

Monday, January 27, 2020

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held January 27, 2020, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:35 p.m. Present were Chair Jessica Martinez, Secretary Bobbi Brown, John Weldon, Joseph Sokolovic, Sybil Allen, Chris Taylor, and Joseph Lombard. Albert Benejan arrived subsequently as noted.

Acting Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Joseph Sokolovic said on January 22nd the board's committee assignments were updated and he was removed as chair of two committees and as a member of three committees. He said the public deserves an explanation as to why. He said he guessed it related to false allegations against him by Ms. Martinez regarding something somebody said on a blog. He said had read on the same OIB blog that two board members had been arrested for crimes, two board members had committed election fraud, that a board member may be linked to a federal indictment, and that a board member was photographed using an illegal substance. He asked the board to overturn the chair's decision and to remove Ms. Martinez as chair.

JoAnn Kennedy said she hoped and prayed that the board would best represent the children of Bridgeport. She said at the end of the day the board had to answer to themselves

and to God. She said none of the board members were her enemy. She urged the board to be honest with themselves and to seek God.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Ms. Allen moved to approve the board's minutes of the Regular Meeting January 13, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and approved by a 5-0 vote.

Voting in favor were members Lombard, Allen, Weldon, Sokolovic and Brown. Mr. Taylor and Ms. Martinez abstained.

CHAIR REPORT:

Ms. Martinez said her father's battle with ALS Lou Gehrig's disease was lost on January 22nd and he was finally free. She said her future attendance would be a lot better.

In response to a question, Ms. Martinez said the committee assignments were still under assignment so the former assignments were still in effect.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Ms. Martinez said she would skip the Finance Committee report because there would be an agenda item on the 2020-21 budget request upcoming which will cover the discussion at the committee.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning committee met on January 21st and discussed committee goals and directions. There was a special education update. He said

he hoped the next chair of the committee would continue the special education oversight.

Mr. Weldon said the Personnel Committee would meet this Wednesday.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Students & Families Committee met on January 16th. He said the committee's goals are to continue the improvement in parent engagement. He said this year there were seven schools that had not spent any money yet on parent engagement.

Mr. Testani said he worked on this with Mr. Planas and met with principals. He said there were some inaccuracies reported at the committee meeting.

Herminio Planas, executive director of elementary education, said in some cases parents wanted to spend money on some things not directly related to education. He said because of weather issues many of the planned activities will take place later in the year. He said all the principals understood that the parent engagement money belongs to the parents and needs to be spent.

Ms. Martinez said she believed principals and parents could work together. Mr. Taylor asked if there was a published document that explains these procedures. Mr. Testani said the documentation exists and is available. Mr. Sokolovic said an explanatory video was needed.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Ad Hoc Committee on Males of Color will meet this Wednesday. In response to a question, he said the white paper would be discussed at the meeting. Dr. Melissa Jenkins, executive director of early childhood, said a draft of the white paper exists, but it needs data. She said

she is primarily writing the white paper, but it has been delayed due to the responsibilities of her day job.

Mr. Testani said he discussed this with Dr. Jenkins and it seems a lot of responsibility on the white paper has fallen on her. He said this was unfair when we have a committee that's been in existence for about a year and a half.

Mr. Sokolovic said it was a challenge because it was a committee of volunteers. He said the committee is moving forward slowly but surely.

Ms. Martinez said she wished the challenges had been communicated sooner.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:

Mr. Testani asked for a moment of a silence for a young man who was a former Central High student that lost his life this weekend in a senseless act of violence.

Mr. Testani said the forthcoming budget report was an example of the severe need for funding for the district in order to support and engage all our students. He said the city and state had done a very poor job in funding education in Bridgeport.

Mr. Testani recognized Jovan Sokolovic for winning Senator Murphy's Martin Luther King essay contest for the middle school division in the 4th Congressional District.

Mr. Testani said the Aerospace and IT Schools at Fairchild Wheeler received an award of excellence for magnet schools and BioTech school received an award of distinction.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on the 2020-21 budget request. Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, made a presentation.

Ms. Siegel said the district's enrollment was 20,103 on October 1, 2019. She said there has been significant growth in the special education (17.49 percent of enrollment) and ELL (20.02 percent) populations. She said special education is 29.19 percent of the total budget.

Ms. Siegel said the NCEP (net current expenditure per pupil) in October 2019 was \$14,697, which is considerably lower than urban peer districts in the state. She said Bridgeport stands at 157th out of 166 state school districts by NCEP.

Ms. Siegel said the fiscal goals are to have a structurally balanced budget, a school-based budgeting model, to ensure in fiscal accountability, and to engage in comprehensive fiscal management.

Ms Siegel said fiscal stress points include services for ELL and special education, utility costs, legal services, transportation, benefits, and absence coverage.

Ms. Siegel gave a brief overview of the 2019-20 budget, the current school year. The operating budget is about \$252 million, with the city share being 26.5 percent, the state share 73.5 percent. She said the city share increased by \$1.3 million and the state share increased by \$2.6 million. The total increase equated to a gain of 1.59 percent.

