

KEENE BOARD OF EDUCATION
Meeting Minutes

DATE: Oct. 25, 2011

LOCATION: Large Group Instruction Area, KHS, 43 Arch St., Keene, NH

CALLED TO ORDER: 7:00 PM

TIME ADJOURNED: 8:13 PM

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:

- Kathleen O'Donnell, Chair
- Kristin Blais, Vice Chair
- Anne Szot
- Kris Roberts
- John Stewart
- Carl Panza
- Neil Donegan
- Mark Nugent
- Chris Coates

ADMINISTRATORS PRESENT:

- William Gurney, Co-Superintendent
- Wayne Woolridge, Co-Superintendent
- Tom Remillard, Maintenance Director

OTHERS PRESENT:

- Frank Marinace, Marinace Architects
- Tibor Farkas, Marinace Architects
- Christine Weeks, Public Information Coordinator
- Cheshire TV crew and volunteers
- Members of the Press (1)
- Members of the Public (about 50)
- Britta Reida, Stenographer

Chair O'Donnell called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM. She thanked Cheshire TV and Time Warner Cable.

1. Presentation of the Recommendation from Administration Regarding Keene Elementary Schools

Wayne Woolridge, Co-Superintendent, introduced Tibor Farkas and Frank Marinace of Marinace Architects, and Tom Remillard, Maintenance Director. Mr. Woolridge stated that he has been an administrator in SAU29 for over years, and spoke of how impressed and grateful he has been for the public's support of education. He spoke of how we cannot take it for granted, and need to look hard for innovative ways to give our children a high quality education at a lower cost, especially now when economic times are so tough.

Mr. Woolridge's report is available in its entirety at <http://www.keeneschoolsolutions.org>. He provided background information about the Elementary Ad Hoc Advisory Committee, which was formed to address the high

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elementary costs while preserving high quality education. That committee recommended to the Keene School Board in June 2011 that the Keene School District move from five elementary schools to four and to have narrow grade spans. The Board approved that recommendation.

Mr. Woolridge reported that one school will be for preschool through Grade 1, another will be for Kindergarten through Grade 1, and two schools will be for Grades 2 through 5. The report from Marinace Architects clarified that the schools that were candidates for closure were Franklin, Wheelock, and Jonathan Daniels. He outlined the advantages and disadvantages of each of the three schools as written in his report. Mr. Woolridge reported that after much careful thought, the recommendation is to close Jonathan Daniels School. He continued that he has spoken with Mr. Gurney, and he agrees.

Mr. Woolridge asked the Board to consider repurposing JD as office space for Keene Food Service, the maintenance department and the IT technicians currently at the Mitchell House. His recommendation is to partner the remaining schools as follows: Fuller with Franklin and Symonds with Wheelock.

Mr. Woolridge continued that he will meet with all of the PTOs, which are important to planning. There will be a Community Forum in the KHS auditorium on November 30, which will include details of reconfiguring the four schools. If the Board approves, a Steering Committee will be formed in January with several subcommittees. The final report would be presented to the Board in October 2012. If the voters approve the bond in March 2013, renovations would span two summers and everything would be ready to go for the start of the 2014-2015 school year. Mr. Woolridge explained the benefits of this plan, namely the cost savings of \$1 million annually, plus increased safety and improved education.

Mr. Woolridge stated that the board is not expected to vote now, but he welcomes questions.

Chair O'Donnell thanked Mr. Woolridge for his presentation, and opened the floor to Board members' questions and comments.

Mr. Coates asked if the savings are still the same if JD stays current. Mr. Woolridge deferred to Mr. Remillard. Mr. Remillard stated that there are mitigating circumstances. He continued that if the eight technicians who are now at Mitchell House went to the repurposed JD building, there would be cost savings because there would be necessary upgrades to Mitchell House if they remained there. It would be easy to take out a back wall of the JD building and use it for parking the larger vehicles that do not fit now. The first task of the Repurposing Subcommittee would be to come up with the cost estimates.

Ms. Szot asked why it would take two summers to do the renovations. Mr. Marinace replied that if they begin in March 2013, the necessary engineering design work would not be done in time to start construction in July. Some renovation work could be done in July and August, but not the total project. Outside work that would not affect the kids

would go on during the year, and the rest of the renovations would be completed the following summer. It would be complete by September 2014.

Mr. Panza asked for the estimated cost of repurposing JD, and whether it would be part of the bond. Mr. Marinace replied that the cost would be part of the bond. He continued that it would not be an excessive amount of work, because the Building Code is not as demanding for offices and storage as it is for schools. Mr. Farkas added that figuring out the details of repurposing the JD building was not part of Marinace Architects' mandate. What JD would be used for is still unknown. Mr. Remillard stated that there is probably \$80,000 worth of work to be done at Mitchell House and the garage areas for the Maintenance Department, which has been continually deferred to the point where it fell off the CIP entirely. Schools are always the priority. But if the technicians from Mitchell House moved to a repurposed JD building, it would not be necessary to spend the \$80,000 to upgrade the Mitchell House and that would give a great start towards renovations necessary to the JD building.

