

LEXINGTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
Monday, April 30, 2007
School Administration Building, Conference Room
1577 Massachusetts Avenue

Present: Superintendent Paul Ash, School Committee Chair Tom Diaz, School Committee Members Helen Cohen, Margaret Coppe and Tom Griffiths. Minutes taken by Leora Tec.

The meeting was convened at 6:34 p.m.

I. Call to Order and Welcome (Tom Diaz)

Tom Griffiths raised the question of whether the School Committee would take a position on Article 35, regarding a study on a senior center. The money proposed to be used is \$35,000 that was set aside for this purpose in 2000. The Committee decided that they preferred to hear discussion on the Article at Town Meeting before deciding whether or nor to take a position on it.

Paul Ash: Why is our May 8th meeting at 8:00 pm?

The Committee agreed to move the meeting to 7:30 pm.

II. Action Items

- A. Peter Kelly's Amendment to Reduce the School Budget by \$640,000
Motion to oppose this amendment (Griffiths, Coppe).

Tom Diaz: We decided with the Selectmen and the finance committees that the \$640K would go to School Department. The Appropriation Committee also opposes this amendment. We have contingency plans in mind if some smaller amount comes through. We have also pointed out that at some point if revenue declines we have a stabilization fund. Before we planned for what we would cut from the at-risk list we consulted with Jeanne Krieger and Carl Valente.

The motion passed 4-0.

- B. Patrick Mehr's Amendment to Reduce the School Budget by \$1.2 Million

Mr. Mehr passed out the updated version of his proposal.

Motion to oppose this amendment (Griffiths, Cohen).

Tom Diaz: We have been over this set of proposals in a great deal of detail including this morning. I don't agree with this proposal but I want to thank Mr. Mehr for his valuable contributions especially in energy. Where would we come up with \$1.2 million: because your suggestions for the \$1.2 million don't work for us.

Patrick Mehr: I would like to restate this. I profoundly care for the schools. You are taking a great risk. You may have zero on June 6th. If you take this amendment you may end up with \$2.8 million, and you do need some money. It makes more sense to go for a smaller amount. If this doesn't pass I will vote no on the override because I don't want to price people out of this community. I am only a citizen who profoundly cares for the schools. I don't want anyone to say there is a surprise.

Tom Diaz: No one knows what number is the exact number that is acceptable to the voters. The Committee has worked very hard to reduce the amount needed for the override. There is only so much we can do. Who knows what number works? The school question in 2004 was about the same percentage of the operating budget. The override this year is less expensive for individual taxpayers than the one proposed last year. We can argue that this is a reasonable number.

Tom Griffiths: I am pleased that Patrick is a friend to the schools but he misrepresents us in at least one area that I can think of. We adopted one suggestion of Mr. Mehr's regarding energy savings; we have also proposed to spend \$0.5 million dollars on SPED programs to save \$1.3-1.4 million in SPED so our efforts are not insensitive to taxpayer costs. Mr. Mehr has also criticized our accounting procedures. We have constituted a financial review committee. We are making progress in that area. Mr. Mehr, as a friend of the schools, has mischaracterized the level of school overruns. We have had tremendous increases in SPED expenses; indeed our major overrun is in SPED expenses. There seems to be a will to disbelieve that SPED expenses are a tremendous problem for the school system. We can and do lobby the state government. We are proactive in this. I am pleased that you are friend of the schools but I hope we'll have a friendlier relationship.

Patrick Mehr: I agree you are investing money to save energy (though it took me 3 years to convince you), number two, the financial review committee was a very good idea and three I am delighted that we are keeping more in district SPED students. What concerns me is that we have to learn more aggressively and faster, our expense growth rate is too fast. I wish we went into turnaround mode. I know that SPED is a huge problem. We ought to have an audit system in place to make sure we are doing it as efficiently as possibly. That is one of the reasons I will vote no, I don't know it is being managed efficiently. I don't wish to tax people; I am a leftist liberal. I am not trying to sabotage anyone. If you don't optimize...it is not sustainable. This is not a way to run a stable organization.

Tom Griffiths: A friend of the school says it's important for us to be in turnaround mode ...and my sense is we are way beyond turnaround mode. I believe the schools are in good financial shape. We have known for a long time about Clarke. We thought it was a no-brainer to fix Clarke, but it was a lot of work. We actually evaluate our

projects before we undertake them. I won't listen to the claims that this friend of the schools is making.

Tom Diaz: We don't take for granted that SPED costs are uncontrollable. The vote on November 28th is an effort to control those. We know we have to act locally and we're not relying on some *deus ex machina* to do it. We've taken two good calculated risks for FY08 to get expenses under control. There is a lot of talk about accounting errors—you'll see in the report of the Appropriation Committee they reject accounting errors as major factors in our budget problems.

The motion passed 4-0.

C. Motion to stay in session to be adjourned at the discretion of the chairman
(Griffiths, Cohen).

The motion passed 4-0.