

Hamilton Wenham Blue Ribbon Committee

February 10, 2009

Minutes

CALLED TO ORDER: L. Kane, Chairman, called a duly posted meeting of the Hamilton Wenham Blue Ribbon Committee to order at 7:00 p.m. The meeting was held in the Wenham Selectmen's Chambers.

PRESENT: Margo Druschel, Betty Dunbar, Lynnette Fallon, Donald Gallant, Lisa Kane, Susan Mehlin and John McWane from the Hamilton Finance Committee, as a substitute for Robert Bullivant.

ALSO PRESENT: Observers

ABSENT: David Reid was absent and Robert Bullivant was represented by John McWane.

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 January 13, 2009.

1. Third Party Review of District Operations. L. Kane reported that the selectmen of the two towns have indicated that they would consider a third party engagement to assess the efficiencies of the operations of the Hamilton Wenham Regional School District. The Committee discussed the cost and scope of the project. It was noted that a narrowed scope might help decrease the cost and increase the likelihood that cost-savings would be identified. L. Kane handed out a draft Request for Proposal submitted by the Enough is Enough citizen group, which listed 18 areas in defining the scope of the project. Committee members observed that an extremely broad range of expertise would be required to complete a project of this scope, including financial management, facilities management, educational services and legal compliance.

Several committee members recommended that the scope be narrowed. Special education was identified as an area of substantial spending that also offered a variety of possible methods of satisfying the requirements under law and under individual education plans for students, some of which might be more cost effective than others. J. McWane asked for feedback from Enough is Enough as to whether they would consider limiting the scope of the project.

L. Kane reviewed a list of possible candidates to engage in the work, including two consultants with public school expertise, the Massachusetts Association of School Business managers, and the association of school superintendants. The Committee discussed whether there might be sources of funding for this project from the state.

The consensus of the Committee was that they supported the engagement of a third party to assist in assessing and improving the operations of the district, but that the engagement should be narrowed in scope and the issues of funding the expense should be addressed.

2. Reporting Blue Ribbon Committee Findings to the Communities. L. Kane commented that the Committee should make an effort to communicate its work to the community. L. Fallon mentioned that she had tried to engage the Hamilton Wenham Chronicle in an article and had not received a response. L. Kane undertook to write a report to submit to the Chronicle. It was also agreed that the Committee should plan to report out at each of the town meetings in May.

3. Review of School Committee's Responses to Data Requests from Town Finance Committees. L. Kane reported that she had received a copy of the data submitted by the School Committee to the finance committees of the two towns. She indicated that she would ask for additional copies for the members of the Blue Ribbon Committee who had not received copies through other roles. It was noted that the School Committee had not provided a comparative study of teacher salaries with other districts, as requested. There had been a misunderstanding that the Blue Ribbon Committee was engaging in a study of this type. The Committee noted that it had obtained Department of Education information on average teacher salaries but had not developed a comparative study of teacher pay, but would also be interested in the information. J. McWane noted that the teacher union contracts all contained schedules showing each salary step and that it would be possible to compare these to one another.

The Committee discussed the fact that it was possible that the teacher union for the HWRSD might make concessions under their contract for FY 2010 to assist in the budget shortfall. D. Gallant noted that the School Committee should know in early March whether this was a possibility.

4. Review of Regional Agreement. L. Kane provided copies to the Committee members of the Manchester Essex Regional Agreement. L. Fallon commented that, although it was a much more recent agreement than the HWRSD agreement, it was very similar. S. Mehlin provided L. Fallon with a copy of Massachusetts Department of Revenue recommended changes to regional agreements that S. Mehlin had received from Sarah Johnson, Finance Director for the Town of Wenham. L. Fallon agreed to review and report on these recommended changes. L. Fallon also indicated that she would continue to look for other regional agreement models.

5. Report on Stand for Children and Gordon College. M. Druschel reported on the Stand for Children program that she attended on January 24, 2009. The program on cost-savings was cancelled but M. Druschel still felt that attendance was worthwhile. One cost-saving initiative for school districts that was discussed at the Stand for Children program was joining the Group Insurance Commission ("GIC") health insurance program used by state employees. D. Gallant reported that the School Committee had obtained an analysis comparing GIC insurance with the District's current coverage from Harvard Pilgrim. He noted that the cost sharing by employees in the Harvard Pilgrim was 40%. D. Gallant undertook to provide this report to the Blue Ribbon Committee.

M. Druschel reported that the Gordon College professor of a new public policy course had informed her that, after consideration, she did not feel that the students would be able to assist the Committee in its efforts to engage in a detailed peer review with other districts.

6. Governor's Readiness Finance Commission Report. The Committee briefly discussed the Governor's Readiness Finance Commission Report which L. Fallon had distributed to the Committee. This Readiness Finance Commission was assembled by Governor Patrick in June 2008 to identify all alternative means to achieve sustainable education funding for current needs, except through raising local property taxes. The report contains six recommendations for cost savings by public school districts. L. Fallon noted that the Blue Ribbon Committee should review these recommendations and obtain responses from the School Committee on each of them. The Committee agreed to discuss this next time.

7. Statements of Guests. There were several questions and comments from the observers, mostly relating to the third party assessments of the district operations discussed by the

Committee. An observer noted that an assessment of SPED services would need to be limited by the confidentiality issues relating to individual education plans. The Committee noted that it would need advice on how a SPED program assessment might be done given these constraints.

8. Approval of Minutes. The Committee discussed the draft minutes of January 13, 2009. L. Fallon reported on certain edits made to respond to comments from R. Bullivant. An additional comment from B. Dunbar was discussed and final edits agreed. D. Gallant made a motion that the Hamilton Wenham Blue Ribbon Committee vote to approve the minutes for the regular meeting held on January 13, 2009, as modified. S. Mehlin seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously, with J. McWane abstaining (6-0-1).

ADJOURNMENT: L. Kane made a motion that the Hamilton Wenham Blue Ribbon Committee vote to adjourn at 9:15 pm. B. Dunbar seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (7-0-0).



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