

BELMONT WARRANT COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

FINAL

APRIL 13, 2016, 7:30 P.M.

CHENERY COMMUNITY ROOM

2016 MAY -2 AM 10:12

Present: Chair Libenson; Members Alcock, Dash, Epstein, Fallon, Gammill, Helgen, Lisanke, McLaughlin, McVay, Mennis, Sarno, Schreiber; Selectman Baghdady; School Committee Rep. Burgess-Cox

Town Administrator Kale

Members Absent: Starzec

The meeting was called to order at 7:31 pm by Chair Libenson.

Chair Libenson began by turning to the first item on the agenda.

Approval of Minutes

The minutes of 4/6/16 were approved, as modified, with one abstention.

Discussion and Vote: Annual Town Meeting (ATM) and Special Town Meeting (STM) Articles

Annual Town Meeting (ATM) Articles

Article 4: Demolition Delay Extension

Chair Libenson invited Mr. Joe Cornish, Co-Chair of the Historic District Commission (HDC), to the WC table. Mr. Cornish explained that, although there is a sunset provision in the existing Demolition Delay, more time is needed to pursue the Demolition Delay survey. Member McLaughlin asked about the survey – specifically, how it relates to the list of homes. Selectman Baghdady noted that, with 70% of the survey complete, it would be a shame to not allow the time to complete it. He added that he has not heard any complaints about the survey. Ms. Allison, Chair of the Planning Board (PB), added from the audience that the PB vote was unanimous in its support of this article.

Member Helgen moved: Favorable Action on Article 4.
The motion passed unanimously.

Article 6: Oversized Dwelling Zoning Bylaw

Ms. Liz Allison, Chair of the PB, and Mr. Jeff Wheeler, Senior Town Planner, approached the WC to discuss Article 6. Ms. Allison informed the WC that the goal of this article is to keep homes that are out of character with the neighborhood (height,

grade, setback, etc.) from being built. She distributed a handout and explained the existing rules for homes in this area and then explained the proposed adjustments under this article. Member Epstein asked about the gas tank and propane tank restrictions.

Ms. Allison noted that the area of discretion will likely be adjusted at some point in the future. Member Dash noted that the word "altered" had been changed to "raised." He said that he would prefer the word "altered" as it is more flexible, since people both lower the grade and raise the grade. Mr. Wheeler explained the rationale of this change, but noted that he would edit the article and restate the word "altered". He then explained the addition of the five-year requirement. Member Epstein asked about the "34 feet to max height on to ridge" rule. Ms. Allison noted that Point 5 only applies to non-conforming lots. Non-conforming lots were briefly discussed.

The WC discussed issues relating to Article 6.

Member McLaughlin asked if it has been calculated what the town would lose in new growth revenue by limiting the building of "McMansions." There is likely a financial impact to limiting the size of these homes, in that we are limiting potential tax revenue via new growth. Ms. Allison replied that the cost of the services required by those who move in to a smaller house may be reduced when compared to the amount of revenue that can be collected from a larger house.

Selectman Baghdady noted that these "smaller" houses help preserve the home values of the entire neighborhood.

Mr. Steve Pinkerton, from Belmont Citizens for Responsible Zoning, added that a developer told him that one of his very large homes did not sell for a while.

Member Dash moved: Favorable Action on Article 6.
The motion passed unanimously.

Special Town Meeting (STM) Articles

Article 3: Free Cash Transfer (\$1.45M) to Fund Modular Classrooms at CMS

Superintendent Phelan joined the WC table. He explained the enrollment trends across the district, noting that enrollment has been increasing over time. All available space is being utilized to absorb the enrollment. He explained the work of the Enrollment Task Force, noting that all possible space was explored for usage and is actually being utilized – even though those spaces were intended for storage or for conference space.

Superintendent Phelan explained why the modular units (and funding to purchase them) is being requested at the Chenery Middle School. He then reviewed the WC's questions, and offered his answers. He explained how the space will likely be used, addressed the cost question of the units. He explained why buying the six units outright is more cost-effective than leasing the units. He stated that all six units will be required next year and

over the next six to eight years. Even more units could be used, but the School Department is trying to be conservative.

Mr. Kale addressed the question of why free cash would be used to fund the units, over the bonding option. Down the road, he said, more units may be needed at the elementary level. Those units would be bonded. But this first phase will be funded via free cash, as the funding is available there.

The WC then asked questions about the units, e.g., the durability of the units, the configuration of the one large unit with six classrooms (as opposed to another set up), etc.

Member Fallon moved: Favorable Action on Article 3.
The motion passed unanimously.

