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**BELMONT WARRANT COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
FINAL**

**AUGUST 3, 2016, 7:30 P.M.
CHENERY COMMUNITY ROOM**

Present: Chair Libenson; Members Alcock, Dash, Epstein, Gammill, Lisanke, McLaughlin, Schreiber; Selectman Baghdady; School Committee Member Burgess-Cox

Ms. Pat Brusch (Capital Budget Committee) and Mr. Jack Weis (Belmont's Minuteman SC member)

Members Absent: Fallon, Helgen, Mennis

The meeting was called to order at 7:32 pm by Chair Libenson.

Chair Libenson began by noting that Minuteman will be the main agenda item.

Approval of Minutes

The minutes of 6/15/16 were unanimously approved, as amended.

Discussion of Minuteman Vocational High School District Referendum seeking approval of \$144.9 million bonding for building a new school

Chair Libenson began by stating that there will be a district-wide vote on Tuesday, September 20 from noon – 8 p.m. Belmont will have all of its polling places open.

Member McLaughlin reviewed some of the basic information concerning the election. He stated that, if the majority of residents across the district vote to authorize the debt (regardless of individual town votes), the new school will go forward. In any particular town, if a majority of voters votes against authorizing the debt, the town will have the option to withdraw from the district (specifically, it will have 60 days from the date of the district-wide vote to give notice to Minuteman that it wants to withdraw from the district). A decision to withdraw from the district in such circumstances would require 2/3 support from Town Meeting. In Belmont, since no Town Meeting is already scheduled within the 60-day window, the Selectmen will need to call a Special Town Meeting (STM). If a vote to withdraw passes (with 2/3 majority), the actual withdrawing would occur in three years time. Withdrawing towns are allowed to keep their freshmen at Minuteman through graduation.

Mr. Weis noted that, if Belmont votes "no" on September 20 and then a Belmont STM votes to withdraw from the Minuteman district (with 2/3 majority), then Belmont would not merely be able to leave the district, it would do so without incurring any of the new building debt.

Member McLaughlin reiterated: Belmont could disapprove the 9/20 vote and within 60 days call a STM to request to withdraw from the district. The STM vote must pass with a 2/3 majority. Should these two steps happen, Belmont will not be responsible for the new building debt for the 30 year of bonding. (If Belmont chose to continue to send students to Minuteman after withdrawing, the town – now a nonmember town – would incur a capital fee as deemed appropriate by DESE for any year that it sends students.) DESE must approve the withdrawal.

If Belmont votes “yes” on 9/20 and the district as a whole votes “yes”, the town joins the other member towns in taking on responsibility for the new building debt. If STM does not pass with 2/3 majority (i.e., Belmont remains in the district, even if it voted “no” in an overall “yes” district vote), Belmont is responsible for the debt.

The WC then discussed its role in advising Town Meeting Members and registered voters. Chair Libenson stated that there will be a League of Women Voters Night on Monday, September 12, 2016 at 7:30 p.m. at the Beech Street Center. The WC can provide additional information that may aid the process.

Member Epstein stated that questions remain concerning this process. For example, if Belmont does withdraw from the district, what educational alternatives are available for those students who would have attended Minuteman? What is available for these students and at what cost? It was noted that they could attend Minuteman, as non-member students. It will be useful, he said, to get a sense of projected future enrollment at Minuteman – not just from Belmont, but district-wide – in order to judge Minuteman’s future capacity to accept Belmont students if Belmont withdraws from the district. He stated that a new building, with revised programs, may lead to higher enrollment.

Member McLaughlin noted that options do exist. For example, Sudbury will send its 25 students to Assabet (Marlborough). Waltham may expand their internal vocational training, and would welcome Belmont’s students. Also, Belmont’s students could still attend Minuteman. Also, Belmont’s Superintendent of Schools has pledged that students interested in vocational education will be educated. Member Epstein noted that specific details are missing from the Superintendent.

SC Member Burgess-Cox stated that the School Department is looking into other options, but is waiting to learn the town’s decision. Member Gammill noted that pulling out of Minuteman creates a whole new issue that will require resolution. He asked whether the Superintendent views this as an opportunity or a distraction. Member Schreiber stated that it is not understood what will happen for the students should Belmont leave the district. The community does not have a good sense of what the options are, although the Superintendent may know the options. She stated that it would be useful to know what the possibilities are for this type of education. Member Dash agreed. He said it’s hard to vote without knowing what the options are. It behooves the School Department to make the options known, especially with the Belmont High School debt coming down the road.

