

Friday, November 30, 2018

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held November 30, 2018, at Bassick High School, 1181 Fairfield Avenue, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:09 p.m.

Present were Chair John Weldon, Secretary Jessica Martinez, Joseph Sokolovic, Sybil Allen, Ben Walker, Chris Taylor and Maria Pereira. Vice President Hernan Illingworth and Dennis Bradley arrived subsequently as noted

Supt. Aresta L. Johnson, Ed.D, was present.

Mr. Weldon said yesterday he, along with Ms. Pereira, various members of the school construction office and others, met with the director of the State of Connecticut office of school construction grants and review.

Mr. Weldon said the director reported that everything that needs to be submitted to his office has been received, there are no deadlines left to meet, and the project will be placed on the governor's priority list. The decision of new construction versus renovate as new or a hybrid has not yet been made. It is pending a review of all items, including an enrollment report which was submitted to the state yesterday. The review process will take the next two or three months.

Mr. Weldon said the decision will be made based on an involved process that takes place at the state level. This

means the board and the city have no decision-making capability with respect to what happens at Bassick. He said this is because the state will be funding anywhere between 70 and 80 percent of the project. He said the cost of the project is roughly \$115 million.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said the state does receive input from the local level, however, from their standpoint they look at it from the standpoint of the operational effectiveness of the facility, safety, overall quality and what will provide the best value. He said the state does not get involved in aesthetic issues, which takes place at the design level.

The next agenda item was a walk-through of Bassick, led by Dr. Raiola. The walk-through began at 6:17 p.m.

The board reconvened the meeting at 6:27 p.m. Mr. Illingworth was now present.

Ms. Pereira said she would like to read into the record the editorial written by Charles Brilvitch, the former Bridgeport city historian.

Mr. Brilvitch said Bassick High needed to be preserved because it is a masterwork of neo-Classic architecture and a historical landmark that has been an object of immense civic pride. He said it is eligible for inclusion in the state and national Register of Historic Places, which would make it eligible for a Connecticut historical tax credit equal to 25 percent of construction hard costs.

Mr. Brilvitch said the importance of retaining monumental works of architecture is illustrated in New York City in the 1960s, when Pennsylvania Station was torn down and

Grand Central Station was saved, even though both were viewed as functionally obsolete. He said Bassick also dates from the Beaux Arts era and the City Beautiful movement that brought classical majesty to America's cities. He said the pillared portico at the center of the building echoes a form of Roman architecture and inculcates the student or visitor with the importance of the learning that goes on within. The entrance also includes a stone balustrade and carved stone urns. The projecting pavilion echo the forms of the Roman Pantheon of the 2nd Century A.D.

Mr. Brilvitch said Bridgeport in the 1920s was one of the most progressive, avant-garde, and wealthy cities on earth. Housing and industry were cutting edge. The opulent mansions of the industrialists were cheek by jowl with the three-family tenements of the workers the owners employed. Such a man was Edgar Webb Bassick(1872-1948), president of the company which was the world's largest producer of furniture and automobile hardware.

Mr. Brilvitch said Mr. Bassick made a memorial to his father in the form of the most beautiful state-of-the-art school yet seen in America on the site of his family's historic Fairfield Avenue estate. Mr. Bassick's father, Edmund Chase Bassick(1834-1898) was born into poverty in Maine and found himself stranded in Australia the age of 16, where he discovered the very first gold on that continent.

Edmund Bassick amassed fortunes in gold which were stolen and then made his way penniless to America. In Colorado, he discovered the largest gold mine ever in America. He returned East to retire in Bridgeport, living in P.T. Barnum's former home. He built model workers' cottages, among other things. His son donated the property to honor his family's name and selected architect Ernest G.

Southey.

Mr. Brilvitch said the trend in Bridgeport is to demolish old schools and build new ones due to the often-stated reasoning about expenses and difficulties. He noted the vast majority of Yale University's campus was erected in the teens and twenties of the 20th Century, which no one would dream of tearing down because they are the university's tradition and trademark.

