

Rochester-Stockbridge Unified District

Board Of School Directors

Tuesday, August 6, 2019 - 6:30pm

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Rochester Campus – Notes, Revised

1. Call to Order: Carl called the meeting to order at 6:39pm. In attendance was board members; Megan Payne, Ethan Bowen, Carl Groppe, Janie Feinberg, and Amy Wildt. Administration, Lindy Stetson, Bruce Labs, and Tara Withers. The Boards legal Council Dina Atwood¹. Public attendance was Deb Matthews, Cheryl Rivers, Joanne Mills, Lisa Blair, Dick McCormack, Walter Merdik, and Lisa Splunkin

2. Adjustments to the agenda: Carl added under action items, Certifying Tuition Payments residency policy, and approving warrants.

3. Public comment: Cheryl Rivers spoke about the tax issue and would like the board to warn a large public meeting with State Representatives, to get the fact out about what is going on

4. Consent Agenda:

4.1 Approve the Minutes of Friday, August 2, 2019: Minutes not provided, Tabled.

5. Board Comment:

6. Reports to the Board:

7. Discussion Items:

7.1 Update on Education Tax Issue

Carl recapped the last special meeting about the tax issue we had on July 22nd. Brad James attended that meeting and spoke about the issue that he was having with the implementation of the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS). The changes in the way that it manages the equalized pupil count and assigning the students to the appropriate local education authority. Our budget that the board build was build from the Agency of Educations(AOE) figure that they gave us in January, 179.93 pupils. Around the time we were passing our budget the AOE to changed the pupil number, and dropped it close to 6%. The effect is when there are less kids to spread the spending over, it raises the spending per kids so that added the first \$1/4million to our taxes, then because that money was added, now we are in the penalty, so another \$150,000 of penalty was added. In that meeting with Brad James it was decided that what we really need to do is go back and look at the census of each of the last 3 years, because the equalized pupil count is based on a 2 year rolling average. The State send us an excel file that Tara immediately distributed to the Board. We went through the list and found some problems.

¹ Inclusion of Dina's last name is an addition from prior meeting minutes.

There were some kids that were missed and there were some kids from Pittsfield that were not ours to count. So this could affect Pittsfield's count. We gave all the information to the State and asked us for more information, which we provided, the State again asked for additional information, which we again supplied. The file with all this information had 6 sheets to it. To date the State has only looked through 1 of those sheets. And they have found that there were students that needed to be removed and students that needed to be added. In all the first sheet ended up with a plus of 5 students. We don't have any information on the other 5 census surveys from the State yet. The State said what with Brad James being out of the office until the end of the month the State will not be giving us any answers until that time. At the last meeting we said that we feel we are right, and if so, we will keep our original passed budget which was a 2.48% tax increase. If that doesn't happen and we are faced with this large increase to tax rate due to the equalized pupils then the Board will do something. The Board would never have put forth a budget and pretended it was under the penalty when it was reality. Our Lawyer is currently exploring all our options. One thought is to reduce the budget so it is a budget we can afford. With the state pushing the time line out potentially passed the first day of school, the time line to warn and pass a new budget would be unrealistic. Another option is to point out to the state that they had a legal obligation to give us proper, good, numbers by December 15, and they didn't. Brad James admitted that at the last meeting, that they were just getting the number right in May. We feel that perhaps the best option is advocating that we took the states numbers and put together a budget in good faith, we passed it in front of our communities, with a 2.48% tax increase, that our voters agreed to pay that. That is the budget that we need to get back to. It may take an executive order, or legislative. This is what the Board needs to discuss, what the best action will be. We made an agreement with our tax payers that we would tax a certain amount and they would get a certain amount of school. We find this unacceptable that the state would give us other numbers.

Discussion ensued on the frustration that there is a bottle neck at the State that only one person is able to verify our numbers and that person is on vacation, so we just have to wait. Discussion ensued regarding the tax issue and frustrations with the States response. Discussion regarding informing the Governor and the Secretary of education ensued. Dick McCormack, a Vermont State Senator, joined the meeting and he will be going to Montpelier and expressing our disappointment and will have some discussions with continuants.

Bruce Labs has asked the Superintendents association to find out if there are other districts outside of our SU who are experiencing the same problem with the equalized pupil count from Montpelier. It was noted that larger districts would not necessarily experience the same fluctuations in their tax bill with an increase or decrease of 9 equalized pupils. He expects a response shortly.

We are all very disappointed that the answer will not be provided to us until the end of August at the earliest, but in the mean time, School will be opened, lights will be on and lunch will be served. We are putting pressure on Montpelier to get this done.

Dina clarified that the 5% cap on tax rate increase or decrease did not pertain to us as we had previously thought. Discussion ensued on the frustration that Montpelier put out this "carrot" as an Act 46 merger

incentive, but with a subsequent Act 49 changed the language of the incentive so that once each towns tax rate was within 5% of each other we can no longer use this incentive.

Bruce brought information about the role of the Board Treasurer, and information about the cost if health insurance increases over the last couple years. Tara explained more about both.

8. Action Items:

8.1: Approving Warrants: Carl would like in the short term until we have clarity on our budget, he recommends that we only pay essential expenses, not tuitions. As long as we are not accruing interest on these bills. We will pay salaries, food service, utilities, and all other essential bills. The school has a Tax Anticipation Note that they can draw on to pay all bills, but this comes with interest, and until we have this tax issue resolved we give the instruction to hold off on tuition payments.

8.2 Certifying Tuition Payments residency policy: Carl stated that we need a policy that we will not send a tuition payment to any school without current residency verification. Lindy verified that we do have such a policy that went into effect the beginning of last year. Tara stated that this is also the policy of the SU, no tuition payment goes out without residency verification forms filled out.

9. Public Comment:

Mason Wade spoke about our carbon foot print, and about our overall school maintenance outdoors. Knowing what the inventory of the equipments that we have, in particular an electric trimmer. Mason spoke about the long term for cost savings and education around our carbon foot print, and would like to see our staff to exemplify methods to reduce our carbon foot print.

Joanne noted that she would like to hold off on a building addition until we know what our tax rate is, and was told "no promises".²

10. Other: Megan asked that we have written update that can be posted to keep the public informed. Carl will be writing up a brief update, and as Tara gets any information at all she will communicate it with us. Megan also purposed that our Board sends a formal letter to the State, to the Governor, to the AOE and to the Secretary Of Education. Dina will help us compose this.

11. Next Meeting Date

11.1 Tuesday, September 3, 2019 @ Stockbridge Campus - Regular Meeting

12. Adjourn: At 8:27pm

Respectfully Submitted

Amy Wildt

² This paragraph is an addition from prior notes.