Mr. Donegan stated that he read the report and knows the administration does not want to commit to numbers, but he would like their best estimate of what it would cost to rebuild the four schools in question to be big enough for 1400 students. He asked what the price difference would be if the renovations were a first class that included everything that is recommended, versus the minimum to meet Building Code requirements. He continued that he worries that building just to the minimum standards results in buildings that do not last.

Mr. Marinace replied that estimating is very complicated, especially when you are trying to do it a year in advance without knowing the economy and whether construction prices will be leveled or raised. He has seen costs spike because there are fewer contractors.

Mr. Donegan replied that they are saying the district will save a million dollars per year, but the savings might be decreased if construction costs go up. Mr. Marinace replied that it is unlikely that the costs would increase that much. He continued that historically, the construction costs have been going up approximately 5% per year. That would not make or break the numbers; they would just adjust the project.

Mr. Donegan asked what the estimated costs would be to refurbish the buildings to meet Keene's high standards. Mr. Farkas gave the numbers from report. There are \$5 million worth of renovations to be done, envelope upgrades, and mechanical upgrades. He continued that Marinace Architects did not plan or include a major upgrade on all buildings that are of lesser importance. If the Board wants them to generate additional figures, they can. Spending five million on the four schools will provide the required upgrades and Code-mandated upgrades. In regards to how this will affect the savings that are estimated and the fears that the savings would disappear, the annual rise in construction costs is relatively small. Ninety percent of the district's expenses is staffing. Those savings control the bottom line. If staffing can be decreased, as it will be with a four school model, the savings stays pretty much as indicated in the report.

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Mr. Nugent asked if the KSD owns Mitchell House. Mr. Woolridge replied yes. Mr. Nugent asked what will be done with the building if the technicians move to the repurposed JD building. Mr. Remillard replied that the recommendation is to tear it down. There are three facilities on the site, a garage, a barn, and the house. The house is in the worst condition of the three. Mr. Nugent asked if taking the Mitchell House down would create additional parking space. Mr. Remillard replied yes, or green space.

Mr. Nugent stated that the administration and Marinace Architects have done a tremendous job of analyzing this, but he is not hearing much conversation about the location. The new middle school building is situated in a great place. They should continue to question whether it makes sense to have an elementary school at the JD site at some point in time. There is a tremendous neighborhood across the street from the school, which includes people who have been living there since the 1960s and 1970s. The neighborhood has many classic first time homebuyer homes, but they will convert if JD closes. Young people will buy those homes and raise children there if there was an elementary school across the street. Mr. Nugent continued that he thinks that these issues have not been analyzed well enough.

Mr. Roberts stated that Keene has the 3rd or 4th highest tax rate in the state. He continued that approximately 57% of housing in Keene is rentals, and the percentage is increasing. If you compare the Keene of the 1980s and 1990s to the Keene of today, it appears that Keene is losing more and more families. He asked what the projection is for children to come in to Keene's elementary schools in the future.

Mr. Woolridge replied that in the early 1990s, about 10% of homes in Keene had kids, and now it is closer to 8%. Enrollment appears to have stabilized. The administration recommends an Enrollment Subcommittee explore this question in depth. Keene is becoming a more desirable community for families. The economy in the region has not been encouraging for families to move here - not just to Keene, but surrounding towns, too. Keene enrollment will depend on decisions made on the City and County levels. People want to come to Keene, and he hears about people growing up in Keene, leaving for a while, then returning to the City because they want to raise their kids here.

Mr. Roberts replied that many families live in surrounding towns because they want their children to go to KHS but they cannot afford to live in Keene. He asked how that can be changed. Mr. Woolridge replied that this plan goes a long way towards that. It elevates Keene's elementary schools. It will be helpful to realtors to know that this improvement effort is happening. In addition to improving Keene's elementary schools, the plan will also mitigate taxes.

Mr. Coates asked if the children who attend preschool at Wheelock will then attend Kindergarten and other grades at Wheelock when they complete preschool, instead of going to a different elementary school. Mr. Woolridge replied that that decision has not been discussed yet. He continued that currently, students who are in preschool at Wheelock, as they turn 5, return to Kindergarten in their attendance area. Mr. Coates replied that concern is that those children with special needs, who have difficulties with

transitions, will have to go to preschool for 2 years in one school, then go to another school for Kindergarten and first grade, then another school for grades 2 through 5. Mr. Woolridge replied that is one of the types of issues that need to be addressed, and it will take some time.

