

Ipswich School Committee

MS/HS Ensemble Room
134 High Street, Ipswich
Thursday, December 2, 2021
7:00 PM

MINUTES

1. Call to Order

Mr. Whitten called the meeting to order at 7:01 PM.

Members Present: Mr. Whitten, Mr. Stevens, Dr. O’Flynn, Ms. Kneedler, Ms. Cannon, Ms. Eliot and Mr. Poirier.

Also Present: Dr. Brian Blake, Superintendent of Schools and Caroline Jepsen, High School Student Representative

2. Reading of the District Mission Statement

Ms. Jepsen read the mission statement.

3. Announcements

- The next School Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, December 16th at 7:00pm in the MS/HS Ensemble Room.
- The following subcommittees and working groups will be meeting:
 - Policy Subcommittee: Tuesday, December 7th at 5:30pm
 - Race and Equity Working Group: Tuesday, December 7th at 7:30pm
 - Athletic Subcommittee: Thursday, December 9th at 5:30pm
 - Negotiations Subcommittee: Tuesday, December 14th at 3:45pm
 - Budget Subcommittee: Thursday, December 16th at 6:00pm

4. Special Acknowledgements

Dr. Blake congratulated the girls volleyball team for their state championship title. He also acknowledged the girls field hockey team on their postseason accomplishments.

5. Citizens’ Comments

Mitch McDonald, Kimball Avenue: Mr. McDonald first asked what educational criteria the School Committee was using to choose a site for a new school. He pointed out that Doyon abuts Willowdale Forest which adds value for environmental education. He then talked about a Facilities Working Group Meeting in June 2021 where a discussion around bringing a site proposal to Fall Town Meeting occurred. At that time, the group had discussed holding community listening sessions. He asked about changes to that plan. He then asked if there were studies the School Committee was relying on to go before the Select Board to request the use of Bielek Park. Mr. McDonald then shared concerns over the listening sessions and whether the vocal minority will be taken into account. He asked the School Committee to provide ways to show confidence that all will be listened to and heard at these sessions.

6. High School Student Representative Report

Ms. Jepsen reported on the activities taking place throughout the high school. Her report included the following:

- The girls volleyball team claimed their first State Championship title
- The girls field hockey team played in the State Championship game, coming in as runner up
- The boys cross country team participated in the All Star meet
- The Green Team and the Environmental Club collaborated on a cleanup effort around the school grounds
- The National Honors Society held their induction ceremony in-person
- The Interact Club is working on the final details for the Jingle Bell Walk to be held later this month
- Mr. Shippen, math teacher at the high school, has revived the Ski and Snowboarding Club
- The Sustainability Club is hosting a coat drive

- The music program will be hosting a winter concert on Thursday, December 16th

7. Presentations

A. Global War on Terror Speaker Series Presentation

Rich Barbato, an Ipswich resident and Iraq combat veteran, along with Karen Tyler of Veteran Services shared information on their efforts to move bill SD 2069: an act naming the Global War of Terror Memorial Bridge in the Town of Ipswich forward. In response to some pushback on the proposal, Mr. Barbato and Ms. Tyler created a series of speakers and presentations to educate the community on the Global War on Terror. The first event in the speaker series was poorly attended, so Mr. Barbato and Ms. Tyler were coming before the School Committee in hopes of generating more interest in the school community.

Along with garnering interest for the speaker series and bringing attention to their effort to name the bridge, the two also spoke about an essay contest for students based on the question, "What is the price of freedom?". Dr. Blake and Mr. Whitten both agreed that information about the essay contest could be shared with the schools.

Ms. Tyler shared that the best way to support SD 2069 would be to contact local State Representatives.