Article 2: Appropriation of Woodfall Road Sale to fund BHS Proposed Project

Selectman Baghdady explained that it makes sense to apply the sale of Woodfall Road (one-time capital money \$1.75M) to the next capital project in town – the BHS project. The Board felt that the Kendall Fund (\$3.3M) might be preserved to fund feasibility studies for several other capital projects that are coming down the line (Library, Police Station, DPW). It is likely that the Woodfall Road funding will get the BHS project through the feasibility phase. Other funding sources could possibly include free cash.

The WC discussed this article, focusing on the potential MSBA reimbursement. Member Helgen asked how much money would need to be spent prior to the debt exclusion. Superintendent Phelan ventured that about \$1.7M will be needed to get through the feasibility phase/schematic design. After the feasibility phase, Mr. Kale explained, the amount will be known for the project, and a debt exclusion vote will need to occur. He said it is not likely that there will be money left over (of the \$1.75M).

Member Fallon moved: Favorable Action on Article 2.
The motion passed unanimously.

Article 1: Minuteman New School Project (Debt)

Chair Libenson invited Mr. Jack Weis and Ms. Pat Brusca to approach the WC table to discuss issues relating to Article 1. Chair Libenson stated that the new Minuteman School project will cost about \$145M. He said that the WC may not vote on this tonight.

Mr. Weis began by informing the WC that six of the 16 towns have left the member district under the new revised agreement. He explained there is now a 10-town district, which is a geographic oddity. The feasibility study for Minuteman has been in process for many years. Belmont has had consistent reservations about the size of the proposed school. He then explained the enrollment projections – noting that there is an in-district enrollment number, and a non-member enrollment number.

Enrollment is currently set at 628 for the new building, and again, he said, Belmont has consistently felt that this was too large a number. Total enrollment is currently about 635, including about 51 students from the six towns who have left. At the start of the school year, member-town enrollment – counting all 16 member towns – was roughly 382 (of the 635). Counting the 51 students from the six departing towns as non-member students now, member-town enrollment is down to 331, which leaves about $253 + 51 = 304$ non-member students.

Mr. Weis continued: after the MSBA reimbursement, the project totals \$100M, with \$372K a year of debt service being paid by Belmont on a yearly basis. This number is not fixed. It changes as a town's enrollment number changes and it may change if non-member towns are charged a debt-service fee.

Minuteman feels that the enrollment will grow by about 40%, contrary to all studies in enrollment trends. Belmont will be paying close to \$20K per student for capital costs, while already paying \$29K per student for operating costs.

Mr. Weis then discussed the vote concerning the debt. The six withdrawing communities who are leaving the district will not vote on the debt, but this is considered to be an implicit affirmative. Three communities have already approved the debt.

Mr. Weis stated that, while the school is too large, the alternative paths may not be better for Belmont. He said the debt vote will likely pass in all communities, with the possible exception of Arlington. He then raised other possible scenarios, all of which have downsides.

Member McLaughlin stated that he believes Belmont should vote No on the debt at Town Meeting. The new school is twice as large as the member-town enrollment figures. He then explained the fiscal ramifications and the risk of an approved building vote. Minuteman's projections are predicated on a full school, he said, but the demographics have dramatically changed. Their enrollment assumptions are not supported by data. This school, he said, can be adequately restored for far less than \$100M. He explained some of the upsides of voting this down. Spending \$40K per student is clearly unsustainable for Belmont.

If Arlington votes No on April 27, Mr. Weis stated that Belmont should go ahead and hold its STM vote anyway – even though all it takes is one town to vote No, and Minuteman would then conduct a district-wide election. Member McLaughlin agreed.

Member Fallon asked about the enrollment numbers, the programming changes in a school with a smaller building, and the cost of refurbishing the current building. Mr. Weis explained some of the programs that he felt could be jettisoned without materially impacting program offerings (as too few member-town students enroll in them). He agreed that the \$100M number Minuteman provides for renovation is likely to be inflated.

Chair Libenson suggested that Belmont needs to devise a Plan B for its students, if Belmont opts to leave the Minuteman district. Mr. Kale said it is unlikely that the town will know a viable Plan B, by the time of the STM. Perhaps those students would return to Minuteman under the non-member rubric.

Various scenarios were then touched upon, including: the escape clause, the district-wide vote, the 60-day opt-out option, DESE's role, funding the Minuteman debt, etc.

Free Cash Status and Projections

Chair Libenson stated that this item will be deferred until April 27.

Subcommittee Updates

Chair Libenson stated that this item will also be deferred until April 27.

Updates: Board of Selectmen and School Committee

Board of Selectmen: Selectman Baghdady reported that the town has received a \$150K payment from the new Cushing Village developer, Toll Brothers.

School Committee: SC Rep Burgess-Cox reported that the SC elected Ms. Lisa Fiore as Chair and herself as Secretary.

Adjournment

Member McLaughlin moved to adjourn at 9:38 p.m.

Submitted by Lisa Gibalerio
WC Recording Secretary