Chair Libenson noted that there may not be one plan for Belmont's 26 (or so) Minuteman students – there may be a combination of options, depending on the needs of the students. The School Department has pledged that it will “do right” by these students.

Member McLaughlin reiterated that the core issue is whether or not Belmont will support this ill-conceived project; this vote is not a value judgment on vocational education. Mr. Weis agreed and added that the educational alternatives need to be stated, as it will impact the decision to support this project or not. Selectman Baghdady agreed that the residents will need a lot of education concerning this issue. He said he supports the WC's involvement in its outreach to the community, e.g., Member Epsteins's work.

Chair Libenson stated that, ultimately, Belmont needs to decide if it wants to join with the six towns who are leaving the Minuteman district or join with the nine towns that have remained.

The WC continued to discuss the following:

- the level of detail that needs to be disseminated (by the School Department) concerning the full range of educational options/alternatives for these students
- the process by which residents will receive information on this topic and to what extent the WC will be involved (possibilities for informing the electorate)
- the mechanism for releasing information (a report, a spreadsheet, LVW night, etc.)
- various scenarios concerning the district-wide vote on 9/20 and the STM vote (e.g., the implications of yes/no vote)
- data gathering concerning Minuteman costs, district enrollment trends, the costs of educational alternatives, etc.

Chair Libenson stated that providing viable educational alternatives is fundamentally a School Department question. Belmont must decide a rent/buy question: do we buy into Minuteman or do we rent to offer this education? Mr. Gammill noted that the framework is also about Belmont having a seat at the table. Mr. Weis noted that member towns only have modest input at Minuteman. Programmatic decisions tend to be driven by the Superintendent, so there is minimal input from member towns. Also, DESE makes fiscal decisions. Therefore, a member town had minimal input under the old agreement. Mr. Gammill noted that the new agreement is better with respect to governance.

Member Epstein underscored the fact that the 9/20 vote date is coming up fast and no information concerning educational alternatives has been released from the School Department. Also, the WC should look (at some point in the near future) at the various scenarios concerning per-pupil costs – as a member town, and as a non-member town. The capital fee that DESE controls will impact this figure.

Chair Libenson noted that next steps include the gathering of information. This process will be led by Member Epstein. Members McLaughlin and Gammill as well as Mr. Weis offered to help.

SC Member Burgess-Cox stated that the School Department will proceed once it knows the outcome of the vote e.g. – once it knows the direction in which the town wants to go. Ms. Brusch said there needs to be more information from the School Department other than “we will do right by the kids.” She said specifics are not needed, but general educational possibilities (“Waltham has openings” “Cambridge isn’t full”, etc.) need to be laid out. Member McLaughlin agreed that more information on *how* these kids could potentially be educated needs to be shared with the electorate. Member Dash agreed that knowing the alternatives to Minuteman needs to be communicated, as this information will impact the vote. Mr. Weis concurred that understanding the viable alternatives is directly related to the financial matter.

Chair Libenson added that on 9/20, the No voters will need to believe that viable alternatives to Minuteman exist. The Superintendent, at a minimum, needs to assure the voters that a quality education can be provided to these students.

Updates: Board of Selectmen and School Committee

Board of Selectmen: Selectman Baghdady answered a question concerning the progress of the work being done in Belmont Center. He stated that it is actively being worked on and will hopefully be finished by September. Concerning Cushing Village, he stated that Toll Brothers and the town are working on the Land Development Agreement as well as on the review of Toll’s financial statements.

Member Gammill requested that the end-of-year (FY16) fiscal reports from the Town and School Departments be available in September.

School Committee: SC Rep Burgess-Cox did not report.

Public Contributions

Mr. Geoffrey Lubien, TMM Pct. 7, stated that more information (concerning Minuteman) will be helpful. He also requested information on the impact of this debt on the town’s overall financials.

Adjournment

Member McLaughlin moved to adjourn at 9:01 p.m.

Submitted by Lisa Gibalerio
WC Recording Secretary