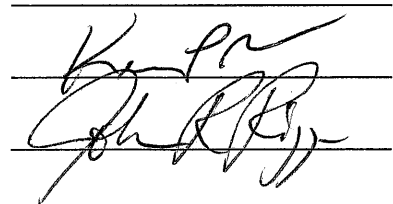


BUCKLAND BOARD OF SELECTMEN
MEETING MINUTES
April 9, 2015, 7:00 p.m.
Buckland Town Hall

Cheryl L. Dukes

Kevin P. Fox

John R. Riggan



Attendees: Cheryl L. Dukes, Kevin Fox, Rob Riggan, Ben Bosco (*Shelburne Falls Independent News*), Diane Broncaccio (*The Recorder*), MTRSD Superintendent Michael Buoniconti, Cynthia Caparaso, School Committee Representative Glenn Cardinal, Marilyn Kelsey, MTRSD Business Manager Michael Kociela, Andrea Llamas

Kevin opened the meeting at 7:03 p.m..

1. Appointment

Superintendent, Business Manger, Buckland School Committee Representatives Mohawk Trail Regional School District - Discussion of Rowe Article to join the District: Rob asked about the effect on the EQV of the District as Rowe was asked to leave the District in the past due to the effect on the EQV. Wouldn't we have the same effect if we let Rowe back in? Superintendent Buoniconti stated that the District can't know how it would be going forward but had asked the Business Manger to go back ten years, and it shows there would have been an additional \$300,000 in Chapter 70 money to the District. Business Manager Kociela commented that the District doesn't get more Chapter 70 money over foundation due to the number of students, but the District will set new numbers through minimum contributions— that will lower all the other Towns when Rowe joins. The first year we will get their Chapter 70 then it will be set going forward. Rob commented that he didn't think there would be any gain. The Superintendent responded that that was wrong – based on their calculations over the past ten years— only talking about Chapter 70, not looking at all other calculations... Michael Kociela stated that the District would gain a small amount of money over the years.

Rob asked if we didn't also have to take into account that this added another Town to the Regional Agreement. Stated that this wasn't about the kids— they have done fine. Also what about Regional Transportation – say on average we get reimbursed 50%, if the cost for Rowe is \$100,000 then doesn't the District now have to pick up the additional \$50,000? The Superintendent said that looking at the last ten years there would be a net benefit to the District.

Kevin stated that the original handout had shown there would be a gain of \$90,000 now the new sheet shows a gain of \$30,000? The Superintendent responded that it was an average. Kevin asked how we got from \$90,000 to \$30,000? The Business Manager stated that each year was different – that they fluctuated from positive to negative. Cheryl asked if that fluctuation was due to the legislature. The Superintendent responded it was more due to the minimum contribution fluctuations. Cheryl asked how then we would have the knowledge to look forward at the formula— in our current climate. The Superintendent responded that Chapter 70 has been flat. The minimum contribution has been the largest cause of the fluctuations. The Business Manager stated that the minimum contribution levels have been the most unstable, unpredictable indicator.

Rob stated that he was at the meeting the first night the School Committee discussed the pre-school. What concerns him is whether we can provide all these services – we are as close as we have ever been to the levy limit without an override. Rob stated that he senses there is a total lack of communication between the District and the Town. He stated that we lack the same tax base we had back in 1967 when the agreement with the District was set. The Superintendent stated that Dena was looking at the budget numbers, but that they couldn't find them easily on the DOR website. She was looking at five years of the Town's budget. Glenn stated that they wanted to compare the percentage of the school budget to the total Town budget.

Kevin said he felt this was somewhat of a self-inflicted wound. We have too many schools and too few kids. The Superintendent stated that aside from the structural issue, the percent of the Town budget to school budget hasn't changed much. Andrea stated that you had to be careful that you were comparing everything – the percentages don't always show everything that is removed to lower the budget (below the levy). Cheryl stated that the school mandate is to educate the kids in town, but the Town also has a mandate for other services. The school has a different reality and the towns have no control over the whole way of doing things in the school— that it is separate from what the town is doing which we have control over. What she is saying is that the schools are their own "municipality" that we (the towns) are assessed and pay for –mandated to pay for, but the flex in the system is that we have to make cuts in other services to pay into this separate entity that serves only one portion of the constituency.

Rob stated that the more we cut town departments budgets to keep taxes down, the lower the free cash goes as well. The impact is that free cash falls dangerously low. Where we see the lack of communication is that the school doesn't see the impact on the overall budget. Glenn stated that they want to see the budget and see where it will end up so they can communicate with the Town. The Superintendent said that we need to do something different if what we are doing is not working. Kevin would like to know at what point does school closure come up. The Superintendent said that it is a Regional Agreement issue. He stated that the Long Range Planning Committee didn't come back with that recommendation. Kevin stated that he is astounded that the Superintendent can say that. Nine years ago the first Long Range Planning Committee came back with that recommendation and it's now worse and this one didn't? Kevin asked why the School Committee isn't putting forth a plan to close schools. He stated that there is no way out of this, that there is no more squeezing of the budget to do.