- *Motion to direct the School Committee Chair to write a letter on behalf of the School Committee in support of SD 2069 was made by Dr. O'Flynn and seconded by Ms. Cannon. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

B. Discussion/Vote to support a School Committee request to the Select Board to release Bialek Park for consideration as an option for a school building project

Mr. Whitten began by sharing that he, along with Dr. Blake and Mr. Stevens had a call with Town Counsel, George Hall. This discussion outlined the timeline around the potential release of Bialek Park. He then reviewed the timeline which included:

1. Non-binding referendum vote at ballot, potentially Spring 2022
2. Select Board must declare the site is no longer needed for playground use
3. A $\frac{2}{3}$ vote at Town Meeting allowing Bialek Park to be transferred to the school district
4. Begin and complete the Article 97 process, which typically takes a year

Overall, Mr. Whitten explained, the process between Town approval and the State requirements takes roughly two years. While he was hopeful this would be a site of compromise and consideration, Mr. Whitten admits that he has not seen positive support. He said that moving forward, he felt this site should not be pursued and the School Committee should disengage in the discussion around Bialek Park as a potential location for a new elementary school.

Mr. Whitten also shared that there was a discussion with Bill Logue, the facilitator who worked previously with the School Committee. He is awaiting a proposal from Mr. Logue to begin listening sessions for the new project. The early sessions will focus around issues like community values. While the details are still to be worked out, Mr. Whitten is hopeful these will be well attended and useful as the process moves forward.

Mr. Stevens agreed with Mr. Whitten. He felt that timing is also an issue with the potential override vote in May. He felt it was unwise to combine these two contentious issues. Mr. Stevens agreed that listening sessions will help find a consensus among the Town. He also agreed that the School Committee should not move forward with their request to the Select Board to release Bialek Park.

Ms. Eliot agreed that there has been little support for the Bialek Park site and also supported not moving forward with the request. She said it was important to not think of these issues in a bubble, but rather look out on the horizon and figure out the priorities for the school district. She felt there was little appetite for a long, drawn out process that may have little community support.

Dr. O'Flynn said that he has been clear that the most important thing the School Committee does is support a long term operating budget. He has been a longtime advocate for a single elementary school and feels that Bialek Park has always been the best location. He worries that the School Committee will find themselves in the same place as the last attempt at

a building project. Dr. O'Flynn feels that the highest priority should be to pass the override . If you cannot have both a new school and the override, then the override must come first so the schools can be adequately funded.

Mr. Poirier asked if this conversation should have come sooner. He feels that the community believes the School Committee has already committed to a site and a location. He felt it was time to begin the community listening session and also share with the community what configurations and locations are possible. He agreed that the School Committee should not move forward with their request to the Select Board.

Mr. Whitten hoped that the listening sessions would begin in mid-January and include community members who fell on either side of the school issue during the last go around.

Ms. Cannon first asked why the School Committee would be voting now. She felt that the conversation with Town Counsel should have taken place prior to going before the Select Board. She said that if the School Committee is focused on building a consensus among the Town, it is important that the Town trusts the process and feels that the School Committee is doing its due diligence. Ms. Cannon feels the process needs to slow down and that the listening sessions will be key to any strategy moving forward.

Ms. Kneedler said she was hopeful the School Committee would receive some positive feedback in the upcoming listening sessions. She felt it was discouraging knowing that members of the community did not believe the School Committee was coming from a place of honesty. Ms. Kneedler said the School Committee has always done their best to help the children of Ipswich.

Mr. Stevens said that in hindsight, the School Committee should have had more of a discussion and voted ahead of the Select Board meeting. While the process may not have started the right way, the School Committee is on a better path moving forward.

Dr. O'Flynn felt that once Bialek Park is no longer an option, there will continue to be people in opposition of any site.

Ms. Eliot stressed the importance of having parameters around the listening sessions.

- *Motion for the School Committee to remove their request to the Select Board to release Bialek Park for consideration as an option for a school building project was made by Mr. Stevens and seconded by Mr. Poirier. **The motion passed with 6 in favor and 1 opposed.***

C. Traverso-Weatherall Innovation Grant Presentation

Ms. Cannon reviewed the thirteen Traverso-Weather Innovation Grants approved for the Fall grant cycle. The total amount funded equaled roughly \$56,000. Ms. Cannon said that it was clear teachers were working to adapt to challenges brought on by the pandemic. She was impressed with the creativity. The list of approved grants included:

1. Stepping into Kindergarten
2. 3d Printer
3. Girls, Inc.
4. Pamper Pole High Element
5. Elementary Comic Con
6. Elementary Robotics Program
7. Books to Diversity
8. Multilingual Showcase
9. Focus Garden for the 4th Grade
10. Joy is Contagious
11. Building Fact Fluency
12. Tiger Year Festival
13. Laser Cutting

Dr. O'Flynn shared that he is always impressed with the Traverso-Weatherall Innovation Grants and felt that these types of projects help to inspire both students and educators.

