

Wednesday, June 13, 2018

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 13, 2018, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:54 p.m. Committee members present were Chair Jessica Martinez, Dennis Bradley and Chris Taylor. Board members Hernan Illingworth, Maria Pereira, Sybil Allen, Ben Walker, John Weldon and Joseph Sokolovic were in attendance.

Supt. Dr. Aresta Johnson was present.

Mr. Bradley moved to approve the committee's minutes of May 11, 2018, with proposed amendments. Mr. Taylor seconded the motion. Ms. Pereira noted grammatical errors. The motion was unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was the transportation services RFP.

Dr. Johnson said the board members received the RFP in their packets, which includes a timeline on page 5. The current contract with We Transport goes

through June 2019. She said we want to move aggressively to have the RFP out over the summer.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said the prior contract was for three years and has been extended.

Mr. Bradley moved *“to approve the proposed RFP.”*

Mr. Taylor said he did not see a route list for the buses. He said being in the transportation industry normally you would receive such a list.

Chief Financial Officer Marlene Siegel said it is not customary to include that in a bid. She said when we engage the vendor we work with the vendor to develop the routing, which is specified in the RFP. The vendor will do the routing for special education students; the district transportation office does the routing for general education students using TransFinder.

Mr. Taylor said he thought that’s why we have such outrageous costs. Ms. Siegel said TransFinder had been quite effective in reducing costs. Mr. Taylor said he disagreed.

Mr. Taylor noted the provision relating to criminal background checks for drivers. He said there should not be drivers who are pedophiles or threats to children, but in light of him having a criminal background and a mayor who has had issues

somebody in a second-chance city should not be precluded. He said asked who was to determine what is a “serious” criminal offense. He said there is an ex-offender population that needs to work.

Ms. Siegel said she believed Mr. Taylor was referring to the provision that “if a conviction/arrest is found that is considered a serious criminal offense, the proposer shall not employ the individual.”

Ms. Pereira said the drivers have to go for a fingerprint check. Mr. Taylor asked if a person found with 24 pounds of cocaine would be considered a violent offender. Ms. Pereira asked if he would want someone like that around kids.

Mr. Taylor said he believed in second chances and rehabilitation. He asked why Ms. Pereira was looking at him like he was crazy. Ms. Pereira said this was America.

Dr. Johnson said the sentence is very broad and nebulous. She said perhaps more detail was needed about “serious.”

Ms. Martinez said she believed in second chances but not with things when it comes to our children.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said Mr. Laffitte works in collaboration with the vendor to set up bus routes. Ms. Siegel said the vendor establishes

a daily rate and the number of vehicles would fluctuate. She said the district knows the approximate number of vehicles that we use each year. She said the chart included in the RFP contains a rate table.

Mr. Taylor said it gives the vendor a wide-open opportunity to take advantage of a financial gap. He said we're in a crisis and the transportation numbers are overwhelming.

Ms Siegel said over the last years we've tried to improve the efficiency of routing so that we can reduce the number of routes.

Ms. Pereira said TransFinder has been instrumental in creating cost-effective bus routes that pick up students. She said she believed in second chances, but indicated we should never put children at risk to give an adult a second chance. Such adults could work in something like a bank or a construction site. She noted a Fairfield bus driver was caught drug-dealing off a school bus. She said children should not be placed at risk.

Mr. Taylor said if we say anyone who has a criminal record can't drive a bus it will end the issue. Ms. Pereira said she didn't think someone who has shoplifted is going to necessarily hurt a child.

Ms. Siegel said the RFP went through multiple revisions and was reviewed by City Attorney Ron

Pacacha.

Ms. Siegel noted the vendor employs the individuals and each applicant must pass the background check prior to being assigned a bus route. She said usually “serious” is defined as a felony.

Mr. Walker said the criminal background provisions should be the same for a substitute teacher. Ms. Martinez said she agreed.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said Mr. Laffitte said he would try to be at the meeting, but recently had surgery. She added he participated in the review of the RFP after she developed it. She said it was also reviewed by an internal committee, including administrators.

Ms. Pereira said the current agreement with We Transport allows bus drivers to have their children on the bus.

Andrew Ifill of We Transport said drivers are allowed to have up to one or two children at the most. He said that provision was developed about twenty years ago because of the shortage of bus drivers.