Rob started that depopulation is happening in our region. He can see if we go on like this we could have towns go bankrupt. We need to look at reorganizing. Kevin stated that it frustrates him that both the towns and the school are suffering for lack of funds. Glenn asked the Board what they thought the best way to orchestrate that might be. Kevin stated that it needs to come from the School Committee – for the best interest of district and the kids. Rob stated that he understood the issue with Heath – that it is an emotional thing. Kevin believes there are so few kids and parents there that there is too much weight given to that feeling. The Superintendent stated that they tried to do this in the past and that they lost on a vote of 6 to 2. Kevin stated that there was no trust, the articles were too vague. No plan was put forth and so each town was unsure what the vote meant.

Rob commented that they can't look to School Choice for the answer. The Superintendent stated that for capacity they need 1250 to 1300 kids. Rob said we need to rethink how the region exists – maybe form five to three school "mini regions." There needs to be a reconfiguration with the High School at the heart. Rob questioned how much longer we could do this. The Superintendent stated "you think the School Committee doesn't understand the scope of your pain?" Kevin stated that he thinks they do, but that the numbers don't show everything. Superintendent Buoniconti stated there needs to be more exchange of data with the School Committee.

Kevin asked how bringing in the Town of Rowe to the District affects Buckland? It will dilute our Town vote at the School Committee level and the Town Meeting level for budgets. Glenn stated that we have been leaving money on the table for the last ten years. Kevin stated that we have a regional agreement with eight towns, now we want to add a ninth. He stated he has heard we are the largest district in the state and now we want to make it larger.

Kevin asked about the current capital costs on the budget and if Rowe will have to help pay for them? The Superintendent said he would have to look into that. He has spoken to the chair in Rowe about this going forward. Kevin asked specifically about these – for the next ten years? Michael Kociela said no, not these. Kevin asked if there isn't a way to negotiate on the tuition for Rowe. The Superintendent stated that it means opening the Regional Agreement. Kevin asked that if this is going to cost Rowe \$61,824 as stated on the sheets, why would they want to do this.

Kevin said he had a couple of questions on the pre-school – why are we rushing this? At the School Committee meeting where waiting a year was suggested, no one seemed adverse to that – to take a step back and study it. The Superintendent stated that he thinks it is a great idea and that it will save SPED costs. He is looking at the longevity of the program over time – from a multi-year stand point. 75% of the district kids go to Mohawk Schools – about 200 students we could attract back to the schools. Rob asked if anyone had spoken to the parents that send their kids to other schools? Not enough is known yet – only using Rowe as a model. The Superintendent responded that there is some data. There are about thirty pre-schoolers now – there are a total of fifty signing up right now.

Kevin asked if the original proposal was still in place to open up seats to other towns. The Superintendent stated that if there were open seats other students from other towns could come, but they would have to pay tuition. Kevin asked if there was any type of policy drafted on this. Glenn stated that they had had discussions on this. Kevin asked what the proposed budget of \$220,000 is based on if no defined limits or policy. The Superintendent stated that the principals will have to make that call, but that the District would not come back to the towns— they would operate on their existing budget. Kevin asked how the assessments were determined. Was it based on the Regional Agreement? Has it been assessed to Hawlemont? The Superintendent said no, Hawlemont is not a part of this – they split it between elementary and secondary. The Business Manager stated that they built it into the elementary level of the schools' budgets using only what each principals needs were.

Rob stated that the assumption is that the kids enrolled in pre-school will stay in District for Kindergarten using only Rowe as a model. Superintendent Buoniconti said we saw 75 to 90% of those who came stay. Andrea asked if they knew how many would have come anyway. The Superintendent stated they didn't know – except for the out-of-district students, maybe.

Kevin said that the Selectmen wanted to allow residents the chance to vote on the pre-K proposal so they might break it out into a separate article. The Superintendent stated that according to his legal opinion the Town can't offer two separated budgets. Business Manger Michael Kociela stated that if the Town takes it out and then votes down the pre-K proposal, that equals a no vote on the whole budget. Cheryl commented that now she's being asked to pay for it outside of the Regional Agreement. The Business Manager stated that it has been made very clear how much it costs. Kevin agreed, but stated that we still don't know how much each Town is responsible for. Michael Kociela responded that it is not broken out that way and it would be up to the School Committee. Kevin stated that he is only asking to know how much it will cost each town. Rob commented that by rolling it in to the budget, the District has made it easier to vote in pre-K – either that or you have to vote the whole budget down. Glenn stated that it wasn't planned that way, not like “here's the plan – sweep it under the rug.” Rob said not saying they did, but the reality is that is what happened and that is the effect. By the way it has been presented and built into the budget, they

have made it much harder to have a discussion about it – not really fair. Kevin stated that the reason to have it separate was to get to know what the impact would be of what they were voting on.