Ms. Cannon said that as a School Committee member and a parent, it was nice to see the spark of joy returning to the educators and students.

Mr. Stevens reminded the School Committee that the Feoffees Trust is growing faster than the district is spending the funds. He felt it would be beneficial for them to reach out to the school community several times over the year and discuss the grant program in an effort to generate more interest.

D. Discussion and Vote on Operational Override

Mr. Stevens began the discussion with an overview of the last override. With great fiduciary responsibility, the School Committee has been able to extend a five year plan into year eight. With \$2.6 million currently in the Stabilization Fund, the district's operating budget can be supported through FY23. Without an operational override, the district will fall off a "financial cliff" in FY24. Mr. Stevens, along with members of the Budget subcommittee, felt it prudent to approach taxpayers in May 2022 for a \$2 million override request that will stretch the Stabilization Fund for an additional five years. A \$2 million request in FY24 would only cover two years.

Mr. Stevens explained that moving forward with an override request while some district accounts maintain healthy balances allows for a smaller ask of the taxpayers. An approved override now will bolster the Stabilization Fund and reduce interruptions to educational programming. Should an override not pass, the district will see significant cuts and a greater ask from the taxpayers at the next attempt for an override.

Dr. O'Flynn felt it was best for the students to have a stable budget from year to year. He felt that the fatal flaw of a longer term override is that districts are left with a larger deficit compared to the operating budget. If you go too far, the district will fall off a financial cliff. The decision to seek an override while the district is still in a stability phase is to avoid that cliff. Dr. O'Flynn felt it was critically important for continued success in the district to pass this operational override this year.

Ms. Eliot shared her concerns. She felt it could be hard to pass an override if the elementary school building project is not further along. She is concerned that the School Committee will be unable to garner broad community support given the low turnout at the informational meeting. She said with healthy account balances, the sense of urgency is lacking. It will be the School Committee's responsibility to create that sense of urgency. She also noted that without the support of the both boards, passing the override will be more challenging.

While Mr. Stevens said he understood where Ms. Eliot's concerns came from, he felt that pushing off the override would ultimately push the School Committee into a school decision. If the override is delayed and does not pass in FY24, the school district will fall off the financial cliff.

Ms. Kneedler agreed with Mr. Stevens. She said she had lived through a failed override when her children were in school and it was described as "scary". She said at the time, the district was forced to make draconian cuts. It took years to get that programming back.

Mr. Whitten reminded the School Committee that they are fiduciaries. He felt the override requests laid out a plan that allows the district to be fiscally conservative with their funds.

It was decided that Mr. Whitten would ask for a discussion regarding the operational override to be placed on the Tri Board agenda. The expectation was that the boards would not vote on the override at that meeting, but rather listen to information about the timing, calculator and overall budget.

Ms. Cannon felt that while people are wanting to return to normalcy, they are failing to recognize how much has been lost in terms of programming, socialization and other factors due to the pandemic. She said that to do anything that would remove teachers and programming is not what is best for the students of Ipswich. If supporting an override means fighting to keep consistency in students' lives, then the School Committee needs to do it. Ms. Cannon felt the School Committee would be missing the point of their roles if they failed to acknowledge how this could impact the students.

Dr. O'Flynn clarified that the money from the override would be used in the budget immediately and would ensure the future programming for the students.

Carl Nylen, Brownville Avenue: After thinking about previous overrides, Mr. Nylen felt it was important to ask for a formal vote from each board as early into the process as possible so the School Committee understands where each board stands. He also said it was important to think about the sequencing of this override versus the school building project. Mr. Nylen felt that the community will have difficulty focusing on anything else until the issue of the school building project has been settled. His suggestion to the School Committee would be to make progress on the building project before moving forward with the override.

