

**IPSWICH SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
THURSDAY, APRIL 15, 2021
7:00 PM**

MIDDLE/HIGH ENSEMBLE ROOM

(School Committee Members only, public participation through Zoom Video Conferencing)

Minutes

I. Call to Order

Mr. Whitten, Chair, called the meeting to order at 7:10pm.

Present: C. Whitten, C. Nylan, H.O'Flynn, P. Kneedler, G. Stevens, K. Eliot and E. Cannon

Also Present: Dr. Brian Blake, Superintendent of Schools; Bill Frangiamore, Interim Director of Finance and Operations; Caroline Jepsen, High School Student Representative

Ms. Jepsen read the District Mission Statement.

Announcements:

- The next School Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, May 6th at 7:00pm.
- Schools will be closed Monday, April 19th through Friday, April 23rd for vacation week.
- District offices will be closed Monday, April 19th.
- The Communications Subcommittee will meet on Thursday, April 27th at 4pm.
- The Negotiations Subcommittee will meet on Wednesday, April 28th at 3:30pm.

Citizens' Comments:

There were no comments at this time.

Special Acknowledgements:

Dr. Blake thanked the faculty and staff at the elementary schools for their work getting the buildings fully opened and operational for all returning students.

II. School Committee Presentations

School Reopening Update:

Dr. Blake shared the following information as it relates to the reopening of schools:

- Both elementary schools welcomed students back into their buildings in a full in-person model. While there are a few logistics to work out, students and staff were happy to be back.
- The middle and high school will be returning to a full in-person model on the Tuesday after April vacation.
- The district did not see an increase in positive COVID cases and no sign of in-school transmission within the past two weeks.
- The positivity rate in Ipswich has increased again this week, however the Town still remains in the Yellow zone.
- The district is working on preparing end of year events.

High School Student Representative Report:

Ms. Jepsen reported on the activities and events taking place at the high school, which included:

- The Theater Club continues to rehearse for their spring performance of *Mama Mia!*

- The orchestra program will be hosting StringFest this spring.
- Spring sports have begun and are going well.
- The Green Team continues to maintain the Generation Growers Garden at the high school.
- The Environmental Club is working on several projects.
- The Class of 2023 is currently holding a candy fundraiser.
- Overall, students are excited at the opportunity to return to school in-person.

School Building Workshop with Logue Group

Mr. Nysten opened the workshop by reviewing the timeline of the last school building project. He shared that after the failed project, the School Committee took a long and necessary pause in their efforts around the elementary school building project. The School Committee now feels like this is the time to get back in the process and find a solution. In the past weeks, the School Committee has begun to research next steps including conversations with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) about what entering the MSBA funding process would look like after a failed project.

The School Facilities Working Group, on behalf of the School Committee, also met with the town of Amherst at the recommendation of MSBA. Amherst also experienced a failed first attempt at a school building project, but is now in the process of reapplying to MSBA. Mr. Nysten felt that the conversation with Amherst provided a lot of insight for the School Committee to learn from.

After taking those initial steps, the School Committee felt it was necessary to begin the conversation again, first among the group and with the superintendent, to see what the thoughts of the Committee were about moving forward. Mr. Nysten stressed that this was the very beginning of the process and emphasized the need to involve the community moving forward.

To help facilitate this conversation, the School Committee brought in Bill Logue from Logue Group. Mr. Logue came recommended by Amherst, as he helped to successfully facilitate a similar process for them.

Mr. Logue began by introducing his colleague for this process, Loraine Della Porta, and then shared information on their background and past experiences. He explained that the goal for tonight is to have a space to brainstorm and have an open dialogue about the process the School Committee needs to consider in order to approach any future MSBA project. Throughout the workshop, the School Committee will be asked to review the process, think about lessons learned, consider issues and goals going forward, think about what public engagement means and looks like in this process, whether there are things that will be on or off the table as the process moves forward and lastly, what roles will various stakeholders play. Mr. Logue finished his introduction by stressing that this initial conversation is for exploratory purposes.

Mr. Logue shared a draft timeline for an MSBA submission. He emphasized that this process is a marathon, not a sprint and can take anywhere from 5 to 10 years from application to completed school. Ideally, the School Committee would submit a Statement of Interest (SOI) to MSBA by Spring 2022. There will be a lot of work to do and decisions to be made prior to that date. He then posed a series of framing questions to help organize the workshop discussions.

