

Meeting Date: April 11, 2016

Administration in attendance: Dr. Jean Fitzgerald, Superintendent, Charles Kellner, Director of Business Services, Steve Romanelli, Director of Facilities and Transportation Buildings and Grounds School Committee Subcommittee Members: Elizabeth Yusem, Chair, Eileen Hsu-Balzer, Kendra Foley

Audience:

Town administration: Tom Tracy, Auditor/Assistant Town Manager of Finance  
Principals: Mena Ciarlone, Cunniff Principal, Bob La Roche, Hosmer Principal  
School Committee: John Portz, Guido Guidotti, Candace Miller, Mark Sideris/TC,  
Town Council: Mark Sideris/SC, Vincent Piccirilli, Lisa Feltner, Michael Dattoli, Aaron Dushku  
Various members of the public including many parents.

### **Meeting Minutes:**

There was a motion to begin the meeting.  
There was a second.  
The motion was unanimously approved.

### **Plaque Honoring Mr. John R. Burns:**

There was an error in the agenda and the meeting opened with a motion to change order of agenda recognizing that the Tree Planting was confused with the Plaque Honoring Mr. John R. Burns.

There was a motion to recognize the error in the agenda.  
There was a second.  
The motion was unanimously approved.

WPS Alumni had flown in from NYC to be at the meeting because they wanted to donate and have a plaque hung to honor the late Mr. John R. Burns who had been a teacher and principal in the Watertown Public Schools. He was recognized as a community leader and model educator to his students by the Alumni. There is currently a scholarship available to graduating seniors in his name.

There was a motion to accept the plaque and have it displayed at a place to be determined at the Watertown Middle School.  
There was a second.  
The motion was unanimously approved.

### **WCAC Television:**

Ms. Hsu-Balzer, who is the school committee representative to WCAC television, asked to move a motion to approve WCAC to move forward with sending out contracts to have work done so that WCAC will be able to broadcast live from a variety of new locations-

WHS and WMS auditorium. There is no additional cost to the schools involved with endorsing these contracts.

There was a motion to approve that WCAC proceed with necessary contracts to move forward to enable work to be done to have broadcasting live for the fall.

There was a second.

The motion was unanimously approved.

### **Space Options for Short-term and Long-Term:**

Dr. Jean Fitzgerald presented work that she had done to address issues revolving around space options for the short-term and long-term. She opened her comments recognizing the many challenges we face as a district surrounding enrollment and then proceeded to present the plans of action she has been pursuing.

First, she explained that there is a contract out for an enhanced enrollment study with DecisionInsite which would examine enrollment at another level than what the NESDEC study had presented at the January 2016 school committee meeting: It will take a deeper look into enrollment trends beyond the NESDEC study's scope.

Additionally, the superintendent presented that she had completed an RFP for a facilities study which would address long term space needs and would also take into consideration findings from both enrollment studies: NESDEC and DecisionInsite at the time of their availability. The time frame discussed for the facility study would take place sometime between June 2016 and the fall of 2016.

It was further indicated by the superintendent that she had sent out a bid request to model the costs for 4 modular classrooms for April 15, 2016. Ms. Hsu-Balzer noted that funding for modular classrooms, if determined necessary, should not come out of the FY17 capital budget and the school committee could make a request to the town for these resources at any point in time.

The general discussion from the superintendent focused on the challenges of the space situation and how it is being addressed by looking at the problem from multiple levels and perspectives. Additionally, the principals of each school are giving weekly enrollment reports to the superintendent to closely monitor and study how weekly changes in enrollment impact each school—as noted by the superintendent, “We are looking at this as a fluid process.”

Dr. Fitzgerald explained why the Phillips School would not be a possibility as a new school site along with other proposed vacant buildings in Watertown such as the branch libraries and the old police station: Each site involves construction cost structures and transportation logistics which do not make them viable solutions at this point in time.

It was noted that some apparent or obvious solutions that community members are discussing might require increased busing, additional locations for pick-up and drop

offs, increased traffic, and overall more confusion to many parents which might become more stressful and burdensome to their daily lives.

Barring the situation involving the Cunniff 4th grade, the superintendent felt that current class sizes looked generally good for WPS, for now, but only if enrollment does not keep increasing as has been happening. Her guess is that the increased enrollment trend will continue and noted there are more new developments coming online soon.

After April vacation, the Cunniff will use the art room as a new 4th grade classroom and they will implement “art on a cart” for the rest of the year to provide art to each classroom.

