

Joint Commission of City Council and School Board
Minutes of Meeting held October 15, 2020
City Council Chambers

Present – Councilor Donald Austin (Interim Chair), Councilor Richard Michaud, School Board Chair Matthew Hanlon, School Board Vice-Chair Steve Potter

Also Present – Mayor Dana Hilliard, Superintendent of Schools Robert Gadomski

Meeting was called to order by interim chair Austin at 5:15 pm.

Motion made by Matthew Hanlon, seconded by Steve Potter to accept the minutes of the meeting held on July 1, 2020. Motion approved 3-0, Councilor Michaud abstained.

School Opening Update and Plans for Changes

Superintendent Gadomski discussed the current status of school operations in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. The district is currently in Phase 2 of its plan, meaning a limited number of students are attending school within the buildings – primarily those who have significant technological challenges with remote learning and those who require services that must be provided in person). It is likely that kindergarten students will begin to attend in person starting in early November, on a rotational basis, and significant planning has been done to ensure the safety of staff and students as this reintroduction begins.

Discussions are underway to consider how other segments of the student population can safely return to in-school learning. Those segments include, for example, Career-Technical students, First Grade students, and perhaps some specific course-level learning at the Middle and High Schools.

Superintendent Gadomski described a significant number of complexities involved in making these decisions, trying to balance the most effective learning environment with the absolute need for the safety and health of the students, staff, and community.

Phase 3 of the reopening plan has no timetable at this point. What this looks like is still being defined, and it will likely be different for each building, grade level, and types of courses and activities offered. One of the most serious challenges to further reopening is related to staffing. For teachers, it would only take a very small number (5 or more) to be absent from newly-reopened classrooms to cause a return to remote learning to happen. In a typical year, they could be temporarily replaced by substitute teachers, or students could be consolidated into other similar classrooms. Neither is an option in the current day environment. Custodial staffing is also a huge concern, as more students in the building means more cleaning of both high-touch areas and occupied spaces. The Facilities Director has described the need for as many as 10 new custodial staff to meet the demands of a reopened school district. There is also the concern about the requirement to self-quarantine if traveling outside of New England. This challenge applies to activities that may require travel as well as instances where students and their families, or staff, travel outside the local area. It is unclear how this situation can best be managed.

Mayor Hilliard and Councilors Austin and Michaud were unanimous in their support of the Superintendent and the School Board as they work through this complex process and make their decisions, and continue to encourage the open dialogue that has proven to be successful in the last several years.

FY 2020-2021 Budget Update

Mayor Hilliard stated that the overall City budget for the current fiscal year is tentatively in good shape, thanks in large part to the availability of the drive-up window used by residents while City Hall was closed. Councilor Austin agreed with that assessment, noting the Finance Committee has expressed concerns about the budgeting for the next fiscal year because of money diverted to COVID-19 related expenses at this time.

Superintendent Gadomski related that almost all of the money the District received under the CARES Act have been expended. Of note is that the District was required to allocate some of that funding to local private schools (Tri-City Academy) AND do the work of ordering their PPE and other related items. \$40-\$50,000 has been held back at this time in anticipation of additional PPE requirements as students return to the buildings. It was noted that the estimated costs of masks alone for returning students could cost as much as \$2,000 per day.

While still very early in the fiscal year, the school budget is holding it own at present. Some of the facility-level projects have been completed the District is being cautious about spending much of the one-time money received for this year.

One significant concern is the reduction in adequacy aid from the state of NH. This revenue line is \$312,000 less than anticipated because the state provided less aid that they advised would be coming when the budget was passed. This loss of revenue hits both the school budget and the city budget, especially at this time when the DRA (Division of Revenue Administration) is ready to set the tax rate for the city. The reduction in adequacy aid continues a trend seen over the last several years, and makes it very difficult for the school district to set a budget based on preliminary estimates that ultimately continue to be underfunded by the state.

Current expenses are difficult to determine at this early date. There could be some savings in the transportation line if nothing changes, and all expense lines are being closely monitored. Current FY expenses could dramatically increase, however, if students return to the buildings, if staff members required time off due to COVID-19 (either personal infection or the need to care for family), and for additional custodial services and PPE that may be required.

FY 2021-2022 Budget Forecast

It is very early in the budget process for the next fiscal year. In the school district, all administrators have been told to expect no increase in discretionary amounts for FY 2021-2022. Known impacts to that budget include an additional \$350,000 for the NH Retirement System, a possible additional \$150,000 for health insurance, and upwards of an additional \$400,000 in salaries and benefits, leading to approximately \$900,000 in additional known expenses for 2021-2022 that must be included. Also, of concern is the ventilation system at the Middle School that will require attention. Finally, there are many unknowns at this time related to the pandemic that may have to be accounted for. Superintendent Gadomski suggested some difficult decisions may be required.

All members acknowledged the challenges we face in discussing the next FY budget and understand that the issues are not isolated to Somersworth. Most other communities are facing similar challenges.

Schools as Community Centers

Mayor Hilliard discussed the role of the Licensing Board as it pertains to the policy to use the school facilities as community centers. That board has consistently supported the School Board and Superintendent in not allowing the use of school facilities at this time and will continue to do so unless both the schools and the city determine it is safe to do so.

Miscellaneous

The Mayor talked about continuing the past practice of holding joint workshops between the City Council and School Board related to budget. It is expected these will continue in some format, possibly by Zoom due to the large number of attendees. More details will be forthcoming.

City Council goal setting sessions will occur in January 2021, after which a joint goal setting meeting with the School Board will be scheduled.

Motion made by Matthew Hanlon, seconded by Steve Potter, to adjourn. Motion carried 4-0, meeting adjourned at 6:17 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Donald Austin
Interim Chair