Ms. Siegel displayed a slide that summarized the actions that had to be taken to achieve a structurally balanced budget at the start of the fiscal year.

Ms. Siegel said there was a total loss over four years of 243 positions. She said the budget gap history shows a total of \$44 million lost over four years.

Ms. Siegel said over five years the average growth in revenue is 1 percent per year. She said this is insufficient to keep pace with escalating costs even after the district's ongoing focused efforts at cost control. The city has contributed .49 percent to the 1 percent and the state .51 percent. In one year there was negative growth. She added the state and federal funding for ELL and special education students has not kept pace with the enrollment in these areas.

Ms. Siegel said the fiscal need for 2020-21 is \$14.5 million in additional funding. She said for purposes of presentation it is divided into a city share of \$7 million and a state share of \$7.5 million.

Ms. Siegel said collective bargaining agreement increases amount to about \$2.7 million; health insurance projections will result in the need for \$4.2 million; and the MERF contribution for non-certified staff is an additional \$1 million.

Mr. Benejan arrived at the meeting.

Ms. Siegel said there is a one-time payment of \$434,753 due to the city based on a 2017 agreement regarding a grant covering SROs.

Ms. Siegel said projected escalated costs in special education are \$1 million.

Ms. Siegel said in the current fiscal year the city paid \$1.2 million directly to the transportation company and it is not part of the MBR (minimum budget requirement). The company also agreed to a one-time credit of \$200,000. She said the district needed \$1.4 million added to the budget to sustain the current transportation limits.

Ms. Siegel said the \$2 million surplus in the Internal Service Fund (ISF) is being applied in the current year to help balance the budget. If the full amount is needed there wouldn't be any money in the ISF to apply to next year's budget.

Ms. Siegel said curriculum renewal will be funded by \$200,000 out of the operating budget and several hundred thousand more in grants. She said curriculum renewal funds in the current year had to be redeployed to balance budget, but she believes at this point those funds will be available for curriculum renewal.

Ms. Siegel said the total requested increase is 5.76 percent. She described it as fair considering the growth over five years.

Ms. Siegel said the budget request of the city consists of \$1.4 million to maintain the transportation limits and about another \$5 million to help cover non-discretionary costs. She said if that amount was provided it would equate an average growth in the city share over six years of .87 percent per year.

Ms. Siegel said in view of the history of budget gaps there could be a shortfall. She said the plan to close the gap will focus first on those strategies that have the least impact on classroom and school operations such as position consolidations based on annual registers, position conversions after attrition such as assistant principals, program and position reductions, and redeploying curriculum technology resources. She said the district remains in deficit prevention mode.

Ms. Siegel displayed a slide which she said demonstration we have one of the most streamlined district offices in the state. There are 92 fulltime employees in total.

Ms. Siegel said about 80 percent of the budget is directly providing school services.

Ms. Siegel described the Connecticut Avenue lease for the facilities department, which ends in December 2020, and is a board obligation. The annual rent is about \$267,000 a year. She said she understood the board would not renew the lease so the budget plan includes rent payments only through December.

Ms. Siegel described curriculum renewal initiatives. In the current year there has been a new reading program in Grades K to 3, costing \$1.2 million. K to 2 also received a new math curriculum. Ms. Siegel said next year it is planned to introduce the reading program into Grades 4 to 6. She said the science program introduced in 2017-18 cost well over \$800,000.

Ms. Siegel said the district's need at this point is \$14.5 million. She noted the district has had a one percent growth

in revenue over five years on average. She noted she shared a sheet containing financial talking points.

In response to a question, Ms Siegel said the total increased budget request was divided between the city and the state in a reasonable fashion. She noted there were years where the city's share was minimal. Mr. Testani said the \$1.4 million for transportation should be the base for the city's contribution, along with payments for SROs, which is a public safety function, and the NAGE contract which is negotiated by the city. He said the health insurance changes to the Connecticut Partnership were initiated by the city so any increases there should be their responsibility.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said she was confident the state will allocate at least \$3 million.

Ms. Siegel said the NCEP is based on the total budget for a district, which includes operating funds, plus grants. She said the grant funding could be for specific schools that is not available to everyone.

Mr. Sokolovic said the state provides about 75 percent of our funding. He said most of the peer districts receive less state funding than Bridgeport and make it up with local funding. He said we should ask much more of the city to make up for previous lack of funding.

Ms. Martinez said we have to be realistic in asking for something we can obtain.

Mr. Sokolovic said BOE administration is one percent of our budget, which was needed for oversight of the district's buildings. He said there was nowhere left to cut in the administration.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said at this point she believed there would not be \$500,000 in special education savings, but judgment has to be reserved due to the multiple facets of special education expenditures.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said four students from Puerto Rico had entered the district recently after the natural disasters. He said there would be future community forums on the budget.

Mr. Testani noted the rainy day fund in state is over \$2.5 billion. He said the district deserved some of those funds.

Mr. Taylor suggested from a business standpoint if you need \$30 million, you should ask for \$60 million. He said if the state was going to mandate programs they should pay for them. He said Bridgeport delivered for Ned Lamont, but to date he had not lived up to his promise to look out for Bridgeport.