Mr. Stewart asked if the Building Code requirements change if the JD building is converted from a school to offices. Mr. Remillard replied yes. Mr. Stewart asked what the cost would be to fix the Code issues at JD, and if the building is grandfathered. Mr. Remillard replied that there is no grandfathering for Life Safety Code issues. He continued that there is a different Code for offices than for schools. Mr. Marinace added that when you renovate a building or repurpose it, offices can get by with a lot more variation than schools can. Classrooms have to be a certain way, whereas offices can be divided up creatively. The cost of converting JD into offices or storage would be very minimal. The offices at JD are probably better than the offices people are in now at the Mitchell House.

Ms. Blais stated that one initial dilemma the Ad Hoc Committee had was that despite the high costs of Keene's elementary program, the district was still not able to complete some of the maintenance items that Mr. Remillard really wanted to do to maintain the buildings and bring them up to Code. Even if Keene does nothing to change the elementary school model, there will still be the expense of bringing all five buildings up to Code. The dilemma was how to maintain the kinds of programming that people in Keene want *and* bring the buildings up to Code. They did not talk about how to keep the buildings at Keene's high standards. They did not ask Marinace Architects to do that. They asked for the basics, e.g. what it would take to fulfill the Life Safety Code requirements. Thus, that is what Marinace Architects gave us in their report - they did not give big plans or cost estimates for renovating everything. The Board could ask Marinace Architects what it would take to have four gorgeous, top of the line new schools, but the focus is on saving money and increasing efficiencies.

Ms. Blais stated that in regards to Mr. Nugent's thoughts on JD and its location, the issue was, again, that the only real way to move forward with JD would be to re-do the classroom wings so they meet the Code, and that cost would be substantial. The savings would not be enough. She continued that she agrees that the location is an issue, but on the other side, it would cost approximately \$9 million to re-do the classroom wings, just for one building.

Mr. Donegan replied that that is true, but the Board needs to get the support of the voters in March 2013. He continued that the questions the Board will be asked are how much needs to be spent, and how much will be saved. He wants to make sure that when this project is done, it is done the right way. The time to upgrade a building is when it is already under construction. He asked what type of final report would be given to the Board in October 2012. They would need firm costs by then.

Mr. Woolridge replied that it is the Steering Committee's charge to make sure everything comes in on time. The curriculum piece would be relatively inexpensive. Transportation

costs are not expected to increase. The biggest subcommittee is facilities. Marinace Architects would be working with Mr. Remillard and that committee. Enrollment Projections is also a big subcommittee; they have to dig deep and look at trends. Additional costs are not anticipated with Special Education. Money is needed for the engineering study. Everything has to be clear to voters when the KSD is asking for the bond. All the questions will have to be answered to the satisfaction of the voters.

Mr. Donegan asked if there is any money in the 2012-2013 capital budget for the engineering study. Mr. Marinace replied that it is somewhat a gamble to rely on the numbers in the report and move forward. If engineers are brought in to look at things in more detail, more money will be needed. However, a more detailed study would give the District more confidence in the number they will present to the voters. Mr. Woolridge replied that they will be presenting to the Finance Committee.

Mr. Roberts stated that the economy does not look like it is getting better. He asked what would happen if the bond does not pass in March 2013 and takes a few more years and the elementary per pupil cost keeps rising. Mr. Woolridge replied that there will be a contingency plan. It appears that Building Aid will come back in some form. He is hopeful that the KSD can communicate this message well enough to the public in order to get more than 60% of the vote. If the bond does not pass there still will be infrastructure needs that need to be taken care of. In that case, the KSD may end up in the circumstances of some other communities in NH, which is not where we would want to be.

Ms. Blais stated that she thinks the risk is that there are educational programs that everyone wants to preserve, which causes the KSD to ask for additional funds. She has heard that people want to know what the educational benefits to this new model are, and why it is not just financially driven. The Ad Hoc Committee strongly believes it is not just financially driven and has many educational benefits, but that needs to be communicated.

Mr. Woolridge replied that there are numerous educational and instructional benefits. The early grade schools will be more literacy and numeracy driven. A bigger benefit is that the schools could maximize Professional Learning Communities, data teams, and collaboration amongst teachers in the same grade level, which have been goals for years. Also, Response to Intervention (RTI) works better with a critical mass. Administrators will have the ability to create better student groupings, when there are more students and teachers to choose from, and to better match up teachers and students. They will have the ability to create classroom environments that were not possible in a one or two division school. There are educational advantages that outweigh the advantages of the current configuration.

