

Warwick School Committee Minutes
Meeting May 11, 2015 – Open Session

The Warwick School Committee met in Open Session at the Toll Gate High School Cafeteria on Tuesday, May 11, 2015. Ms. Ahearn called the meeting to order at 6:50 p.m. with the five school committee members in attendance.

MOTION 2015-117: Moved by Ms. Ahearn, seconded by Ms. Furtado, to seal the Minutes of the Executive Session [May 11, 2015].

MOTION PASSES (3-0)

Bethany A. Furtado – Aye
Eugene A. Nadeau – not present for vote
Jennifer Ahearn - Aye
M. Terri Medeiros – Aye
Karen Bachus – not present for vote

Mr. Edward Frenette began by reviewing who SMMA is, purpose of the workshop, criteria to select master plan, building trust, status of the demographic study, educational planning, capacity analysis, facilities assessment, outreach and traffic and cost. The goal for the evening to understand the demographic study, the capacity analysis and the criteria and alternative master plans. Warwick is operating between eight and ten schools too many and the district is losing four to six full classrooms of students per year. In 2011-2012 there were six too many schools and right now there are seven too many. An average class size is 25 at high school level and 24 for everything below that. The capacity analysis indicates that both levels need to be consolidated. One alternative is to create 6-8 middle schools, 2 magnet high schools with 9th grade academies. Toll Gate is a default magnet school, and we need to create another magnet school so there's parity across the system. Assessment reports have been sent to the cost estimators and it is expected having a draft report ready for next week with useful initial numbers. Here in Warwick there is 30% to 40% too much space, total building, not just classrooms with acoustic space. This level of over capacity is beyond what you want. Classrooms represent one-third to one-half of total square footage per high school. In junior highs and high schools classrooms can be effectively used 85% of the time. Administration buildings are above and beyond excess capacity – if you include them and consider them as educational space – it makes the numbers worse.

Mr. Frenette noted that the firm will not complete a traffic analysis until the options are narrowed down to two or three master plans. Traffic and cost analysis will be addressed during the May 27th workshop.

In addition to a base level master plan, other plan options under consideration include: consolidation of secondary; consolidation of elementary; consolidation of both secondary and elementary; creation of a middle school (6th to 8th) with two magnet high schools with ninth grade academies; creation of a broadband middle school (5th-8th) with two magnet high schools with 9th grade academies; and creation of three magnet middle high schools with 9th grade academies. A 9th grade academy is geographically self-contained and teachers work together on lesson plans. One of problems with high school is ninth grade students have a hard time coping going from middle school environment to high school. Ninth grade academies try to bridge the gap and ease the transition.

One new suggestion to add to the master plan was to revisit the city map, undergoing a complete redistricting and then determining how many schools are needed to create one unified city instead of three separate sub districts. The second suggestion was to close all six secondary schools and build one super high school and one super junior high school. A junior high school nurse said she was against the idea to create a super junior high, because behavior and hormones of students in junior high will cause fights and super drama. Mr. Frenette commented he didn't think RIDE would fund construction of a super high or junior high nor would residents of the city.

Asked for a prediction when population will increase, Mr. Frenette said Warwick has an aging population. For this to reverse it will take quite some time, while we are obligated to look at 20 years for this study; the state only looks at five to ten years. For the trend to change, a lot of residents

would have to sell their homes at a price that child rearing families can afford. Warwick needs first-time homebuyers with young children. The demographic study and facility capacity analysis will be available online.

When the question was asked why we can't sell off the old school buildings and use the money to build new, Ms. Ahearn said school facilities are under the purview of the mayor and city council, the school department wouldn't receive the benefit of any sale of the buildings. Ms. Bachus commented the city owns the land and buildings, so when we close a school, it goes back to the city. Dr. D'Agostino remarked that Potowomut Elementary was closed but never sold. It was knocked down for a new fire station. The city also tried to sell Rhodes, but it hasn't been sold.

Mr. Nadeau commented Warwick is seventh from the bottom in RI in value of homes. Warwick has \$900 million funded and un-funded debt. Taxes have been raised 25 years in a row. Money is being taken out of our pockets and we have seen deterioration in the city over time. Mr. Testa remarked that Cranston has higher taxes and Warwick's tax rate is modest. The City didn't release the \$25 million in bonds for school repairs.

Mr. Frenette was asked if the buildings will be ranked by condition. He responded that we can identify some important building systems like boilers, windows, roofs, fire safety, etc and will rank them by a system to indicate whether it is a "must repair," "should repair," but we won't rank building by building.

