

**8 TOWN REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT PLANNING BOARD
MEETING MINUTES**

Wednesday, November 16, 2022

5 p.m.

Remote attendance only via Zoom

Zoom coordinates below*

1. Call to Order

The Zoom meeting with remote attendance only was called to order by Lucy Prashker at 5:02 p.m. The following members were present as confirmed by Lucy Prashker, Chair by roll call:

Alford: Lucy Prashker, Charles Ketchen, Carl Stewart (joined at 5:27pm)

Egremont: George McGurn

Great Barrington: Deb Phillips, Peter Taylor, Stephen Bannon

Monterey: Jonathan Sylbert, Donald Coburn

New Marlborough: Tara White, Susan Smith

Sheffield: Bonnie Silvers, Nadine Hawver, Colin Smith

Stockbridge: Patrick White, Michael Canales

West Stockbridge: Andy Potter

RSDPB members absent:

Patrick White, Michael Canales, Thomas Berkel, Marie Ryan

Previous RSDPB Members present: Laura Rodriguez, Jane Burke, Danile Kelly,

Others Webinar Panelists Present:

SBRSD Superintendent Beth Regulbuto

BHRSD Superintendent Peter Dillon

Project Manager: H. Jake Eberwein

Facilitator: Simon Holzapfel

RSDPB Consultants: Frank Cote

Sheffield Advisory Representative: Julie Hannum

2. Approval of minutes of 9.28.2022 and 10.25.2022

A motion to approve the draft minutes of 9.28.2022 was made by Tara White, seconded by Charles Ketchen. Bonnie Silvers stated there were a few minor corrections to be made. There

being no further discussion, it was unanimously voted

VOTED to approve the minutes of 9.28.2022 with minor corrections noted by roll call vote.

The draft minutes of 10.25.2022 were tabled until the next meeting.

3. Facilitated Discussion with Simon Holzapfel concerning merger discussion dynamics

Mr. Eberwein introduced Mr. Holzapfel to the board. Mr. Holzapfel briefly discussed his personal, educational and professional background as well as the guidelines of the meeting.

Mr. Holzapfel started by asking attendees to respond to several questions in order to gauge the temperature of the group. Ms. Prashker suggested it would be helpful if Mr. Holzapfel read the board's motion, as approved on 9/28/2022, to hold this facilitated discussion, whereupon the motion, as adopted, was read:

VOTED to engage an outsider facilitator to assist the board in helping to examine the difficult dynamic that interferes with our ability to make progress.

Mr. Holzapfel asked the question of how the board could surface issues that have been impeding the process of the group.

Mr. Potter feels the situation is simple. Everyone just needs to be respectful. He encouraged everyone to think and formulate their thoughts before going forward.

Mr. Coburn stated issues have not been impeding the progress of the group at all and the board has been able to continue to discuss and vote on matters, and move forward. He stated the problem is folks who are threatening to leave the group if they don't get their way.

Mr. Holzapfel asked the board members to consider the word "threatening".

Ms. Silvers stated she is one of the people Mr. Coburn is addressing with his statement. She believes that Mr. Coburn has gotten to the heart of the issue the board is facing around misinterpretation of people who entered the process open-minded, but feel there are answers that she and others still don't have. She does not feel this meeting will help to get her those answers.

Ms. White stated she wants to say something at times, but can't because (she believes) it would offend someone. If something is said, it can be taken as extreme criticism, which makes people get angry. People should be able to disagree and talk about what is wrong.

Ms. Smith stated she was offended by the letter written by the SBRSD school committee to the board. She did feel it was threatening and believes there has been and is always ample time to discuss the issues. Ms. Smith stated it is going to be hard to move ahead if members of the

SBRSD school committee are not willing to participate. Ms. Smith stated she is frustrated and disappointed.

Ms. Burke stated that the quality of listening, and inclusion of the community and conversation has been stilted since day one. The board was supposed to be speaking as one body and the hostility she has experienced for bringing in other ideas has been surprising to her. She stated ideas should be considered rather than viewed as hostile if they don't match what the consulting team or other people find acceptable. She doesn't feel the board has made the appropriate outreach to hear from the constituents.

Mr. McGurn stated "other" is a term that led to the motion requesting this meeting. He offered that the SBRSD letter for a pause was ignored, leading some people to feel like the "other". He believes there are two options: we hear you (SBRSD concerns) and we will pause and speak more with your many stakeholders (tax payers, community, parents), or we can choose not to pause and say the planning board has a life of its own. He feels it (the current conflict) is all about a building and agrees with Ms. Burke.