Mr. Whitten clarified that the School Committee would not submit a Statement of Interest (SOI) to the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) in April without a show of community support through a site vote at Town Meeting. There is no Town Meeting before the deadline to submit the SOI for this year. Mr. Whitten said that the School Committee is also respectful of the Strategic Plan laid out by the Town.

Rachel Roessler, Spillers Lane: Speaking to sequencing, Ms. Roessler also shared her concern about putting the override before the building project. She felt it would be hard to separate the two. She said that every year the project is delayed, the cost of supplies increases and the amount needed from the town will also increase. She felt the faster you can build a consensus on the building project, the chances of passing an override become stronger. The sooner the School Committee can remove the anger and confusion from the community, the more successful they will be.

Dr. O'Flynn felt that the override was the priority. He felt the override could bring the community together with clarity and purpose.

Ms. Cannon talked about want versus need. The district needs the override and wants the school building project. Like Dr. O'Flynn, she felt that the override is the more responsible choice at this point.

Ms. Eliot clarified that she was not opposed to an override, but rather the timing of when it occurred.

- *Motion to support an operational override on the May 2022 Town Meeting warrant was made by Mr. Stevens and seconded by Mr. Poirier. The motion passed with 6 in favor and 1 opposed.*

8. Superintendent's Administrative Report

Dr. Blake reported on his work throughout the district in weeks since that last School Committee meeting. His report included:

- A COVID update
- A meeting with John Blair regarding the potential for electric vehicle charges on the high school property
- A Facilities update with Chris Rais
- Triboard Chair meeting
- A meeting with Joe Gill regarding personnel issues
- Ongoing negotiations with the Ipswich Educators' Association
- A call with the Disability Resource Center
- Several subcommittee meetings
- Rotary breakfast with the high school administration and the athletic director
- Conference call with Town Counsel
- Dinner bell with the School Committee
- An Admin team meeting
- A Northshore Education Consortium (NEC) board meeting
- A meeting with Tracy wagner
- A meeting with Bill logue to discuss a proposal for listening sessions for the school building project
- Attendance in the Supporting Culturally Proficient Classrooms and Schools class

9. Subcommittee, Working Group and Liaison Reports

- **Ipswich Education Foundation (IEF):** The group is working on their branding, brochure and updates to their website. They talked about wanting to align with other grant funding sources in the district and help to fill the gaps.
- **Negotiations Subcommittee:** These meetings are ongoing.

- **Mutual Concerns Subcommittee:** The group discussed inviting members of the boards to visit the schools. The facilities work order system is working well in each building. They discussed building a working relationship between the School Committee and the Ipswich Educators' Association(IEA).

10. New Business*

Dr. O'Flynn highlighted the School Choice student who helped to bring the volleyball team their Championship win, as well as the Educational student on the field hockey teams.

Mr. Whitten suggested holding a workshop to review the School Committee roles and responsibilities with the district's legal counsel. The School Committee has not held a review of this subject in several years. This workshop will take place at a meeting in January.

There is a conflict with the School Committee meeting on December 16, 2022. It was decided to cancel this meeting and return to regularly scheduled meetings in January.

Dr. Blake received the NESDEC Enrollment Projection report for this year. The numbers are correct in the report; however, the report does not give an accurate depiction of enrollment or the projections. NESDEC has only factored in residents of Ipswich and does not account for the large building projects in town. He shared that NESDEC offers a more in depth study that he would like to pursue. He feels it critical to get the most accurate numbers ahead of the override and building project discussions.

11. Vouchers and Bills

All were reviewed and signed.

12. Consent Agenda

- *Motion to approve the Consent Agenda as presented was made by Mr. Whitten and seconded by Dr. O'Flynn. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

13. Adjournment

- *Motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Ms. Kneedler and seconded by Ms. Cannon. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

Meeting adjourned at 9:22 PM