Mr. Taylor urged running at a deficit the way Mayor Bronin of Hartford did, after which Hartford was bailed out by the governor. He said we should be more aggressive and run at a deficit. He said appreciated Ms. Siegel's efforts and understood her value. He added he wanted the increase from the state, not the city to avoid a city tax increase.

Mr. Benejan said it was time for the board to talk to the state and to the city. He urged things not be left to the last minute.

Ms. Siegel said the superintendent is in communication with city officials.

Ms. Martinez said the board meets with the City Council during every budget season and another meeting would be arranged.

Mr. Weldon moved “*to make the budget request as presented by the CFO of the respective municipal and state funding entities for fiscal year 2020-2021.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown.

Mr. Taylor moved to amend the motion to include more funding from the state. Ms. Martinez said the state won't give us more. She said if the state doesn't see the city investing in education itself it won't act. She said as a finance chair that is the information she received back from legislators such as Mr. Rosario and Mr. Bradley.

Ms. Siegel and Ms. Martinez noted Waterbury has greater funding because the municipality contributes much more for education.

Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed with the spirit of Mr. Taylor's amendment. He said the proposed budget would leave us flat. He proposed adding four or five million dollars without naming the source.

Ms. Martinez cautioned against asking for an amount that was too high. She said unfortunately education in Bridgeport has never been a priority.

Mr. Taylor suggested asking for \$50 million, noting \$44 million in cuts that had been made. He said we have nothing to lose by asking.

Mr. Taylor said he had never been to Hartford : Ms. Martinez said she had been to Hartford often.

Mr. Taylor said if his motion was not seconded that board members should not say that they support the students or attack his attendance record.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to amend the motion to add an additional \$5 million to the budget request, not say where it's coming from, and bring back some of the 243 positions that have been cut. He said the worse they can say is no.

Mr. Taylor suggested going for the maximum, not the minimum.

Mr. Weldon said Ms. Siegel's information indicated that over the past four years the board has lost \$44 million. He suggested an amendment to specify an additional \$50 million increase to cover the cuts from 2016 to 2020.

Mr. Taylor said he would amend his motion "*to include that.*" Mr. Weldon seconded the amendment. The amendment was unanimously approved.

The main motion as amended was approved by a unanimous vote.

Ms. Martinez said the superintendent has a job to build a relationship with the city leadership. She said she appreciated the work Mr. Testani and Ms. Siegel had done and apologized for the difficulties they were going to face for this number. She said she was not apologizing for the cuts the board had suffered.

Mr. Taylor said his comment was not directed at the City Council, but to the state budget. He said he had no issue with the mayor or the council.

The next agenda item was on the food and nutrition services budget for 2020-21.

Ms. Siegel said the plan is designed to request that the city put a number into the MUNIS system. She said nutrition is funded solely by state and federal revenue, and the district spends funds up to the level of revenue. The anticipated revenue for 2020-21 is \$18.9 million.

Mr. Weldon moved *“to make the 2020-21 nutrition budget request as explained by the CFO.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the nutrition department’s truck bid. John Gerrity, director of food and nutrition services, said the request for the refrigerated truck was discussed at the last Finance Committee meeting. He said the truck has to be built with up to a six-month lead time.

Mr. Taylor moved *“to approve Mr. Gerrity’s request.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the department reached out extensively, but only one bid was returned.

In response to a question, Mr. Gerrity said the vehicles are registered to the city but are used by the board.

The motion was unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was possible action on the nutrition department’s supper expansion. Mr. Gerrity said his colleague Nichola Hall’s initiative was to expand the supper program to the high schools, which includes food for student

athletes who are at the school late in the day. Also requested are an expansion to community sites with after-school activities.

Ms. Hall said she was a basketball coach and had observed her students being hungry at practice. She said the initiative was designed to expand the offerings at no cost to the city.

Mr. Taylor moved “*to approve discussion and possible action of nutrition center supper program.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

In response to a question, Ms. Hall said the personnel providing the food to community sites have to receive training by the nutrition center and complete a state certification process. She said the nutrition staff would serve meals at the high schools. She said she would work with principals to involve custodians in cleaning the meal locations.

The motion was unanimously approved.

Mr. Taylor requested the next item on decommissioning Harding High School be tabled. He said he had not had an opportunity to talk about it with the superintendent and Ms. Martinez about it. He moved to “*table that item.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

In response to an inquiry, Mr. Testani said a thirty-day delay in action was fine.

The next agenda item was on the establishment of a Contracts Committee.

Mr. Weldon said he requested this item because the district's contracting opportunities and public bids often get funneled through different committees. He added the Series 3000 policies should be modernized.

Mr. Weldon moved "*to establish a Contracts Committee.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Testani said this would make it a little easier to bring contracts for approval. Mr. Weldon said he believed the Finance Committee should be focused on the budget and the new committee would avoid distractions to the committee.

Mr. Testani noted some agreements such as MOUs have no cost impact so finance would not be affected by those.

The motion was unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the capital plan. Robert Hammond said the plan was approved by the Facilities Committee.

Mr. Taylor moved "*to approve it.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

Ms. Brown moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:31 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod