study

Mr. Rhodes noted that there has been a great deal of public discussion about the per pupil cost of the Amherst Schools compared to other districts in the state. He said it is important to make sure that when per pupil cost is discussed, the data compared is apples to apples. Ms. Appy said she agrees this is an important issue and asked if there will be a cost associated with conducting a study. Mr. Rhodes noted that he met with Mr. Detweiler to discuss options for the study and there may not be a cost. If there is a cost, he would return to the committee for discussion before moving forward with a study. Ms. Geryk noted that it is critically important that the person doing this study have a very thorough understanding of school systems. She said it is important to understand that Mr. Detweiler will have to be highly involved in the study even if an outside organization is contracted for the work. Mr. Detweiler noted that, for the first time, his office has been looking at the FY13 budget from the perspective of per pupil cost. He noted that some areas that have stood out as contributors to the district's higher per pupil cost are 1) the district's robust pre-K program, which includes two non-mandated regular education classes; 2) the fact that some districts have cut arts and music programs and Amherst has not; and 3) higher health insurance costs. He noted that he would like to finish unpacking our own district's data before beginning comparison's with other districts since that data will inform the comparison. Mr. Rhodes noted that this type of per pupil cost analysis has not been done in the state and is something the Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials may be very interested in doing. After discussion, Mr. Spence made a motion that the school committee authorizes the chair to seek qualified organizations such as the Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials, the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, or qualified individuals to do an independent comparative analysis of the per pupil cost of comparison schools of Amherst. Mr. Hood seconded and the motion was approved with Ms. Appy opposed and Mr. Goldstein-Rose abstaining.

5. Policies 8:04 p.m.

DOCUMENTS: Policy AC: Commitment to Nondiscrimination and Educational Equity, Policy ACB: Affirmative Action on Cultural Diversity, Policy BDFA: School Councils, and Policy BDFB: School Improvement Plans as approved by Regional School Committee

Mr. Goldstein-Rose made a motion to approve Policy AC: Commitment to Nondiscrimination and Educational Equity, Policy ACB: Affirmative Action on Cultural Diversity, Policy BDFA: School Councils, and Policy BDFB: School Improvement Plans. Ms. Appy seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

6. Subcommittees

None

7. School Committee Planning

8:00 p.m.

A. Calendar—RSDPC Meeting on March 26 at 7:00 p.m. in the ARHS library with Christine Lynch from DESE

B. Items for Future Agendas—Class Size Discussion

8. Adjournment

8:05 p.m.

Mr. Goldstein-Rose moved to adjourn at 8:05 p.m. Mr. Rhodes seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully Submitted,
Debbie Westmoreland