The following are questions and answers brought up during this meeting and were posted by SMMA:

1. **Is there one elementary school district that is over-crowded?** *There is extra space at most of the elementary schools.*
2. **I teach in the elementary schools and we've been introducing differentiated instruction and small group learning in some of our classes, but this requires acoustic separation. We may have excess capacity, but we have found innovative ways to use these spaces.** *The traditional model for education was the "Sage on the stage" where teaching and learning was pretty much one way. In differentiated learning teachers are the "guide on the side", educators become coaches, it involves demonstrating, not telling, and requires one on one, or small group education. This is difficult in a small classroom because you can't get acoustic separation. If you have larger classroom spaces differentiated learning is much easier. The problem here in Warwick is that you have over 30% to 40% (37.5%) too much space, and that is the total building, not just the classrooms with "acoustic space". This level of over-capacity is beyond what you want. So, even though it's being used, you wouldn't go out and buy it. And indirectly, you are buying these "vacant schools" each year incrementally, roofs, windows, boilers, heat and light.*
3. **Still, when you say we have 8-10 to many schools, that's what people think about.** *We are talking about a fully programmed school not just classrooms.*
4. **Is every period for instruction used in secondary schools?** *In the junior highs and high schools the classrooms can be effectively used 85% of the time. Otherwise, the schools would be too crowded.*
5. **What about elementary schools with open plans?** *When we assess your schools, we're assuming that if you keep these buildings open, they can be made to function. Every dollar you spend on buildings you don't need takes away from education. These capacity standards we're using are widely recognized. Most of New England is functioning using these capacities and standards. We need to understand what these numbers mean and not keep searching for reasons not face up to the meaning of excess capacity.*
6. **Other districts don't have as many private schools as Warwick. All this publicity and uncertainty will make it easy for Warwick kids to leave the district and go to the private and charter schools.** *There are lots of private schools in New England. So there are many cities in your situation, but I am not aware of any school district that consciously funds 30% to 40% (37.5%) more space than they need.*
7. **Does the excess capacity take into account the administration buildings? Shouldn't we vacate those buildings and give them back to the City?** *We did not include the administration buildings as educational space in our calculations, but if we did it only would have made the case worse. Using this excess capacity for administration is creative use of space, but it would be a good idea to re-think these buildings and how they're used.*
8. **I'm concerned that you say traffic will be considered later in the study because traffic is not an after-thought. Administration has been very dismissive about cost and time. But, I'm concerned with the time**

students spend on the bus and their separation from neighborhoods and parents. *Traffic and transportation should definitely be taken into consideration. I can recall a study we did that generated 12 computerized transportation options, and none of them was perfect. When we narrow down the master plan alternatives we will factor in transportation, but it will probably not be the deciding factor.*

9. Will you be ranking each of the school buildings by condition? *We can identify some important building systems like, boilers, windows, roofs, fire safety, code compliance and will rank them by a system to indicate whether it is a “must repair” or a “should repair.”*

10. Will there be consolidation at the primary level or the secondary level?

The capacity analysis indicates that both levels need to be consolidated. One alternative is to create 6-8 middle schools, 2 magnet high schools with 9th grade academies. Toll Gate is a default magnet school, and we need to create another magnet school so there’s parity across the system.

11. What are other examples of magnet schools? *STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics): At this point the idea of having a magnet school is more important than the details. The educators will be heavily involved in designing any magnet school program.*

12. Can you give us an example of course offerings? *That will be in the next phase.*

13. I’m not comfortable with the idea of a 5-8 middle school. I don’t think fifth graders are ready for middle school. *Most districts we have worked with go with 6-8 middle schools. When you have a district going with a grade 5-8 middle school, it is usually to solve capacity problem in the elementary schools.*

Another alternative we would like to consider is the creation of three two-school campuses (middle and high) with magnet high schools and ninth grade academies each with 9th grade academies, one each at Pilgrim, Veterans and Toll Gate. Warwick would still have the three (3) same teams. This alternative will require additional construction at the schools: Separate entrances, separate cafeterias, separate gyms. It would also need separate bussing for middle and high school students.