Mr. Brilvitch said Bridgeport should be honored to have a landmark such as Bassick; its demolition is unthinkable.

Ms. Allen moved "*pursuant to bylaw 9314, suspension of bylaw 9325(a) as necessary to allow members of the public at a special meeting to address the board for a total of two minutes on any item or items on the agenda, provided that a maximum of thirty minutes will be allowed.*" The motion was seconded Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Mr. Walker read a letter from E. Webb Bassick IV, oldest survivor of four generations of Bassicks. Mr. Bassick referenced Mr. Brilvitch's editorial and said it did a good job of providing the rich history that led to the building of Bassick High School. He said oftentimes students learn today in sterile glass boxes. He urged that the building be rebuilt into the noteworthy and acclaimed school that it once was. He said all around the country important buildings that have contributed to our past have been saved. He noted if the building was not saved the decision could never be undone.

Mr. Bradley arrived at the meeting.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Albert Benejan, the PTSO president at Bassick, said he respects everyone. He said he was here for the students and the future. He said board members should not attack parents. He said everyone should work together for the best future for our kids.

Jeanette Falcon, PTSO vice president at Bassick and a parent of former and present Bassick students, said she understood about the history, but it was time to start new and change the school. She pointed out the difficulties as an asthmatic of navigating the school because it is in two buildings. She said persons with disabilities had difficulties as well. She added the name should be preserved, not the building.

Tammy Boyle, PTSO secretary at Bassick, appeared with a young child. She said this young man does not deserve to come into a building in this condition. She noted Harding High was recently built as a new school and the Bassick deserves the same. She said history could be preserved by taking a picture or by visiting buildings downtown. She described Bassick as like a prison, a slum, and the worst school in Bridgeport.

Brianna Downey said the buildings were not handicapped accessible and not fair to handicapped people or students who are late to school. She said even though she is a senior, the students of the future deserve a new school. Jinardry Fulgencio said she was here in support.

Donna Koolis, a retired Bassick teacher, said it sounds like the state is going to make the decision. She said she was happy people were in the auditorium tonight to see what it's like. She said new is not necessarily better than old. She said renovations done correctly would mean a state-of-the-

art building. She noted the steel and building materials in the building are a lot better than would be used in any new construction. She said she would hate to see the school lose the telescope in the newer building.

Mr. Weldon said a copy of the audio of the meeting will be sent to the state.

Bob Halstead quoted the poet William Lovelace who wrote in 1642 and referred to the power of education and the power of the mind to transcend building walls. He said too much emphasis was being put on the walls of the school, not what goes on during the day in the school. He said he agreed with Mr. Brilvitch's statement read by Ms. Pereira. He said the auditorium the meeting was being held in was beautiful.

Maruf Hossain said he could understanding the desire to preserve this building. He said he knew of buildings in Bangladesh which are held in high regard historically. He said he wanted the new building to contribute to the future. He said although he was in a senior in the school, he hoped future students would go to a new school.

Tony Barr said to not ever compare Yale to Bassick because the kids at Yale are rich and don't want for anything, while every student in Bassick had to struggle. He said we don't want to hold onto the old ways. He said today's teenagers should not never have to live the way Edgar Allen Poe did. He said he was about giving these kids an opportunity to succeed. He sang a brief portion of an Eric Clapton song.

Nilda Barahona said history is about the future of our children. She said she wanted to educate Ms. Pereira about Grand Central Station, which was refurbished because it was bought by Metro-North. She said children are suffering

for people like Ms. Pereira that don't want to see them grow. She said members of her family graduated from Bassick and the teachers were great, but the conditions in the building are bad. She said preserving the building would be like putting a Band-Aid on something that would fall right off. She noted Harding and Fairchild Wheeler students were in new buildings.

James Moss said he graduated from Bassick fifty years ago. He said you had to learn from the past to build a better future for our children. He said he came from a one-room school that his grandfather and parents attended to Bridgeport. He said he knew the history of corruption and everything in Bridgeport. He said he played with some of the best musicians in the world. He urged everyone to come together to make a decision.