Mr. Logue: After going through the previous process and now having time to step away, what were some key takeaways from the process? What are things to keep, things to change?

Mr. Nysten shared that he thought the Committee needed to decide at what points in the process they should be informing the community about the scope of the project and steps moving forward, validating

their work as broadly as they can. He said with the past process, plans changed and the Committee often assumed that people were following the process closely and understood how those changes occurred. He felt there needed to be more frequent validation steps to ensure the public is up to speed and agrees with the steps moving forward.

Dr. O'Flynn said there is no "one public". Everytime a new door was opened in the last project, someone came out to fight it or show support. Everytime a change was made, community support drifted away or came closer, depending on the group. It was evident the Committee struggled with an inability to produce a single plan. There is a fear that this new project will, again, attract people who want very specific details and if they do not get them, will attempt to "blow up" the project.

The high level takeaway, Mr. Whitten shared, is that although there was support for a building project, the last process created such lasting divisiveness in town. There needs to be a way to bring these two groups together to work toward a common goal.

Mr. Logue said that rather than have the public come to the School Committee or School Building Committee, the group needs to go out to the community. Hold meetings in a variety of places, spread the word to specific groups, be accessible at different times of the day.

Mr. Logue: What were community concerns that arose during the prior effort that are still present today?

Ms. Kneeder said there was still a feeling of a lack of transparency, at times, on the part of the School Committee. The School Committee has greatly improved their communication with the community over the past few years through work on the Communications Subcommittee. She is hoping the Committee can continue to inform the community of what is going in an effective way.

Ms. Eliot said it was more a feeling of mistrust with the School Building Committee versus the School Committee. The project started as one project at Winthrop and morphed into something completely different. She shared that people felt slighted by that.

Dr. Blake said that the former project took so many turns over the years. The project changed and a divisiveness formed in town.

Mr. Nylen said that the project struggled with consensus at all levels, even within the School Committee. Going forward, it will be important to get consensus from stakeholder groups.

Mr. Stevens shared that as an outsider at the time of the first project, it appeared there were small groups muddying the waters. Things came up at the 11th hour and there was a lack of communication. Although all the meetings prior were public, they were not publicized well. The group needs to be better from the start.

Ms. Cannon also shared that she was not part of the School Committee during this first project. Echoing Ms. Eliot, she said the project started as one thing and morphed into something completely different. The commitment to watching all the meetings was too great for most people, therefore, people were uninformed. She suggests getting community input and not having a small group make the big decisions.

Mr. Logue said that what he was hearing from the Committee was a clear lack of transparency and a need to communicate with the larger community in a way that is easier for them to find, understand and disseminate information.

Mr. Whitten added that a general consensus is most needed. In the last process, there was an inability to compromise.

Mr. Logue shared that from his experience, most people equate consensus to 100% unanimity. That rarely happens. If people's views and opinions are not disregarded, they are more accepting of the outcome.

Mr. Logue: What are the key issues that need to be addressed in a Statement of Interest (SOI)? What informs your goals moving forward? In an effort to be transparent with the public, what is up for discussion and what is not? Are there boundaries you want to be clear on from the onset? Are you going to reopen the process as broadly as you did before?

Mr. Whitten felt that in order to present a strong proposal to MSBA, the Committee needs to present an SOI that has community support.

Mr. Nylen felt the project should be figured out before submitting an SOI. The ability to eliminate as many other alternatives beforehand, the better.

Mr. Logue agreed with Mr. Nylen and shared that was the path that Amherst took. They were able to find areas with a consensus could be reached, gained community support and then presented an SOI.

Mr. Logue: What do people think about the big three factors?

Mr. Stevens shared that he struggled with how to move on and get community support with a new SOI. There was so much work done for the first project, how does the process change enough to get the support it was lacking the first time around?

Dr. O'Flynn reviewed the steps the School Committee took during the last building project. They agreed that a single building was more cost effective and the ideal location was in town. They had ideas for Bialeck Park, but it wasn't released. There were issues with the configuration for the Winthrop location. Will the Committee have in-town options that were not available before? He felt it would be frustrating to go through this process again and get the same outcome.

Mr. Stevens said that gaining community support and changing the outcome from last time will be dependent on engaging a larger audience and not allowing the vocal minority to take the lead.

