

JOINT Meeting of the Amherst-Pelham Regional and Union 26 School Committees

Tuesday, August 09, 2016

5:00 p.m.

Library, Amherst Regional High School

In Attendance

Laura Kent, Region Chair

Darius Modestow, Union 26 Chair

Trevor Baptiste, Region and Union 26

Sarah Dolven, Region/Union 26

Anastasia Ordonez, Region and Union 26

Vira Douangmany Cage, Region

Katherine Appy, Region/Union 26 (remotely)

Stephen Sullivan, Region

Mike Morris, Assistant Superintendent

Kathryn Mazur, Human Resources Director

Sean Mangano, Finance Director

Marta Guevara, Director of Student & Family Engagement

Carol Ross, Media & Climate Communications Specialist

Jo Ann Smith, Student Services Administrator

Mark Jackson, ARHS Principal

Nick Yaffe, WW Principal

Derek Shea, CF Principal

Public and Press

Debbie Westmoreland, Recorder

Absent

Phoebe Hazzard, Region and Union 26

Emily Marriott, Region

Tara Luce, Union 26

1. Welcome and Call to Order

Ms. Kent called the meeting of the Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committee to order at 5:13 p.m. Mr. Modestow called the meeting of the Union 26 School Committee to order at 5:13 p.m. Ms. Kent then reviewed the agenda and moved that the committee enter Executive Session according to MGL Chapter 30A; Section 21(a)(2) to conduct contract negotiations with nonunion personnel (Maria Geryk) with intention to return to open session at approximately 6:00 p.m. Mr. Baptiste voiced his objection to entering executive session, noting that he feels threatened and forced into these contract negotiations. He stated that he believes that evaluations should be done before contract negotiations are done and he feels coerced. Ms. Appy is remotely participating due to geographic location and, by request of Chair Kent, Ms. Appy confirmed that no one else is present in her location that might compromise the confidentiality of the Executive Session. Ms. Kent noted that the committee is inviting Sean Mangano, Finance Director, Kathryn Mazur, Human Resources Director, and Tom Colombe, counsel for the Committee into Executive Session. By roll call vote the committee entered Executive Session at 5:17 p.m. Roll call was as follows:

Modestow—Aye

Baptiste—Nay

Kent—Aye

Appy—Aye

Dolven—Aye

Ordonez—Aye

Douangmany-Cage—Nay

Sullivan—Aye

At 8:05 p.m., the meeting was called back to order in open session.

2. Superintendent's Contract Statement

8:05 p.m.

Ms. Kent thanked everyone for waiting. She then moved to accept a modified separation agreement that has been approved in Executive Session for separation from the Superintendent and to authorize the Chairs to execute it. Mr. Modestow seconded and discussion followed. Ms. Douangmany Cage stated that she does not approve of the separation agreement or the monetary value attached to it, and then read a portion of the agreement. Ms. Douangmany Cage noted that she is not in agreement to pay the Superintendent one penny for her separation. Mr. Baptiste stated that he and the other members volunteer and serve for the schools and the children, and he has always served honorably and with integrity. He said he must speak to insinuations that he has done anything less than that. He said he cannot vote in favor of this separation agreement because he cannot be in favor of anything that is done in question of his honorable service. Ms. Douangmany Cage stated that it was a surprise to have this settlement agreement come up in the way it has, and she thinks it will be a grave mistake for the committee to proceed and approve such settlement terms because there is no rush. She encouraged the committee to take time to understand what they are doing, noting that she has expressed her reservations about the committee's attorney being part of a firm that has represented the Superintendent in the past. Ms.

Douangmany Cage noted that she has encouraged the committee to change representation and it has fallen on deaf ears. Ms. Appy called the question. Mr. Baptiste called point of privilege and stated that for those who know him he has to say that he has not been intimidated or cowered and he does not believe the committee has been. By roll call vote, the motion was approved as follows:

Baptiste—Nay
Kent—Aye
Dolven—Aye
Ordonez—Aye
Douangmany Cage—Nay
Sullivan—Nay
Appy—Aye

Ms. Kent then read the following statement:

Over the past month and a half our committee met several times in Executive Session to discuss a highly sensitive and serious matter affecting the employment of our Superintendent. Our members worked diligently over the course of twelve hours to understand the claim put before us, and then to negotiate an appropriate separation that would meet the terms of our contract and not put our district in further jeopardy. I recognize the public's questioning of the details of this settlement and it is my hope that in expediting the approval of the executive session minutes and documents to be released the community can digest the thought processes of each committee member and present the committee with informed questions at that time. We have carefully reviewed the district budget during the course of our decision-making; we recognize that our district already operates under a tight budget, like many other districts in our area and across the country, and I want to provide assurance that the funding for this agreement will come at no cost to our staff and our children. For many of us, our commitment has always been to our children, this community and the future operation and reputation of our district.

I want to thank the committee for the time that has been invested in this decision and I hope we can work to repair the fragmented pieces that have jeopardized our integrity. This experience has put a mirror in front of our committee, and has made clear that we have a lot of work to do to minimize the risk of a similar situation in the future, and to ensure the success of our future superintendents. I want to thank Ms. Geryk for her 14 years of service and hard work on behalf of the district. To our administrative staff and other 600 staff members who make the tree that supports our kids, we will continue the good work happening in our schools and look forward to the new chapter that our district is opening. It is within this opportunity that we need to redirect our focus to the fabulous initiatives ensuing, the ability to grow and constructively change for the best interests of our children and our community.