Mr. Smith stated he interpreted the SBRSD letter as a threat. People can have different points of view and experiences, but should be held equal in order to reach a common goal. He stated the democratic process has to be followed and if the majority wants to go in a particular direction, that is the way you go. Mr. Smith stated he is not interested in slowing down.

Ms. Kelly stated she has directed many people to the 8towns.org website for correct information. She stated no SBRSD school committee closed-door conversations have been held and if people do not feel prepared or don't have enough answers, it is okay to take a pause.

Ms. Smith stated the SBRSD meeting, in which Ms. Burke stated she contacted counsel regarding withdrawing from the RSDPB process, was not on the school committee agenda. Ms. Smith feels it is a defeatist approach and she would have been in attendance if she knew the subject was being brought up.

Ms. Silvers stated many points being made by SBRSD are not being addressed and she feels there is discord and animosity (among the board). She stated the SBRSD letter was not aimed at pulling out of the RSDPB; it was aimed at being heard and looking at specific issues regarding building a new high school. Ms. Silvers stated the economic impact is concerning for SBRSD communities and does not feel she has the necessary information available to her to discuss it with SBRSD constituents. She stated the amount of misinformation out in the communities is growing.

Ms. Burke stated the reason for the (SBRSD school committee's request for a) pause has to do with the unavailability of teachers and administrators, who are very busy. She believes if a quality discussion is to be had, it needs to be spread out with fewer meetings or in a different time period. The pause was to have a pace that is livable.

Mr. Potter stated the key is to understand the process is governed by Massachusetts General Law. Ultimately, under MGL, the goal is to have a plan to present to our constituents for their decision at town meetings. If a majority of the board chooses to not place something on the warrant or not, it is a majority process.

Ms. Phillips stated she heard rage at a SBRSD school committee meeting and discussions (among SBRSD school committee members) regarding withholding of funds and slowing the (RSDPB) process. She stated what she heard at those meetings and what she hears at the RSDPB meetings feels very disjointed. Ms. Phillips asked for clarification of what questions SBRSD school committee members believe are unanswered. She asked the SBRSD members, “whose information will you trust if you don't trust the information that is coming from the RSDPB?”

Mr. Coburn stated there is an overarching point that members have lost sight of. A process was agreed to and voted on. He stated there is no need for a pause, but instead encourages continued discussion within the (topic) context at subsequent meetings.

Ms. Prashker suggested that this discussion should be around “the difficult dynamic that interferes with our ability to make progress,” as stated in the motion. Ms. Prashker stated part of the dynamic is people are not following the rules that were laid out at the beginning of the meeting, which includes speaking personally, being respectful, and not assuming anyone’s motivation/intention. She stated that all of those who speak at our meetings are heard. She believes that minority views have been debated, probed, and challenged, as have the views of the majority. Ms. Prashker stated the members should be talking about a way to move forward productively, as a group, if we are going to make progress. She suggested that members stick to the facts and try to have a productive conversation on how to move forward in the absence of unanimity.

Mr. Taylor stated it is important to speak to the dimensions of the process. He stated there were multiple opportunities to surface the issues at the full board and subcommittee levels. The process and transparency are both strong at full board meetings and in the subcommittee meetings.

Mr. Stewart asked for clarification and examples of misinformation being stated in the community. Members should not just state that there is misinformation without stating what that misinformation is. He asked Ms. Silvers for an example of the misinformation she mentioned.

Ms. Silvers stated the following misinformation: the SBRSD school committee wanted to drop out and completely stop the process; misinformation about members of the SBRSD administration and staff; and misinformation about attitudes towards working towards a positive resolution and outcome.

Mr. Sylbert stated the lesson for tonight should be how to work both in the minority and majority. Both sides need to behave in the same way and treat the process and each other with the same respect. He stated this is a democratic process. If members wanted the process slowed down, a proposal should have been submitted and a motion made. The majority and the minority are responsible for presenting positive proposals to the board that can be considered by the board, and, following that consideration, to accept the result. If people want to slow down the process, they should make a proposal to do that that can then be considered by the board and voted on. What doesn't work is when someone does not put forth a proposal and instead uses negative tactics to delay the process. That is not productive. He wants to hear everyone's concerns and all positive proposals that are made. If people leave the facilitated meeting feeling, thinking and behaving the same way they did prior to the meeting, nothing has been accomplished. Mr. Sylbert stated board members' ideas need to be respected regardless if they are the minority or majority. If you are trying to stop the process because you don't like a decision that the majority has made, that is not being a responsible board member. If you don't like the process and can't do your part and accept majority votes, you should not be on the board, and we should find people who do believe in the process.