Mr. Logue said it was important to listen to community concerns, see if things have changed and what the priorities are in the community. When people feel disregarded or are treated like an obstacle, they won't listen to what you have to say. How would you bring the community into the conversation earlier?

Mr. Logue: How do you engage the public? How do you inform the public about the process and how they will be involved. Do you want to consult with people at the very beginning to gather interest? Before you get to the final draft, do you go out into the community and share? Can you do different things at different times?

Mr. Nylen asked if in this type of process, does quality outweigh quantity or does quantity matter? Does the quality of the public engagements outweigh the quantity or does there need to just be a lot of meetings?

Mr. Logue responded, explaining that people can get burnt out with a lot of meetings. Quality information, good outreach and accessibility helps. You want to give people advanced notice and predictability. Mapping out a timeline and sharing that out can be helpful.

Mr. Nylen then asked how to avoid the trap of people not paying attention until a major decision is made.

Mr. Logue said that the people who show up are the ones who want to be there. The Committee should reach out to the people that were involved before. Ask what people are looking for and how. Surveys can be helpful. At listening sessions, work in small groups, take notes and gauge the level of sentiment.

Mr. Whitten felt that the listening sessions at Amherst were vital in gathering consensus for the SOI. He also liked that the School Committee remained quiet during those sessions.

Ms. Eliot agreed with Mr. Whitten, sharing that the listening sessions were relatively focused and had set boundaries.

Ms. Cannon said that the community feedback piece is important. She felt there was a fear within the community that they will lose what they like about their schools with a new project and that is fueling their discontent. She also felt that the Committee was “padding around the issues.” While there is value in community feedback and participation, there needs to be an honest conversation about what is truly feasible. She does not want to set people up to advocate for something that is not possible.

Mr. Logue: How can transparency be addressed? Are there key elements that you need to agree upon first? No decision needs to be made tonight, but you should take the Committee’s temperature on that and move on pretty quickly.

Dr. Blake shared that when he came into the project towards the end, there were still major decisions being made and some consensus forming. There was going to be one school and an upper and lower house within that school. What people struggled with was the location. The perception was that as soon as the location of the school moved to the Doyon location, the community became divided.

Ms. Kneedler agreed that it did come down to the site location. The concern is that the location hasn’t changed. While there is a desire for a downtown school, there are not a lot of feasible options.

Mr. Stevens added that when you start to drift to a two school model, you’re ultimately turning off taxpayers who don’t have children in school. It’s about money and two buildings are too expensive.

There was some clarification about the Town Hall location and if it was a possibility. That location was dismissed at the advice of the architects because it was the prior location of a dump.

Mr. Nylen felt hopeful that the town would support the right project. It would be beneficial to be able to ask the town about their interest in the Bialeck Park as it wasn’t an option to do last time around. From a process perspective, he felt that it would be good to ask the town if they would support that, otherwise the Committee would just continue to speculate.

Ms. Eliot agreed that it was important to see what options are actually available and what are not.

Mr. Logue said he was hearing that from a financial perspective, one school was a more viable option. He heard that grade configurations should be discussed. Although site locations had previously been

discussed, many felt that situations may have changed and it would be worth revisiting certain locations again. If things have changed, is there a path to move forward?

Mr. Whitten talked about the ongoing discussions around a town wide strategic plan. In that plan, there are variables that have changed with regard to site. The makeup of the Select Board will be changing. A public safety building may be built at a new site.

Mr. Nysten said it was also important to consider an increase in enrollment with several new developments being built.

Ms. Cannon felt that pulling a school out of the middle of downtown changes the dynamic of downtown. There is a growing concern about an increase in building in Ipswich and what would replace Winthrop School should a new site be considered.

Mr. Logue: Are there any parameters to think about going forward?

Mr. Nysten expressed a need to better align the elementary schools, whether it is in one building or two. A building project may be able to address some unhealthy distinctions between the two buildings.

Dr. O'Flynn agreed that one of the benefits of one building is the ability to bring people together.

Dr. Blake added that one building lends itself to changing class sizes.

Dr. O'Flynn added that having all students in one building allows for more flexibility and more opportunity down the road.

Both Mr. Stevens and Mr. Nysten agreed that there is an obligation to be fiscally responsible in terms of the cost of this project.

