

Hamilton Wenham Blue Ribbon Committee

December 16, 2008

Minutes

CALLED TO ORDER: L. Kane, Chairman, called a duly posted meeting of the Hamilton Wenham Blue Ribbon Committee to order at 7:05 p.m. The meeting was held in the Wenham Selectmen's Chambers.

PRESENT: Bob Bullivant, Margo Druschel, Betty Dunbar, Lynnette Fallon, Laurie Wilson, HWRSD School Committee Chair (as an alternate for Donald Gallant), Lisa Kane, Susan Mehlin and David Reid.

ALSO PRESENT: Members of the Steering Committee (Arthur Oberheim, chair of Town of Hamilton Finance Committee, John Clemenzi and Harriet Davis, Wenham selectmen, and Richard Low, Hamilton selectman); Marinel McGrath, HWRSD Superintendent; and other observers

ABSENT: Donald Gallant was represented by an alternate.

NEW BUSINESS: L. Kane confirmed that Committee members had received copies of the agenda for this meeting and the proposed minutes of the meeting on December 9, 2008.

1. Presentation to the Steering Committee. L. Kane made a presentation to the members of the Steering Committee on the activities of the Blue Ribbon Committee since its first meeting on October 7, 2008. She reported on the organization of the Committee and meeting schedules adopted by the Committee. She reviewed the Committee's views on its mission and goals and efforts to learn about matters impacting the HWRSD. The Committee and the Steering Committee discussed certain observations made by the Committee to date.

At the conclusion of L. Kane's presentation, D. Reid made a presentation on the Committee's review of publicly available data on school districts in Massachusetts. He reported on the Committee's selection of a peer group of 14 other districts and provided data comparing HWRSD to these districts in a variety of metrics. The Committee and the Steering Committee discussed next steps, including engaging a consultant or academic resources to understand and identify potential opportunities for improvement for HWRSD. There was discussion about sharing the cost and work product with other interested districts.

2. Discussion of Peer Questionnaire. The Committee discussed the plan to develop a brief questionnaire that might be distributed to some or all of the peer districts, which could be a starting point for further in-depth analysis. Committee members shared suggested questions. It was agreed that L. Fallon would assemble a list of the questions discussed in the meeting and distribute it to the Committee. Additional questions could be sent to L. Kane and the list discussed at the next meeting.

3. Regional Agreement. L. Kane noted that a copy of the current agreement between Hamilton and Wenham that forms the HWRSD had been distributed to the Committee members. She suggested that the Committee discuss thoughts on this agreement at the next meeting.

4. Correspondence between Selectmen and Enough is Enough. L. Kane provided copies to the Committee members of a letter from Enough is Enough, a citizen group, dated November 18, 2008 to the Hamilton and Wenham Boards of Selectmen. She also provided copies of responses from John Clemenzi on behalf of the Wenham Selectmen dated December 10, 2009 and from Richard Low on behalf of the Hamilton Selectmen dated December 1, 2008. L. Kane noted that the Boards of Selectmen, in these letters, had referred Enough is Enough to the Blue Ribbon Committee to consider the suggestion of undertaking an "operational audit" of the HWRSD. The Committee discussed the intended meaning of an operational audit, as suggested by Enough is Enough. The Committee observed that they could reach a conclusion as to whether there was a third party who might provide a beneficial analysis of operating efficiencies and other improvements to the district at an affordable fee. Mr. Clemenzi noted that the Committee should pass on any proposals for consultant engagements that the Committee views as attractive to the Boards of Selectmen for consideration.

The Committee, the Steering Committee and other observers commented on the consultants and auditors who might be appropriate for this work. There was extensive discussion of cost-saving benefits identified in a forensic audit done by the City of Salem's auditors. Sarah Johnson, Finance Director for Wenham, undertook to obtain more information regarding this project. Mr. Oberheim observed that the Committee could use its own work to narrow the project to certain areas of inquiry. M. McGrath reminded the Committee regarding the procurement rules. L. Fallon noted that the Committee would rely on the towns to engage in the appropriate procurement processes.

5. Future Meetings. R. Bullivant noted that the Hamilton Finance Committee would have an alternate at three future meetings.


6. Discussion of FY2010 Budget Process. L. Wilson noted that the timeline for the budget process as well as FY 2010 budget assumptions and goals had been posted on the School Committee's webpage. The Committee discussed the budget development process, focusing on whether the communities will have an early opportunity to understand the challenges facing the district and the need to compromise between additional costs and additional service reductions. There was also discussion on when actual town contribution amounts would be available so that the publication of a proposed school budget for FY2010 might be available. M. McGrath discussed the process to develop a base budget, which includes level services, contractually obligated service changes and enrollment driven service issues. She explained that the School Committee would be holding public workshops (in lieu of separate Finance subcommittee meetings) to review the base budget and develop the proposed budget that would be published in late February. Deborah Evans, a member of the Budget Process Committee, noted that the Budget Process Committee had not been able to schedule a meeting in December and that it was important that this committee be involved in the development of the FY2010 budget.

7. Statement of Guests. D. Evans commented that the towns of Hamilton and Wenham should also continue to look for cost saving opportunities such as those that might come from economies of scale achieved by regionalization. She asked the selectmen and finance committee members of both towns to look at long term benefits of sharing services, noting that current issues in the Hamilton Police Department might make it an opportune moment to consider a new approach to these services. R. Low commented that the Hamilton Board of Selectmen had asked the Massachusetts Department of Revenue to look at the possibility of merging the towns or regionalizing services. They expect a report from the DOR in April 2009. L. Wilson commented that it would be useful to have a committee that tried to understand and address historic issues that have led to opposition to such a merger in the past.

8. Approval of Minutes. L. Fallon reported on a typographical correction to the draft minutes of the regular meeting held on December 9, 2008. B. Dunbar made a motion that the Hamilton Wenham Blue Ribbon Committee vote to approve the minutes for the regular meeting held on

December 9, 2008, as modified. S. Mehlin seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (8-0-0).

ADJOURNMENT: R. Bullivant made a motion that the Hamilton Wenham Blue Ribbon Committee vote to adjourn at 9:55 pm. B. Dunbar seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (8-0-0).



Respectfully Submitted,
Lynette C. Fallon
Hamilton Wenham Blue Ribbon Committee Secretary