

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL SCHOOL MEETING

MARCH 1, 1999

Moderator Freeman Allen called the Annual School Meeting to order at 8:45 p.m., immediately after the conclusion of the Town portion of Town Meeting. About 40 voters were present. Without objection, Moderator Allen dispensed with reading the whole Warning and proceeded to Article 1.

Article 1: To see if the voters of the Town School District will authorize the sum of \$519,012 to defray current expenses of the Town School District for the ensuing school year and to pay outstanding orders and obligations.

The Article was moved by Laureen Cox and seconded by Warren King.

Ms. Ford, School Board Chair, began with a review of the budget. Increases in the budget are due to:

- An increase in the time of the principal from half time to three quarters time;
- An increase in the time the administrative assistant works from 15 to 20 hours;
- A general 4% increase in the amount available for salaries above the current contracts.

The amount the Board expects to spend on general insurance will decrease. Ms. Ford said that it is pleasant to report a decrease in any expense since that is so rare.

Richard Collitt asked if there were any tuition students. Ms. Ford said there are three, all in the 6th grade and all from Hancock. The School receives a little more than \$5,000 per student in tuition reimbursement. This income does not show up as revenue in the 1998-99 budget since it was not anticipated, nor does it show in the 1999-2000 budget since it is not known a foregone conclusion that there will be any tuition students in that year.

Mr. Collitt asked what the Board's position is on tuition students. Ms. Ford said that the Board is willing to consider accepting tuition students if the class size and local student load allows. They have not been a problem, other than the typical work any new student is at first. The School would be unlikely to accept such students if it required hiring additional teachers, nor would it accept students that cost more to educate than the tuition the School receives. The Board is working on a policy to guide how the School deals with tuition students.

Gracile Lord asked why the newly hired aide was required. Ms. Ford said that the aide, Gwyneth Harris, works with an individual student in the K-1/preschool classroom.

Richard Collitt asked how the preschool program was going. Ms. Ford said that a letter was sent to all parents in Town asking if there was any interest, and there was a large response. If there is enough room (i.e., a small enough kindergarten class), the program will be offered again in the 1999-2000 school year.

Mr. Collitt asked if it was true that the preschool program in place this year was a trial program, but in order to continue with it there needs to be a vote. He noted that there is not specific proposal in the budget for this program. It has just been in without a specific Town vote to allow this program. Ms. Ford said that the program was done within the budget, without incurring additional expenses, so a specific vote to have a program is not required.

The Town does not have to vote on programs or curriculum, only on budget items. She said that the Board did a mailing to the Town last summer, describing the program and inviting voters to a meeting, which was held. She said that the Board wants to see how the children with pre-K experience do in Kindergarten before they ask the Town to commit to a long-term program that might encumber additional costs as the school population increases.

Susan Collitt asked how the School Board could say that the program does not affect the budget when it costs more than \$5,000.00 to educate each student. She said that even if the cost for pre-K were half the cost of a full-time student, it still would cost something to have the program. Susan Mock, the kindergarten teacher, spoke to this question. She said she suggested that the Board consider a pre-K program when the projected kindergarten enrollment was so low. Also, the research shows that children who go to pre-K do better when they get to kindergarten. Having better-prepared students is a tremendous benefit to the Town as a whole. Relating to costs, Ms. Mock said she reduced the amount of preparation time she spends in order to take care of the pre-K students. If there is a sudden influx of kindergartners, the pre-K classes might be split, with half going two days a week and the other half going the other two days (kindergarten is in session four days a week). The State Board of Education does not like to have more than twelve students in kindergarten under the supervision of one teacher.

Susan Collitt asked if the School would be reimbursed by the State for having the pre-K students. Ms. Ford said that kindergartners are reimbursed at 50% of the full Act 60 per-student rate, and pre-K students will be reimbursed at 44% (why 44% no one knows...). This will be based on the so-called ADL's (Average Daily Membership) over two years.

Susan Collitt asked how many students in the kindergarten went to pre-K. Ms. Ford said that this year none of the students were in a pre-K program, but the year before it was about one half, which is typical.

Gracile Lord asked how the reimbursement for pre-K students was written in the law—she was not sure if it was real (too good to be true). Ms. Ford said that the pre-K is part of the student aid formula in the law.