14. Would be the three schools be grades 6-12 or 7-12? *They could be either, but both would require renovation and construction. We will make conceptual unit cost estimates of doing this.*

15. What’s a 9th grade academy? Would it be separated from the high school? *At the turn of last century, most of the country had a grade K-8 system that did not account for changes that take place in teenagers going into grades 6, 7, and 8. Junior high schools were created to respond to those needs. In the 1960’s, junior high schools expanded to include grade 6 and became middle schools in the way they delivered education to solve the problems not addressed by junior high schools. Educators started looking at problems with high schools and discovered that 9th graders often have a hard time coping with a high school environment. Academies are designed to cope with those transitions. Ideally, a 9th grade academy would be geographically self-contained, a school within a school. Teachers would work together planning. Schools of education are still coming up with ideas and solutions, so what we’re proposing today is not the “be all and end all” for the future of education. Our job is to expose you to the future and new ideas which may be appropriate for educating your children.*

16. How do the alternatives work with the Warwick city plan? *The three two-school campuses (middle and high) alternative is a response to the concern that there is minimum disruption. No one solution is going to have everything you want, but we will add that the alternative fit with the City’s Master Plan as an evaluation criterion.*

17. We’ve never looked at Warwick as an entire city. We should re-district and see how many elementary schools should be closed then we should build one super high school and one super junior high school. *We could give that to you in terms of construction dollars and possibly find a site for it, although it would take a lot of land.*

18. I’m a school nurse and I think it is a bad idea to create a super junior high school. Their hormones can go hay-wire, there could be fights everywhere. *I do not want to pre-judge the alternative, but don’t think that RIDE or Warwick will fund a super high school or junior high school. Either will be very expensive.*

19. How do you go about predicting population increases? Isn’t the Warwick population decline going to turn around at some point? *Demographic trends tend to go in long waves or trend lines. Will population come back? For that to happen lots of residents will have to sell their homes at a price that child rearing families can afford. Warwick needs first time home buyers with young children.*

20. Rhode Island Monthly has listed Warwick as a great place to buy homes. *The demographers have included those factors in their report. Any demographic study starts with the number of live births and the age of the population. For those trends to reverse takes a long time. RIDE will only take 10 year projections into account for planning and 5 year projections for construction of new schools; the demographic future beyond 10 years is very difficult to predict.*

21. Will the demographic study and facility capacity analysis be available online? *Yes, by the end of this week.*

22. Warwick is losing school enrollment much more quickly than surrounding cities and towns. If you're losing a young school age population, you need to convince the City that schools are important for city values and economic activity. *We find that when we help a town to build a new school, it fills up very quickly; kids come streaming back from charter and private schools. There is much anecdotal evidence that a good school system attracts children and parents.*

23. Schools and school buildings should be part of general town improvements. *I agree. I have been working for the same superintendent for 20 years; he is very well organized, very methodical, and he does not put things off. He wants to make sure his buildings stay in good shape. The Town is ahead of the curve, very pro-active. As a result, the Town attracts children and parents and keeps residential costs moving in a positive direction.*

24. Is that town in Rhode Island? *No, it is not. Rhode Island has some budget problems that must be solved and will be solved.*

25. Is it better to work with a town or a city? *In general, cities can act faster than towns, but most towns are smaller, so it balances out. East Greenwich was small enough that we could solve their entire system's problems with one new middle school. There's no way that one new building could do everything for Warwick*

26. I'm concerned that by consolidating we would be losing programs. I want to make sure that when we consolidate that we will improve course offerings, Warwick needs more educational enrichment. We're not seeing the educational plan yet. *We need to make each aspect of the master plan efficient. The educational plan will be part of the total presentation. Like your School Committee, we want Warwick to be competitive with other districts. And, I want to stress the fact that it's not our plan, it is your plan.*

27. Why can't we sell off the old school buildings and use the money to build new? *Facilities are under City's purview, not school committees. The City owns the land and building; there will be discussions and negotiations with the city on these issues.*

28. Warwick is 7th from the bottom in RI in value of homes. Warwick has \$900 million funded and unfunded debt. Taxes have been raised 25 years in a row. Money is being taken out of our pockets and we have seen deterioration in the city over time. Education of students is vital, but right now there is very little credit for what is being done for our 9,000 students. I'm confident that we'll make the right move.

29. With regard to taxes, the grass is not always greener; Cranston has higher taxes, Warwick's tax rate is modest. The city didn't release the \$25 million in bonds for school repairs. This is not us against them. We're going to have to do something. *The last thing we want to do is produce a pile of paper that gathers dust. Even if nothing gets built, we want to make a difference and improve education in Warwick. Whatever you decide to do, you will need RIDE for reimbursement funding in the future for something. And, RIDE will require that you do something with your excess capacity as a part of your receiving reimbursement.*

MOTION 2015-117: Moved by Mr. Nadeau, seconded by Ms. Furtado, to adjourn.

MOTION PASSES (5-0)

Bethany A. Furtado - Aye M. Terri Medeiros - Aye
Eugene A. Nadeau - Aye Karen Bachus - Aye
Jennifer Ahearn - Aye

Meeting adjourned: 8:30 p.m.