Ms. Siegel said the RFP was developed using the We Transport contract as a template and it was then modified based on the district’s needs.

Ms. Pereira said the phrase that indicates the district shall have the right to add an extension to the contract should be replaced by the Board of Education. She noted this is the third largest item in our budget. She added there were other examples where the district is referred to that should be changed to the board.

Ms. Siegel said she'd be happy to change that.

Ms. Pereira said there is a conflict between the provisions that indicate a one-year contract with the right to give a two-year extension and another section where it requests a rate schedule for the next five fiscal years, with the understanding the district intends to execute a contract for three years subject to two additional years.

Mr. Weldon said he believed the intent was to obtain what the rate would be today if we decided it to extend it.

Ms. Siegel said she could remove the reference to the three-year contract.

Mr. Weldon asked why anyone would bid on a one-year contract. Ms. Pereira said because it's worth \$21 million a year. Mr. Weldon said it was a major investment for a vendor. Mr. Taylor said no one was doing a one-year contract. Mr. Weldon said a three-year contract would get a competitive rate. Ms.

Siegel said she was fine with that.

Ms. Pereira asked if the reason for the one-year contract request was the ability to test the waters if there is a new vendor. Ms. Siegel said that was the case and the intent was to be optimistic that the services would be satisfactory and it could be extended. Ms. Pereira said she didn't have a problem with a three-year contract because the board would retain the right to terminate.

Ms. Pereira noted the district employs nine special education bus drivers on its payrolls. Ms. Siegel said the number had been reduced from fourteen over several years. She said as they retire or leave the district is not replacing them.

Ms. Pereira noted that after a young special education child died on a school bus the current bus company claimed that the district couldn't look at the camera footage and later said that the camera was not operating. She said she was shocked the board was never sued for that. She noted the child was medically fragile.

Ms. Pereira said there was a provision added to contract that the company must have working cameras and if cameras were not working the company would pay a fine.

Ms. Pereira asked if it was against state law for buses

to idle more than five minutes on school property. Mr. Taylor said you cannot idle anywhere for more than three minutes. Ms. Pereira asked that be written into the RFP. Ms Siegel said there are references in the RFP that they have to comply with state law.

Ms. Siegel said she put the same language in the RFP that the board approved about cameras in the We Transport contract. She said a provision allowing the company to send out a bus without a working camera with the approval of the administration would only apply in extreme circumstances.

Mr. Taylor said after hearing what Ms. Pereira said he did not believe We Transport was eligible to transport our students. He noted there was fatality and they wouldn't show us the videotape.

Ms. Siegel said there was a full investigation and an amendment to the contract was approved by the board with new requirements.

Ms. Pereira said Supt. Rabinowitz told her the company initially declined to show the video footage. Mr. Taylor said he had a credibility issue with the company after hearing the testimony of his colleagues.

Ms. Siegel said the company is allowed to submit a proposal and you have the right not to select it.

Ms. Pereira asked if \$1 million of insurance was enough to protect the board. Ms. Siegel said that was reviewed by the city attorney. There is an excess liability policy that is required and would ensure sufficient coverage. She said we have specified \$15 million to be the amount of umbrella coverage.

Ms. Siegel asked what the committee wanted her to do on criminal background checks.

Ms. Martinez said we need to understand what “serious” means, and whether it includes felonies or assaultive misdemeanors.

Mr. Bradley said this was just an RFP; once a vendor is selected the contract can cover these provisions.

Mr. Bradley moved to “*approve this RFP.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor.

Ms. Siegel said there were amendments mentioned by the board members. On page 13, further clarification would be needed around the phrase “serious criminal offense.” Also, the term of the contract will be three years, with an option for the board to renew for two successive terms.

Ms. Pereira said we have to go out to bid after three years. Ms. Siegel said the city ordinance limits contracts to three years, however there is an option of requesting an extension from the purchasing agent.

Ms. Pereira said it's our third largest line item in the budget and we should always go out to bid.

Ms. Siegel said she was not endorsing the provision by including the option. She said the board needs as much flexibility as possible.

The motion was unanimously approved.

The next item was on the 2017-18 budget status update.

Ms. Siegel said the end of the fiscal year is rapidly approaching and we are on track to end the year balanced.