Willem Jewett said that the School Board began to consider a pre-K program due to the small kindergarten class for the 1998-99 school year. Ms. Ford agreed, saying that as of Town meeting there were no scheduled kindergartners. Mr. Jewett said that the pre-K was initiated to maintain teacher continuity—to continue to have Ms. Mock as a teacher. However, next year there will be eight kindergartners, so how many pre-K students will we be able to serve? Carol Ford said that the School Board is working on a policy to deal with this situation. She said that the kindergarten takes priority. When there might be limited slots, students might be admitted to pre-K on a lottery basis, for example. Ms. Ford reiterated that the pre-K program is a pilot program at this point, and the Board is not willing to propose a program that will have a direct financial impact yet.

Mr. Jewett commented that the pre-K program already has had an impact, since it led to keeping a teacher.

Gracile Lord asked why the school has to buy more manipulatives every year. Jane Phinney, the Principal, said that they wear out with use. Mr. Collitt asked what manipulatives are. Ms. Phinney explained that they are things like blocks and science equipment that allow the students hands on experience.

Eric Warren said that he had a concern about the possibility of limiting the number of pre-K students. If the Town decides that it wants to provide and pay for a pre-K program, then we need to be able to serve the people who want the program. He asked if it was possible or legal to refuse to serve one student when another student is refused a place.

Principal Phinney said that the kindergarten required a teacher, and the funds were in the budget for that position. So long as the pre-K program does not take funds to run, the Town does not have to vote on it. If the Town decided to take any and all who wanted pre-K, then there would have to be a budget, and therefore a vote—and there would be a vote, preceded by many meetings and a great deal of discussion.

Willem Jewett said that it might be that no vote is required to have the pre-K, but it seems in order to bring the issue before the Town. He said he would like to make a motion to call for a special vote on the issue. After a brief discussion with the Moderator, the Moderator ruled that the motion would be considered under the “Any other business proper to come before said meeting” portion of Town Meeting.

At this point Richard Kimler called the question, and was seconded.

The vote to end debate was in the affirmative on a voice vote.

The vote on the question was in the affirmative on a voice vote, with a few nos.

Article 2: To see if the voters on the Town School District will authorize the addition of \$2,400 to the Capital Improvement Fund, said amount to come from the FY98 unreserved fund balance.

The question was moved by Warren King, and seconded by Willem Jewett.

School Board Chair Carol Ford said that this fund was created with leftover funds from the building project. Since then the Board has warned for an additional \$2,400 per year to be added to the fund. These monies cannot be spent without an explicit vote of the Town.

Richard Collitt recalled that at a previous Annual Meeting the Board had been more ambivalent about adding money to the fund. He asked if the Board supported this article this year. Ms. Ford said that the Board supports the article in years when the money comes from a surplus (positive fund balance due to unanticipated income, for example the payment last year from Middlebury College for their use of the School building for the summer day care project). When the payment to the fund has to come from new tax money the Board is less supportive. Ms. Ford said an example of the use of the fund is the approximately \$7,000.00 used last year to repair the roof.

Richard Kimler asked what would happen to the money if the voters defeated this issue. Ms. Ford said that the amount would be added to the fund balance as shown on page 45 of the Town Report.

At this point Richard Kimler called the question and was seconded, and the vote to end debate was in the affirmative.

The voice vote to adopt the article was also in the affirmative, with a few nos.

Article 3: To see if the voters on the Town School District will authorize an amount of money not to exceed \$4,000 to purchase tables for the school lunch room, said amount to come from the FY98 unreserved fund balance.

The article was moved by Barbara King, and seconded by Richard Kimler.

School Board Chair Carol Ford began the discussion by explaining that the School had started a hot lunch program about two and one half years ago. The food is prepared in the kitchen, but taken to the classrooms to be eaten. The article provides funds to purchase tables with built in chairs so that the food can be served in the gym. There will be enough seating for about sixty.

William Ford asked if the tables can be rolled into the storage room behind the gym. Principal Phinney said that they would fit there.

Barbara King asked if the tables/chairs were adult or child sized. Ms. Phinney said that they were child sized.

Michael Seligman asked if the tables could be used for other purposes. Ms. Phinney said that there were other uses, but did not elaborate on what those uses might be.

At this point Richard Kimler called the question, and was seconded.

The voice vote to end debate was in the affirmative.

The voice vote to adopt the article was also in the affirmative.

Article 4: To see if the voters on the Town School District will authorize the addition of \$500 to support the Ripton Community Garden, said amount to come from the FY98 unreserved fund balance.

The article was moved by Richard Kimler, and seconded by Deborah Price.