Ms. Rodriguez stated she appreciated what everyone has said, in particular Mr. Potter's and Ms. Phillips' framing of the charge of the board and Mass law. She stated important views have resurfaced at the meeting but she is still not hearing anyone address the difficult dynamic that she has referred to in the past. It is a dynamic that she can't put her finger on because she has not been in the community long enough. It is an old dynamic from long ago that is getting in the way of these discussions.

Ms. Smith read aloud a section of the SBRSD school committee September letter that stated:

Again, it is unfortunate; however, at this point we are struggling as we consider withdrawing from this process unless we can take a pause, stop being driven (in our view) by the MSBA's deadlines, etc.

She stated that she takes exception to Ms. Silvers' statement that the SBRSD never considered withdrawing, as the threat was stated clearly in the letter.

Mr. Smith stated he appreciated and agreed with Mr. Sylbert's comments. He stated the purpose of this meeting is to be able to hear each other and take a different approach in future meetings, but is not sure that is working.

Ms. Hawver stated she feels she has listened to all opinions at each meeting and if she disagreed, she did not say anything, absorbed what was said, and thought about it during and after the meeting. She stated she always tried to be respectful even when she is wounded deeply by words from board members. She stated her constituents are the same constituents of the SBRSD, and she is a selectperson in the largest town (Sheffield), that pays the largest share of the (SBRSD) school budget, and she works tirelessly to get to the right solution. She stated she was stunned that RSDPB members would say they don't have answers to questions.

She doesn't know what those questions are. We keep asking for the questions and they don't come forward.

Mr. Taylor said that in terms of a deliverable, he hopes that members will consider acting differently. He said Mr. Sylbert spoke eloquently about the democratic process and the need to bring alternatives to the floor within our established process. He stated that as a matter of human nature, it is harder to build things up than to tear things down, and we all need to resist that temptation. He said Mr. Sylbert gave us a path for how to act going forward.

Mr. Holzapfel wondered what an increased level of candor or respect looked like to the group.

Ms. Burke stated the RSDPB Chair had demonstrated the way that the Chair addressed some things Ms. Burke has done in off-putting comments. She said that the problem was there is no curiosity about why the minority holds the views they do. She said there was a need for further conversation. She said the structure of communication was stiled. She stated she wrote to Mr. Eberwein with concerns, and she did receive replies. She stated the agendas are too full and it is impossible for certain discussions to be had adequately. Ms. Burke stated a previous meeting was adjourned before she could have a discussion about pausing the process. She feels the conversations about the value of education, the meaning of it to the respective towns, and the opportunities for creative solutions have not happened with the communities. She said she does not hold much hope for the group. She said she disagreed with the idea that someone who disagrees had to then agree in the end with the majority.

Ms. Silvers stated she is quite disappointed with the suggestions of Mr. Sylbert that if a member disagrees with the minority, they should leave the board. She added that she is leaving this meeting more disappointed, upset and hurt than when she entered the meeting.

Mr. Sylbert stated that it is really difficult to say something clearly and then have it distorted. He said he takes offense at that. He said he never said that if a member disagrees with a position of the majority, they should resign. He said that all members should bring forward all proposals they have and let them be considered by the board, and if you cannot work within the democratic process in support of the mission, you should resign. He repeated that he did not say people that disagree with each other should resign.

Ms. Silvers thanked Mr. Sylbert for that clarification.

Ms. Smith stated if someone has a position on an issue, they should present the reasons why so it provides for more understanding to the other members.

Following the conclusion of the facilitated discussion, Ms. Prashker acknowledged and thanked those members that have spent the last two and a half years on the RSDPB, but are now rotating off because they are no longer on a school committee. She recognized their contribution and effort. Ms. Prashker acknowledged the members leaving the board: Danile Kelly, Egremont; Jane Burke, New Marlborough; Laura Rodriguez, Monterey; Molly Thomas,

West Stockbridge and Sean Stephen, Stockbridge. She extended to those members a heartfelt thanks from the full board for their service on the board and in other positions of public service in South County.

4. Public Comments

Ms. Gregory stated the committee has spent a lot of private and public monies that were generously donated in two and a half years. Any delay (pause) would have cost a lot of money and could have forfeited some of the use of the money. She stated she has worked with the Chair in the private sector for ten years and she has always been professional and respectful. Ms. Gregory stated she resented the comments that cast the Chair in an unprofessional light.

5. Adjourn

A motion to adjourn was made by Andy Potter and seconded by Tara White. There being no further discussion, it was unanimously

VOTED to adjourn by roll call vote at 7:03 p.m

Submitted by:

Christine Kelly, RSDPB Recorder

Approved: 1.4.2023