Ms. Szot replied that she thinks that is the most important point to make tonight, that educationally, this model is a good investment in Keene. It changes how the classrooms are structured. The Board recently discussed how the current disparity in class sizes in the five elementary schools cannot be fixed by moving a student from one elementary

school to another. When all first graders are in one school, with this new model, they can be grouped equally in classrooms. The teachers on the Elementary Ad Hoc Advisory Committee were excited about that. Another benefit is that RTI would work better with all of the teachers of each grade together to collaborate with each other. This is a great model that needs to be embraced. Ms. Szot continued that as a parent of an elementary student, she is excited about this.

Mr. Panza stated that by looking at the graph, one can clearly see that Keene's elementary per pupil costs are much higher than those of other communities. He continued that those communities are doing something right and Keene is doing something wrong, and this plan addresses that.

Ms. Blais stated that Ms. Szot is right about the disparities in class sizes. For example, some first grade classrooms currently have 13 students, while others have 20. There are disparities like this in each grade. The Ad Hoc committee looked at this regarding equity.

Chair O'Donnell stated that was most surprising to her, that there was a feeling of disparity between the schools. Some parents feel it is unfair that their child is in a big class and other classes are small. This new model fixes that, and also allows more collaboration between teachers. People value the programs that are offered and want to keep them all. This plan is a way of maintaining Keene's quality education with significant offerings of special classes.

Ms. Blais stated that a lot of smaller towns have to have mixed grade classrooms. She continued that people in Keene did not feel that would be best for students. The Ad Hoc Committee addressed this a bit. The educators felt that it was a very difficult thing for teachers to have to do. Mixing grades would be a potential contingency plan if things became dire. Sharing staff was another idea, and people were strongly against it.

Mr. Nugent stated that he supports everything that Mr. Woolridge, Ms. Szot, and Chair O'Donnell said. He continued that the public should get used to the phrase "Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum (GVC.)" It is part of the national requirements. This new model will greatly enhance adherence to the GVC.

Mr. Nugent asked how quickly the Life Safety and Building Code requirements need to be satisfied. Mr. Remillard replied that so far, the City Fire Department has been open to the KSD being able to move forward with the plan and not forcing anything on the district prematurely. Some work will be done next year at Symonds, such as the sprinkler system. What Symonds would or could become is being considered in the design phases. Some advances are being made while everyone continues to decide what the end result would be.

Mr. Coates stated that there are surrounding towns thinking of sending their students to KMS and KHS, and he wonders if Keene has the capacity for that, and at what level.

Chair O'Donnell stated that this is probably premature, but there have been many discussions about Special Education over the past two years. She wonders if there are any preliminary ideas as to how that would shift with the schools changing. Mr. Woolridge replied that the plan presented tonight is running parallel to the SERESC committee's work. He continued that they are trying not to blur lines because they are separate issues, but he imagines that they will converge. He sees this new elementary model as an advantage to Special Education but cannot predict exactly where the advantages will occur. That is why there is a Special Education subcommittee that will report to the Steering Committee and answer these questions early on.

Mr. Coates asked what time the upcoming meetings with the PTOs are. Mr. Woolridge replied that on November 2, he will be at Wheelock at 6:15 PM and Fuller at 7 PM. [The full schedule is in his report, available online].

Ms. Szot asked the architects if the reconfigured preschool that their report suggests would have more space for enrollment. Mr. Farkas replied that the layout is preliminary, and that from his and Mr. Marinace's understanding, four classrooms are sufficient for the current enrollment, but if it increases they would have to make changes. Ms. Blais stated that currently there are three classrooms and there are four in the plan. She continued that preschool is currently crowded now and perhaps the fourth classroom will alleviate crowding but not make room for new students. Ms. Mitchell concurred.

Ms. Blais asked if it would not be possible to use JD for preschool if the wall was knocked down for the truck parking. Mr. Marinace replied that in that situation, they would have mixed occupancy and work would have to be done to bring that part of the building up to code for preschool. Mr. Coates asked if the four-classroom design for preschool includes adequate space for therapists, offices, and meetings. Mr. Marinace replied yes.

Mr. Woolridge stated that at the Public Forum on November 30, there will be a Power Point presentation and more detail about narrow grade spans and the renovations. There will be an opportunity for the public to give input at the forum. If people have questions or comments ahead of time, they can be given to Chris Weeks or Cathy Dieter, via phone or email. Chair O'Donnell encouraged everyone to submit their questions ahead of time if possible, so that the speakers at the forum will be prepared to answer them. Ms. Blais added that people can also submit questions and comments at <http://keeneschoolsolutions.org>.

2. Adjournment

At 8:13 PM, Mr. Nugent made a motion to adjourn. Mr. Donegan seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Stenographer

Approved by the Keene Board of Education: November 15, 2011