Ms. Siegel said the board is achieving the end-of-year condition by withdrawing \$4 million in surplus funds from the Internal Service Fund. She said the current review of the Internal Service Fund is positive and allows this withdrawal. In addition, resources have been pulled from grants where permissible under the guidelines.

Ms. Siegel said she was deeply concerned about special education. She said expenditures are still growing and there is an unabated upward trend. In addition to the \$16 million gap being closed, there is growth in special education, including in out-of-district and homebound expenditures.

Ms. Siegel said the percentage of students in special education has been growing steadily from 15.81 percent at the start of the year. It has increased in almost every month and is now at 17.36 percent.

Ms. Siegel said some additional self-contained classes will be opened next year, with funds being redeployed from unfilled teaching positions to fund the classes. She said she has discussed extensively with the superintendent her concern that the trend continues to be upward. She said we should be prepared for the monetary need for next year growing even as we close the current gap.

The next item was update and possible action on the 2018-19 budget gap plan.

Ms. Siegel said the gap was \$2 million and there is a table included in the documents to address the shortfall. She said there is no agreement with the unions for a furlough day or deferral of a longevity payment.

Ms. Siegel said district office cuts include the assistant director of information technology. The consolidation of subject area directors will eliminate two more positions. An administrative position in special education will be eliminated, along with two other administrative positions either in the district office or schools.

Ms. Siegel said the transportation limit will be changed from 1 mile to 1.25 miles for Grades 5 to 8, which is consistent with state guidelines and consistent with most of the districts in the surrounding area. Additionally, the number of ISS officers would be reduced by six positions through layoffs, along with two security guards. She said the balance will be covered by the savings in the new Xerox network.

Ms. Siegel said she didn't have anything positive to report tonight, but she was hopeful that some additional surplus funds will be able to be rolled into the 2018-19 fiscal year.

Ms. Pereira said Gary Peluchette of the BEA sent her a statement that he asked be read into the record. Ms. Martinez said we should do our work first. She said Mr. Peluchette should deal with the administration, not Ms. Pereira. Ms. Martinez said it was a joke.

Ms Siegel said a tentative ranking for restoration was included in the plan as recommended by the superintendent and herself, subject to board approval. If funds become available, the priority order would be transportation, then the administrators on Line 4, then the ISS officers, and the security guards.

Dr. Johnson said now that the assistant principals are no longer on Line 4 she may recommend shifting the ranking.

Ms. Pereira said we're severely understaffed in IT due to the great amount of devices in the district. Supt. Johnson said a position was added in IT this year. She added that Mr. Postolowski knew there was either going to be new position or he was going to keep the assistant director.

Mr. Bradley moved "*to eliminate the position of assistant information technology director.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Ms. Martinez said the next item on BCAS administrators would consolidate subjects and remove two positions for \$152,000.

Mr. Weldon asked if the collective bargaining agreement permitted merging different functions. Dr. Johnson said the same thing was done about four years ago.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said the math and science directors were consolidated in the past. Mr. Sokolovic said it did not work well in terms of test scores.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said while she was the science director she did not have math as well. She said she had a combined role of science and life skills. She said she worked with Dr. Rosa as

the math director. She said previously the two positions were combined under the direction of the science director, while this proposal is to combine them under the direction of the mathematics director. Dr. Johnson said the math director has really stepped up, moved the scores forward, has done innovative things and has solid plans in place.

Mr. Sokolovic said with new Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) standards he was concerned we're going to slide back in science. He said science should be held in the same esteem as language arts and math. He said he had a suggestion for another cut.

Dr. Johnson noted for years the district had not had a director of social studies. Mr. Sokolovic said social studies had no metrics or test scores. He said minorities have historically been underrepresented in the STEM field.

Dr. Johnson said from a science perspective we need to more aggressive. She said this is an opportunity to do something different. She said there are internal challenges and she is trying to put forth the best effort by presenting this option. She asked for the board's support.

Mr. Walker said the NGSS standards have been piloted in some schools without textbooks. A brand-new curriculum was just approved districtwide in the

Teaching & Learning Committee. He noted the director would be responsible for the new textbooks and the professional development. He said he found this too much responsibility on the math director. He said Mr. Sokolovic has a recommendation to offset the cost.