3. Public Comment

8:19 p.m.

Mr. Kelley asked what the total amount of the agreement is. Ms. Dolven noted that it is \$295,238 in FY17 and \$14,000 in FY18. Vince O'Connor, community member, stated that he supported the appointment of the now former Superintendent as the Interim Superintendent. He said he did not support her appointment as the permanent Superintendent. Mr. O'Connor noted that he believes the committee's failed the children of the district by not reigning in the Superintendent's assertion that she had all authority and said they have reaped the whirlwind of their bad decisions. Andrea Battle, resident and educator, stated that she has been in the district for five and a half years and has been shocked by how things are run. She noted that the Superintendent serves at the pleasure of the School Committee, not the other way around, which has been done here. Ms. Battle stated that \$300,000 is a lot of money and noted they are setting a precedent. Marla Jamate, resident, read a prepared statement encouraging the Amherst School Committee and the Wildwood Building Committee to seek at least an 18 month extension from the MSBA regarding the elementary building project due to the departure of Ms. Geryk. She stated that this is clearly not the best time for the district to move forward with a controversial \$65 million new construction that will have to be overseen by a new, incoming Superintendent. Her statement has been included in the minutes in its entirety. Nick Yaffe, Wildwood Principal, noted that he understands there are many feelings and emotions in the room, as well as differing opinions. He stated that he appreciates Ms. Geryk's service, noting that we owe it to our community to appreciate someone who has given 14 years in service to the community. He noted that as someone who has been here 26 years, he can say that Ms. Geryk has left this a better place. Mr. Yaffe said he wants to assure the community that we are going to come together and be unified as we hire a new Superintendent, and that we are going to be ready to welcome back students when school opens.

4. Adjourn

8:32 p.m.

Ms. Kent moved to adjourn at 8:32 p.m. Mr. Modestow seconded and the motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully Submitted,
Debbie Westmoreland

Approved 9/6/16

To: The Amherst School Committee, Wildwood School Building Committee, and Amherst Select Board
From: Marla Jamate, Crocker Farm parent/Town Meeting member
RE: Need for an 18-Month Extension from the Massachusetts School Building Authority

Aug. 9, 2016

Dear Committee Members,

It is my understanding from recent news reports that Schools Superintendent Maria Geryk intends to resign, and that the Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committee will vote tonight to close out her contract.

In light of Ms. Geryk's pending departure, I would strongly encourage the Amherst School Committee and/or the Wildwood School Building Committee to immediately seek extension of at least 18 months from the Massachusetts School Building Authority before ~~plan finalization~~.

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transitions
was
construction

I would also encourage the committees to ask the Amherst Select Board to strike the related budget override item from the Nov. 8 ballot, for the following reasons:

The coming months will leave the Amherst School District, and the Amherst-Pelham Regional School District, both under the guidance of an interim superintendent.

Meanwhile, a national job search will be necessary, so that candidates can be interviewed to find the best, most experienced person to guide our schools forward and improve their academic performance. Clearly, this is not the optimal time for the district to advance with a controversial \$65 million building project, all its associated, complicated details, and the many decisions that would be required. Moreover, it would only be fair to a new superintendent to allow him or her to have input in this process. It will ultimately fall to the new superintendent to guide any construction and reconfiguration that takes place, and to manage the transitions that would be involved.

As the Committees are aware, questions and concerns have arisen about the pending school construction and grade reconfiguration plan, which would consolidate pupils town-wide in grades 2-6 at a single new campus north of Amherst center, while reducing Crocker Farm in south Amherst to a townwide k-1 and preschool center.

Many parents believe it would make more sense to have one complete, pre-k through grade 6 school each in both north and south sections of Amherst - perhaps through the construction of a single new building on Strong Avenue and an addition to Crocker Farm. This would reduce inconveniences for families whose children would be split up between upper and lower elementary schools under the existing proposal. It would also eliminate chaotic and lengthy bus rides, where individual buses would need to load at two schools before proceeding into Amherst's neighborhoods.

I also believe that any new construction should, at this juncture, be strongly driven by curriculum innovations, such as the addition of bi-lingual education in our elementary schools. Two-way Spanish-English immersion is being tried, with success, on the West Coast and elsewhere, and could help make our curriculum richer and more appealing to many families who seek greater challenges for their children.

The current school building proposal should be delayed in light of all these issues - the need for a permanent superintendent, and for revisions to improve the project and hopefully reduce its cost. The committees would be better served to wait until these changes have taken place before putting the plan before the voters.

I will add that my children have been happy at Crocker Farm, which I see as a thriving, diverse, welcoming and successful school community. It greatly saddens me to think that this school would be broken up, and I do think more thought should be given to this plan. For all these reasons, I would ask you to consider seeking a meaningful extension from the MSBA, for the hiring of a new superintendent, and for needed project review and revision.

Respectfully,

Marla Jamate
105 Glendale Rd.
Amherst, MA. 01002