William Ford asked what the money was to be used for. Bonnie DeGray, former School Board member (recently resigned) said that the money was to have someone to help train the teachers and get information to them regarding the curricular and other uses of a community garden. Also, the person would oversee the garden during the summer.

Richard Collitt said that he did not think that the garden had anything to do with the School—what did the garden have to do with education? He also said that he did not believe that the garden was that widely supported, since people who want to garden have their own, and do not want to spend their summer in someone else's. He said the community garden idea is more of an urban thing. He said that his greatest concern is what happened up north in Barnet. Their school was so overrun with mice that it had to be closed so that it could be fumigated. In addition, the dry wall had to be removed so that the soiled insulation could be removed. They believe that it was the proximity of the garden to the school that encouraged the mice to move into the school. Since this is a hazard that the school should not have to face, the garden should at least be moved further from the building.

Eric Warren asked how the curriculum was structured to use the garden. Ms. Ford said that there was no actual relationship between the garden and the curriculum, but some use is made of it. There could be a tie-in to biology and botany. Gwyneth Harris, a teacher's aide at the school, said that there was a great deal of student interests in the garden. The garden is used to help teach math, science, cooperation, sharing, and so on. Many things can be observed in the garden. Ms. Harris added that the answer to the question of what is to be the use of the money might be to have outside experts evaluate our program, or to send people to other community garden sites to learn from their programs.

Susan Mock said that last fall she observed seven children in the garden who had never seen vegetables in their home. These were the first vegetables they had seen growing, or had eaten fresh.

Michael Beardsley said that in the summer children are with their families, doing family things. The garden could be like a playground in a positive sense, a place where children could learn the difference between good choices and bad ones. Maybe the money could be spent to hire a person to control the participants so that there was supervision for the participants.

William Ford said that he had trouble supporting the expenditures of funds because there has been a dearth of volunteer participants in the gardens. Volunteers run other programs like recycling, the fire department, first response, for example. He said he would rather see the community garden stay volunteer.

Bonnie DeGray said that she believes that the garden is an effective teaching tool, but it takes a person with time to keep it active through the summer. She said that the garden is more effective than a computer, even though it costs much less.

Michael Seligman asked if the garden would fold if this article failed. Bonnie DeGray said that the garden is there, and would probably continue, but it could be more of a part of the Town and the School if there was money to help it along.

Willem Jewett said that he did not doubt that the garden can be a teaching tool, but he sees no specific plan, only some vague suggestions. He would like a better plan in place—a concrete plan is needed. Carol Ford said that one of the suggested uses of the garden is to help develop such a plan.

Lewis Burrige asked whether there were any insurance and liability issues that needed to be considered. Carol Ford said that there is summer coverage by the insurance company, and there is supervision when the children are working at the school.

Eric Warren said that he felt that it made sense to develop a curriculum for the garden. He said that if we agree to pay \$4000 for tables, an investment of \$500 for the community garden seems reasonable.

Deborah Price (the principal of Beeman Academy in New Haven) said that she had had some experience with community gardens. She said that in her experience there are two issues. Firstly, the responsibility needs to be on members of the community, so that there is less pressure on the school staff to weed the garden, and so on. Secondly, there needs to be 100% commitment from the teachers so that the garden can be integrated into the curriculum. She said that the proposal this evening is rather fuzzy, which is why there is some confusion in the

meeting. If there were a plan for the voters to react to it would be better. She also said that the school in Barnet had recently been condemned because of a mouse infestation, and one of the leading theories is that it was the garden, located near the school, that was the source of the mice in the first place. She suggested that it might make sense to make sure that the garden is located far enough away from the school to make sure this didn't happen.

Gracile Lord asked how many children worked in the garden. Susan Mock said that some times there were two or three, sometimes there were eight to ten. Mrs. Lord asked how a garden could be a part of the curriculum in Ripton, since we have such a short growing season—the garden is planted just before the children leave for the summer, and is lost to frost a few weeks after they get back in the fall.

Justine Logan said that the garden could be very useful in teaching environmental issues—and all children need to learn about the environment.

Mia Allen said that there are many kids who have too little to do in the summer. The garden could be integrated into their summer activities. They might be able to sell the produce at a farm stand or at the farmer's market, and make a little money and gain some small business experience.

Michael Beardsley said that he has three children who might be able to benefit from the garden. He said there needs to be adult supervision, however. We might need to have a person paid to be on scene to make sure that the children are safe. Volunteers are not accountable in the same way that a paid person is.