Dr. Johnson said the plan presented to the Teaching & Learning Committee for textbooks has shifted and is currently in limbo. She said this is a time to do something much more foundational and looking at people who can carry out a vision all the way through.

Ms. Martinez said nothing had been presented to us as to a replacement plan.

Dr. Johnson said the early childhood and literacy directors will be combined into one position, while math and science will be combined.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said the science plan has not been solidified as of yet. The textbooks will not be used. She added we need to be prepared for NGSS.

Ms. Siegel noted we currently have new Grade K-5 science, NGSS-compliant programs with textbooks. Grades 6-8 are still being explored.

Mr. Walker said he was concerned about going forward without a dedicated science director or a

director not geared into NGSS and without textbooks.

Ms. Siegel said the cost of the textbooks would be about \$400,000 for Grades 6, 7 and 8. She said the money will be expended on a deferred payment plan: 50 percent will be paid in 2018-19 with the option to pay the balance in 2018-19 or the following fiscal year, 2019-20. She said in the current fiscal climate flexibility was needed to defer 50 percent of the cost.

Ms. Siegel said hopefully the company would commit to fulfill all elements of the plan for Grades 6 to 8 with the understanding that we would pay 50 percent in 2018-19 and the balance either in that year or the following fiscal year.

Mr. Walker said the \$400,000 included more than just textbooks, including professional development and online services.

Mr. Walker said he was concerned about moving forward with an intensive curriculum without a director. He said he trusts the district staff at the meeting and their concern for the students. He asked the committee listen to Mr. Sokolovic's idea to save the position.

Ms. Martinez said she also trusts the staff.

Mr. Illingworth said he had a crazy idea today and asked what would be a 25 percent cut of our total

central office staff. Ms. Siegel said it would be several million dollars. She noted central office includes facilities, a security clerical, information technology, data management, and transportation.

Mr. Illingworth said he would be okay with reducing the central office staff by \$2 million and leaving the cuts to Dr. Johnson. Ms. Siegel said the board had already made multiple reductions in central office.

Ms. Martinez said the plan presented by Ms. Siegel balances the budget. She said she had an issue with the math and science director being consolidated.

Ms. Pereira said she had no problems merging the literacy and early childhood directors. She said she had been quite disappointed in the early childhood office. She said studies show literacy is critical in early childhood. She said she was deeply concerned about science and math due to the country's focus on STEM and the state tests in these areas.

Mr. Bradley recommended a book named *You Can't Teach Hunger* written by a lawyer who became successful by not looking at titles or resumes. He looked at the person or the individual and what they brought to the table. He said leadership looks at the team and what they bring to the table.

Mr. Bradley said he believed the superintendent was doing this with her recommendation. He noted the

superintendent's area of expertise was science. He said the board should look at who is running these departments and then try to have faith in leadership as opposed to just looking at titles.

Mr. Sokolovic said due to the new facts and new situations we had to revisit things we've been against before. He suggested that rather than cut a layer of support to the principals, schools, math and science that the board cut a layer of supervision and look at a second assistant superintendent, which would save \$177,000. He asked if a committee member would be willing to make such a motion.

Mr. Taylor moved to replace Item 3, subject area literacy and math science, with the replacement of two additional superintendents. Ms. Martinez said she disagreed. The motion was not seconded.

Mr. Bradley said we do have to support our superintendent and what she has brought forth is genuine. He said he believed the superintendent was being innovative as to how we look at our money.

Ms. Martinez said we did not know what we were replacing the math and science director with. Mr. Bradley said it would be Mr. Planas running the department. He said based on his knowledge of Mr. Planas as a principal he saw the vigor and hunger he had about mathematics, including at the classroom level. He said this is what Warren Buffet does when

he looks into companies and how the people who are in charge manage companies and handle personnel.

Ms. Martinez suggested pushing the plan forward and taking it to the full board.

Mr. Walker said on the first budget worksheet two superintendents were proposed to be eliminated and the board voted to cut one position. Ms. Martinez said she supports the elimination of two assistant superintendents.

Dr. Johnson said the plan presented had one assistant superintendent, the board made a recommendation for two, which is how it ended up on the budget plan.

Ms. Martinez moved *"to approve items 3 to 8 and we're bringing it to the full board."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Bradley and unanimously approved.

Ms. Martinez said provided we get the \$600,000, this balances our budget.

Ms. Martinez moved the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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