As a rule of thumb, it was noted by the superintendent that the MSBA allows up to 24 students per classroom before they consider the classroom overcrowded by their design standards. Additionally, the superintendent clarified what she thought were good ranges and sizes of classrooms based on the age group—with the lower grades generally having less students per classroom. The superintendent noted that ideal class sizes seem to be in the 18-22 student range for elementary level and although class size is not a policy issue at this point in time for WPS, the school committee might consider addressing it in the future.

The superintendent also explained some other ideas that she has concerning new grade or district reconfigurations. Additionally, centralizing registration for all elementary schools might help with assigning placements and tracking enrollment but that proposal would also need to consider cost and logistics implications.

After the superintendent’s presentation, Ms. Hsu-Balzer commented that she wondered why the tone has been consistently set by a few members of the community that the school department is not fully engaged in the space problem or feeling it. She emphasized that the school department needs the help of the parents to get the word out concerning these issues if we need to go to the town for funding. It was further stressed that if the school committee needs to ask the town for funding for projects to address the issue of overcrowding, then we will need to work with the Town Council and the Town Manager to have them authorize the funds needed.

It was also further emphasized by the committee that it is important that the community came to this meeting and future meetings to have an opportunity to be heard and help move the process forward.

Some of the first comments by members of the community were of appreciation that the administration recognized their concerns and came to the meeting prepared with several plans of action: bid request for modulars, the enhanced enrollment study, and the RFP for a long term study.

Generally, members of the community spoke with a unified message of concern about the potential of additional enrollment crunches with still more new developments

scheduled to open this year coupled with much turnover within the residential housing market. Many questioned how these crunches affected the learning environment and how the children are able to receive the curriculum under these circumstances. One parent from the Cunniff stated that it is not enough to “survive” a year at school.

The community recognized the heroic efforts of the principal and staff at Cunniff in figuring out creative solutions to their space issues but recognized that they are not long term fixes. Many parents also verbalized their anxiety and fears about all the unknowns the school department faces surrounding enrollment in light of the next school year—FY17. Some community members had questions about having an overall long term strategy and what that would look like once the various plans of action were in place.

The community was reassured by the committee that there would be more meetings coming up as information became available to the school administration.

### **Lowell Ceiling Repairs:**

Mr. Charles Kellner noted that an emergency situation occurred over the March holiday weekend at the Lowell school involving acoustic ceiling tiles falling in the nurse’s office. Upon close inspection, Steve Romanelli noted that the damage was far more extensive than originally anticipated. The damage included most classrooms on the first and second floors and attributed the extent of the damage to improperly hung acoustic strappings installed during the last school renovation into the horsehair plaster ceiling.

A handout was distributed titled: Recommendation to Fund Lowell Ceiling Repairs dated 4/11/16. The handout described various sources of leftover money from past capital improvement projects years, FY13-16, which could be pooled to pay the emergency ceiling repair bill of \$104,000. An emergency waiver from DCAMM allowed the work to be done immediately.

There was a motion to approve the repurposing of funds to pay the bill for the emergency ceiling repairs at the Lowell.

There was a second.

The motion was unanimously approved.

### **Garden Planting At Hosmer:**

Mr. Jeffrey Krasner, a Hosmer parent, presented a plan to form a group to beautify the front entry circle at Hosmer. The work will be done under the guidance of the Hosmer principal and the director of facilities. Mr. Krasner had asked whether it was possible for any contributing landscape firms to place signage in the circle. It was explained why it was not possible and that contributors might be acknowledged publicly at a school committee meeting instead.

There was a motion to allow Mr. Krasner to form his gardening group for plantings at the Hosmer circle.

There was a second.

The motion was unanimously approved.

**Shed at Hosmer:**

Tabled.

**Update on Potential Town/School Facilities Management Meetings:**

There have been three collaborative meetings between the town and the school department, including Charles Kellner, Joe DeVito, Town Treasurer, and Tom Tracy. They have begun a conversation about what it would mean to merge Town/School Facilities Management. Some of the conversations they have had have taken into consideration what technical, logistical and legal aspects such a merger would need to consider such as: union contracts, policy issues, what type of timeline it might entail, and learning what was successful and not successful in other towns who have merged facilities management. Some comments by Liz Yusem were that she had heard that it can take up to two years to work out this type of merger.

There was a motion to adjourn the meeting.

There was a second.

The motion was unanimously approved.