Barbara King said that Joseph Keefer, a highly respected environmentalist and educator, who has a garden/school curriculum, is coming in April. His advice will be very useful to this process.

Michael Seligman suggested that the Board look into a community garden grant. Principal Phinney said that she was looking into it.

Alison Joseph said that she wished there were a plan for the use of the money that the voters could react to. She said that last summer Bonnie DeGray was paid—was this the plan this year? Ms. DeGray said that the purpose of the money is to set up a long-term plan for the community garden. There is no plan because no volunteer had had the time to do the kind of planning required.

Cathy Braun said that the fire department members volunteer tens to hundreds of hours each year. If people feel passionately about the garden, they will volunteer the time. If there are not enough volunteers then perhaps there should be no garden.

At this point Michael Seligman moved the question, and was seconded.

The vote to end debate was in the affirmative on a voice vote.

A paper ballot was called for and allowed by the Moderator. The paper ballots being cast and counted, the article passed 20-19.

Article 5: To transact any other business proper to come before said meeting.

Willem Jewett opened this non-binding discussion with a discussion regarding the pre-Kindergarten program. He said that the Board ought to bring this question to the Town for a vote.

Mr. Ford said that he had a concern over micro-management. He said that the Town has the authority to vote on how much money the School spends, but cannot determine exactly how it is spent. Mr. Jewett responded that if the funds for the pre-K are in the budget, the issue will come before the voters.

Carol Ford said that policy formulation is an open and ongoing process. Mr. Baroz said that the Supervisory District will help with developing any policy regarding pre-K. Principal Phinney said that there is a committee dealing with these issues.

Mr. Geissler asked how many teachers there are at the School. Carol Ford said that there are three and one half, although the half-time teacher is moving to 60% time. Mr. Geissler said that if we adopt a pre-K class, at some point there will be increased costs.

Willem Jewett said that it is hard to know how the Town feels about this issue, and that most people cannot attend Board meetings to help shape policy. He repeated that the issue needs to come before the Town.

Eric Warren said that this important issue that will determine who will educate our children needs to come back to the Town since it is such a big issue.

Laureen Cox said that Town Meeting is not the forum to grapple with this sort of issue. Town Meeting is a place to vote a budget, not to meet as a committee.

Michael Seligman suggested that we discuss this issue in another forum. Perhaps a special School Board meeting could be held, properly warned and so on, where this issue could be discussed. There was such a meeting last year—why not another? Carol Ford said that the cost of mailing a letter to everyone in Town is very expensive, and the attendance is not usually particularly good.

Willem Jewett said that a special meeting on the pre-K issue avoids the purpose of Town Meeting, which is to have the voters signify by a vote that they agree with the direction the School Board is taking.

Moderator Allen said that he would admit a motion to have a vote to have a public meeting. If at that meeting there are concerns raised, then there could be a Town Meeting.

Mr. Burrige said that discussion about this issue would have to be at a well-planned and warned meeting. It could not be held at a regular Board meeting because not enough people would be aware that the discussion was going on.

Alison Joseph noted that the current pre-K program could not be evaluated until after next year's Town Meeting, since it has not been in operation long enough to see how it is working. Carol Ford said that is true, that we do not know enough about how things are working yet.

Mr. Jewett said that he wants the process to be: a vote first, then a program, rather than the other way around, when we discover that we have a program, and then vote to spend money on it. He said that it is important that voters be in control of establishing a new program such as a pre-K.

The question was raised as to whether or not there was a motion on the floor. The motion is that there be a vote to have a pre-K program or not at the next Town Meeting.

Principal Phinney said that she felt that the Town should not vote on programs; the Board should make program decisions. The Board has the job to respond to the needs of the Town, and if the Town expresses its concerns to the Board the Board will respond.

Gwynneth Harris said that it should not matter the nature of the meeting so long as there is input from the Town.

Mr. Ford said that the reason that the discussion regarding the community garden took so long is because it was warned separately. We could isolate each item in the budget as with the community garden and the meeting would take forever. Ms. Price agreed, saying that she is concerned over the idea of a line-by-line vote on the budget—where would it stop? The School Directors are responsible for running the school, and they need to be trusted.

Mr. Geissler said that the pre-k is not required by the state, and since we are in effect starting a new grade this ought to involve a vote of the Town.

At this point Mr. Seligman called the question, and was seconded.

The vote was 17 in the affirmative and 16 in the negative by a show of hands.

The meeting adjourned after this vote.