Cheryl stated that a lot of what the problem with this *was* the process. Buckland has two elected representatives, and rather than a discussion it got voted on at the School Committee level and then rolled into the budget. There was no opportunity for the rest of the Town to have any conversation about it. Rob stated he also felt they weren't listened to when they came to the School Committee meeting and asked this to be put off for discussion. Cheryl commented that this speaks to the whole issue. She stated she is not against pre-K, but if we are going to add it to the District and go from private to public pay – folks haven't had input on this – it comes back to process. Glenn commented that he thinks having a separate warrant article would address this. Cheryl asked what the hurry was? Why not evaluate and get all the answers before implementing? Glenn said they wanted to move to capture all of the available kids this year.

Kevin asked what's the worst that could happen? The towns could vote two articles and arrive at one place – is the State going to come in? When things are rushed, there is inherent skepticism. People's backs go up – he's not saying it won't pass or that he is against it. Cheryl believes there should be a proposal that comes forward that when questions come up, those questions can get answered. Rob stated that this raises the communications about finances. Shelburne wasn't prepared for the numbers and is now on the ropes. The Superintendent stated to Cheryl that she speaks very eloquently on process, but that the School Committee doesn't feel they were overstepping – this wasn't done in a deliberate way. Cheryl responded that people have come up to them— you have to deal with people that come up to you. Glenn commented that since the program was already in place, they felt it was within their scope to offer it free. Cheryl stated that it is not “free” –just a question of who pays.

The Superintendent stated that only the morning session is free – if they want all day, they will have to pay for the afternoon session. He hopes that the increase in tuition would help to cover some of the new costs. Kevin asked if the fees cover the cost in the current operation. The Business Manger says no, but we have to cover SPED kids now – and we have a sliding scale for payments. Kevin asked then what makes them think this would cover all the new costs. The Superintendent acknowledged it wouldn't cover all of them. Rob stated that this is a communication and trust issue – do we trust the opinion we are getting from the District as it differs from ours. The Superintendent responded that it is not about trust – it's a communication issue, maybe. Kevin stated that he is debating on what to recommend or not. It would be helpful to know how much this is costing us. He doesn't see getting the number as a legal issue. Need to have it so that when questions come up, the Board has an answer.

Cynthia Caparaso, a Buckland Resident, stated she is a pre-school teacher in Springfield. She asked the Superintendent if there is pre-K in all the District schools. He said yes, in all but Sanderson. Then she asked what the SPED percentage is. The Superintendent said about 18%. Cynthia asked if it was a 2 ½ hour program, and the Superintendent answered it was 3 hours. She asked how much do people currently pay. The Superintendent answered that it was regularly \$4 per hour, \$3 if you qualify for reduced price lunch and \$2 if you qualify for free lunch. Cynthia asked if it was offered all day. The Superintendent responded that it is only full day at Buckland-Shelburne Elementary. She asked how many classrooms are there. He answered two at Buckland-Shelburne, one in Colrain and a Pre-K/K at Heath. Cynthia stated that she loved pre-school, that she works in pre-K, but with what she is hearing being said, she feels the District needs to come in with all the answers at Town Meeting.

Marilyn Kelsey stated that in 2008 an override went through all the Towns – but Colrain, Hawley and Buckland held out. The Superintendent said yes, that year they were back and forth with three proposed budgets – finally Buckland passed the budget in December. Marilyn asked if he really felt that the anticipated additional tuition could pay the full \$200,000 cost. The Superintendent said he didn't know, but \$100,000 was more realistic if Buckland-Shelburne goes from 30 to 50 kids. Tuition could double. He stated that in a twelve month timeframe it seems expensive, but he is looking at it over time. Marilyn asked if with all the big expenses coming before the Town, wasn't this a bad time to put this before the Town? The Superintendent stated that he was here to advocate for the school and that this was intended to save money over time. Marilyn stated that she was here to advocate for the Seniors – whose income doesn't go up. Glenn stated that the needs of the buildings need to be addressed or we will lose the buildings. He stated that they are looking at pre-K as a way to stem the flow of students leaving the District...yes, there are some upfront costs, but not huge when spread over the District.

Discussion to prepare two separate warrants – one with two articles for school. Ask attorney about breaking it into two articles.

Decided to hold other items for next agenda.

Rob moved to adjourn at 9:30 p.m.; Cheryl seconded. **VOTED** unanimously in favor. Meeting adjourned at 9:30 p.m..