Ms. Eliot felt there were a lot of good reasons to move forward with one school, but it was also important to listen to the community who feel two schools are better. It's important to get to the heart of the two school proponents. She feels that if you listen to the community, the Committee will be able to address a lot of their needs and issues.

Mr. Logue also said that holding listening sessions early will give the Committee a better opportunity to address issues and needs early on.

Mr. Logue: If you move forward, what role should the School Committee play in promoting ideas, listening and engaging in the process? While the School Building Committee is the official committee presiding over the process, what does involvement from the School Committee and superintendent look like?

Mr. Whitten felt the School Committee should form an exploratory committee, pre MSBA School Building Committee. He believes that an SOI should be submitted that has both definition and support.

Ms. Eliot thought it was important to present a unified front with the superintendent, especially because some community members feel that the superintendent doesn't necessarily know them well enough.

Mr. Stevens said he would like to see more outreach to community members without children in the district. It will be important to educate the community on why a new school is needed and the process for getting one. This process should be the School Committee and superintendent working in partnership.

Mr. Whitten agreed that it was important to go out into the community, rather than expect the community to go to them.

Mr. Logue: Where are parameters created? How do you want to touch base with the public and at what time?

Dr. Blake felt it was important to “backwards design” this process. If there is a submission deadline set for Spring 2022, the Committee will need to back up from there and ensure that there is time to meet deadlines and get the votes needed from the town.

Mr. Logue: Any additional questions or comments?

Dr. Blake talked about the hurt felt throughout the community over the last project. To some, talk of a new project may be triggering. It will be important to think about how to address those concerns.

Mr. Logue talked about the process of identifying stakeholder groups and gathering input as a way of “humanizing” the project.

Mr. Nylen felt the Committee needed to think about building consensus within the buildings and staff. He thought the best person to build consensus with staff was the superintendent.

Mr. Whitten said the School Committee would like to maintain full transparency through this process.

Public Comment:

DeeDee Schiano, Applewood Drive: Thanked the School Committee for a thoughtful conversation.

Wendy Bendle, Ward Street: She appreciated the tone, reflection and willingness to approach this conversation with the wisdom from last time.

Ann Sophie Whitaker, Lakeman’s Lane: Thanked the School Committee for their work. She came into the meeting nervous about the ability to move forward, but after listening, feels hopeful there are ways to move forward.

Ms. Eliot asked Mr. Logue to address the social media aspect of this project. Mr. Logue said that the Committee cannot control what other people share. What can be controlled is what the School Committee shares, what and when. You want to use social media to your advantage by sharing out information, meeting dates, updates, etc.

Mr. Nylen wanted to know what sort of timeline would be suggested for community engagement. Mr. Logue explained that the parameters the Committee sets in the beginning will impact the length of community engagement. He stressed that you can exhaust people with the process, so every step and engagement should be done thoughtfully and with intention.

Mr. Whitten thanked the Logue Group for their help facilitating the workshop.

III. School Committee Reports

Vouchers and Bill:

All were reviewed and signed.

New Business:

Dr. Blake reviewed the financial report shared out by the Interim Director of Finance. Mr. Frangiamore said more information about the ESSER III grant will be forthcoming.

Mr. Frangiamore talked about the Food Services program. The program deficit was cut by 38%. Overall, the program is doing well.

Dr. Blake updated the Committee on both the Director of Finance Search and the Elementary Principal Search.

Mr. Stevens shared that the Feoffees Trust will be releasing their distribution amount in early May.

IV. Consent Agenda

Mr. Whitten moved the Ipswich School Committee to

- *accept the following donations to the High School Robotics Team, to be deposited into the High School Gift Account:*
 - *\$500 from Gregory Insurance*
 - *\$500 from Bank Gloucester*
 - *\$2,500 from the Institution for Savings*
- *accept a donation from the Institute for Savings in the amount of \$1,000 for expenses related to the High School 2021 graduation, to be deposited into the High School Gift Account.*
- *accept a donation from the Ipswich Education Foundation in the amount of \$1,500 to be used towards the eight virtual 2021 STEAM Showcase workshops, to be deposited into the Miscellaneous Gift Account.*

The motion was seconded by Carl. The motion was approved unanimously by roll call vote, 7 YES, 0 NO.

V. Adjournment

Mr. Stevens moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:29pm, seconded by Ms. Kneeder. The motion passed unanimously in favor by roll call vote, 7 YES, 0 NO.