James Meszoros, a 1985 Bassick graduate and a security officer for 16 years in the school, pointed to the flaws in the auditorium, including the former condemned ceiling and the damage to the walls. He asked if anyone knew how many times Bassick failed accreditation due to the improper structure. He said the school had outdated locker rooms for sports.

Tania Ortiz said the security situation at Bassick was not good because of the many doors to come in and out of the school. She said when her son attended Columbus School there was a problem with a terrible smell. She said a new school made sense and she wanted her children to come to a new Bassick. She added she was going to Central at night to get her diploma.

Ernie Newton thanked the board for opening the public hearing for City Council people to come and have a

dialogue. He said it made him sad to see council members disrespected and the board should have done something about it. He said since he grew up Bassick was always looked at as the third link in the chain compared to Central and Harding. He said the board had an opportunity to give the children of this community a sense of pride, similar to the way the students feel in the new Harding.

Jorge Cruz thanked the board for calling the public meeting. He said he came to Bassick in 1971 and was eternally grateful for the people that built the school. He said change was needed now. He said young people from P.T. Barnum see a new state-of-the-art Harding and would feel worthless if they also did not get a new school. He said being in Bassick reminded him of the auditorium in the Cheshire prison. He said with, all due respect to the Bassick family, the children deserve a brand-new building. He urged the name of the school be kept.

JoAnn Kennedy said everyone here cares about our children no matter what their opinion is on what type of school should be built. She said she volunteered at three different schools. She said the official from Hartford was very informative and clarified a lot of things. She said he indicated it would take five years to build a new school. She said an educated decision should be made and she supported the hybrid plan.

Karen Jackson said five years ago there was a meeting to get bonding for Bassick. She said there was an inkling because it did not make sense to put a new roof on a building that was going to be torn down. She urged the façade and the old building stay, but what goes on inside the school is more important. She said she heard a lot about manual labor or Bullard Havens about the curriculum at the school. She said the Budget & Appropriations Committee of

the City Council bonded an extra \$12 million for a new school.

Jonathan Rodrigues said knowledge is power. He said many of the people who signed the petition are not educated on the history of the Bassick building. He said as a father he hoped one day his daughter would attend this school and see the history. He said you learn from the past. He said he understood costs of renovation. He said a young man, Dmitri Smith, who he mentored asked him to relay a message to preserve the original integrity of the building with new updates.

Jeff Kohut, born and raised in Bridgeport, said he believed all of Bridgeport was sacred ground. He said people such as Barnum and Bassick made Bridgeport great. He said there was great value in preserving the school, while replacing the vast majority of it with a state-of-the-art facility. He urged a new school be built with the core preserved that is here to inspire and remind us, as the architecture of a city should do to all of its people. He wished good luck to all the students and hoped they all become great, while learning from the people in our past.

Mark Halstead, a Bridgeport native and architect, said two of his recent projects at the University of Bridgeport were on 1901 and 1895 buildings. He said the designs preserve the historical background and will be brand-new buildings that will last another hundred years. He said the materials used in Bassick are very robust, while a lot of the materials in new buildings are inferior. He said there were tremendous environmental costs to tearing down an old building. He urged the issue not be polarized between new and old building, but that the middle ground could work very well.

Jennifer Valle read a statement by former board member Howard Gardner. Mr. Gardner said he had lived in the Bassick community for over thirty years and his wife was guidance counselor at the school. He said he mentored several at-risk Bassick students. He said during his tenure on the board he was an advocate for a new school building for Bassick. He asked for support in preserving the original Bassick building due to its pleasing architecture and historical significance. He said every surviving building of a bygone era is a monument of that time and the past people and artisans of that time. He said the hybrid option would create a new modern structure that integrates the outer shell of the existing building.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible action regarding Bassick.

Ms. Martinez moved *“that the chair submit a letter to the City of Bridgeport School Construction Committee indicating that if the state office of school construction determines that a new Bassick High School is to be built the Board of Education desires that the design of the structure incorporate Beaux Arts design elements replicating those of the original 1929 Bassick structure, while at the same time incorporating modern classroom design as well as finishes, furniture, fixtures, equipment and technology in support of the school’s educational specification. I further move that if the state’s office of school construction determines that all or part of the current Bassick structures are to be renovated as new that the chairman submit a letter to the City of Bridgeport School Construction Committee indicating that the Board of Education desires that as many elements of the facility’s Beaux Arts designs be preserved as is feasible, while at the same time incorporating modern classroom design as well as finishes, furniture, fixtures, equipment and*

technology in support of the school's educational specification."

The motion was seconded by Mr. Bradley.

Mr. Taylor said he had heard a lot about history. He said Bassick signed onto a ship that was a slave-trader. He said the school was built when black children and Latino children were not allowed to attend it. He said he kept hearing the history of others. He said the makeup of Bridgeport has changed with new diversity. He said he was a Republican but it was time for others to make history. He said Bassick never did anything for the people that are in this building now.

Mr. Taylor said he was all for preserving but he heard so much from Mr. Brilvitch and so much history that he went the other way. He said he was sold on the idea to renovate, but then he heard so much about white history. He said we don't have to change the name for Bassick pride. He said he would only support a new building.

Mr. Weldon noted the motion was an either/or because the board does not make the final decision. Mr. Taylor said he wanted to hear a letter calling for a new building. Mr. Weldon asked if Mr. Taylor wished to amend the motion.

Mr. Taylor said we represent the makeup of this community. He said he polled teachers, security officers, students and parents, and the people who could not get here tonight, and they were in favor of it. He said his constituents were not happy with his choice to preserve the building, but he changed his position.

Mr. Taylor moved to amend the motion "*to include that a*

letter be sent.” The amendment was seconded by Mr. Bradley. Ms. Martinez said the amendment was to include a letter from the nine existing board members that we will support a brand-new Bassick High School. She added the letter included the elements in her core motion.

Ms. Pereira said Chase Bassick had nothing to do with the slave trade and there were no slaves in the gold mines in Australia or the Gold Rush. She said Bassick purchased P.T. Barnum’s home on this site and renamed it Miner’s Rest. She said the family paid off a \$45,000 mortgage, a huge sum in 1924. The land was donated on the condition that the school be built in honor of his father. She said this school was considered one of the most beautiful schools in America when it was built.

Ms. Pereira said she said had been circulating a petition for about fourteen days signed by 313 Bridgeport residents, architects, alumni, and current and former staff. She said the petition has no opposition to knocking down the 1968 addition and calling for the full renovation of the interior of this building. She said to say there is a huge movement among Bridgeporters to demolish this building is not based on fact. She said a petition was submitted where the top of it said “Sign-in sheet for turkey bingo night and report card conferences.”

Mr. Taylor called the question. Ms. Pereira said she had the floor. The motion was seconded by Mr. Bradley.

Ms. Martinez said the motion encompasses everything on both sides of this.

The vote on the motion to call the question was 6 to 3 in favor. Voting in favor were members Bradley, Taylor,

Illingworth, Martinez, Allen and Weldon. Voting in opposition were members Sokolovic, Walker and Pereira.

Ms. Martinez repeated her motion. She said the amendment was added that the chair write a letter to the state that the board supports a new Bassick High School.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said he understood the board was indicating what it would like to see and entrusted an architect to carry that out, with various design iterations. He said the state could overrule the board's motion.

Mr. Walker said he was totally in favor of Ms. Martinez's motion, but his rights as a board member have been taken away by other members calling the question before he had a chance to voice his opinion, and therefore he would be voting no.

The motion was approved by a 7-2 vote. Voting in favor were members Bradley, Taylor, Illingworth, Martinez, Allen, Sokolovic and Weldon. Voting in opposition were members Walker and Pereira.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:03 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the board on December 10, 2018