

# MANCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION

## Public Forum February 6, 2014 Bennet Academy

**PRESENT:** Crockett, Cruz, Hagenow, Leon, Pattacini, Pazda, Stafford, Thames

**ALSO PRESENT:** Interim Superintendent of Schools Dr. Kisiel, Assistant Superintendent for Pupil Personnel Services Matfess, M. Geary

**ABSENT:** Scappaticci, Assistant to the Superintendent for Finance & Management Brooks, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Radikas

**SPEAKERS:** SMARTR members L. Stewart and B. Murphy, R. Luther – Tai Soo Kim Partners, G. Simmons

### **1. Welcome and Introductions**

The meeting was called to order at 7:01 p.m. by Chairperson Pattacini. All in attendance participated in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, led by Mr. Pattacini. Mr. Pattacini reviewed the purpose of this evening's meeting was to give the community the opportunity to learn about the work that has been done on the plan. The presentation given tonight will be available on the website for review.

### **2. SMARTR Committee Rationale**

Two members of the SMARTR Committee not on the Board were present to speak about the project - Brian Murphy, Chair of the Building Committee, and Les Stewart, a community member of the committee.

**Mr. Murphy** reviewed who makes up the SMARTR Committee – 4 members of the Board of Education, 4 members of the Board of Directors, 4 members of the community, and himself – a member of the Building Committee. He stated that the Committee had met approximately 50 times to discuss the schools, tour the schools, and listen to reports.

**Mr. Stewart** stated the goal of the Committee is to ensure that our children and grandchildren have the best possible education they can have. He noted that the Committee has toured the Cheney building, which has solid construction. The renovation will bring the building up to current code. Mr. Stewart pointed out that the project will renovate an historic building in town, which is an important part of the history of Manchester. The project will also address the immediate need for classroom space in a district at which the elementary schools are currently at 98% capacity. Mr. Stewart also noted the flexibility for swing space the project would allow.

**Mr. Murphy** reviewed that when you merely “fix up” a school you receive approximately a 40% reimbursement rate from the state. With a like-new renovation, which provides for at least a 20 year life for everything in the school, the reimbursement rate is closer to 60%. This project is a lower cost solution for moving approximately 500 students than renovating or building at another location. The project creates a desirable campus environment in downtown, provides the students the latest technology, and also complies with racial balance mandates.

### **3. Educational Benefit**

**Mr. Geary** reviewed the educational benefits of a 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade academy. He noted that he has looked at a lot of research on the subject and there are pros and cons to a number of middle school configurations. Often the configuration is based on the availability of the buildings in town. Some districts have a 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade configuration and separate the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade from the upper grades.

Mr. Geary reviewed the educational benefits and social-emotional benefits of a two year school, including greater curriculum alignment between the grades and providing administrators and support staff with a longer opportunity to get to know students and respond to their needs.

### **4. Enrollment, Classroom Space Considerations**

**Dr. Kisiel** reviewed the available space in elementary schools, which currently consists of two classrooms. The projected enrollment over the next ten years predicts an increase of more than 200 elementary students. If we do nothing to prepare for this increase, the result will mean increased class sizes and possibly needing to add portable classrooms to some schools, which makes no financial sense.

### **5. Design and Costs**

**Randall Luther**, of Tai Soo Kim Partners, presented a Power Point reviewing the three possible design options. All three options were the same approximate cost, so the decision on which option worked best was made based on the educational value. Mr.

Luther reviewed that he had met with both state and local historic groups regarding the plan. While the local historic group seemed okay with demolishing the boiler building completely, the state preferred to keep the building. A compromise was proposed to keep only the façade of the building, which would provide visual continuity to the project and allow for a handicapped ramp to be placed between the façade and the new building.

The project costs are approximately \$17.4 million with a net cost to Manchester taxpayers of \$7.3 million. The state estimates building a new school for approximately 500 students, which is the number that this project will accommodate, generally costs \$33-37 million.

## **6. Tax Impact**

**Greg Simmons**, Director of Finance for the Town, reviewed the tax implications of this plan. Depending on the assessed value of a property, the tax implication is approximately \$22-34 a year based on assessed values of \$137,800-\$210,000.

**Mr. Pattacini** reviewed that if this project is not approved something will need to be done to accommodate the expected growth of 200-500 students over the next 10 years. This is a cost-effective way to add space. Regarding the elementary schools, this project is independent of any decisions yet to be made in that regard. Tonight the public will have an opportunity to ask questions regarding the plan for Bennet/Cheney. Additional questions can be emailed to Dr. Kisiel. Mr. Pattacini reviewed that the Board of Education will be meeting Saturday in a workshop to discuss the feedback and the next steps.

## **7. Public Questions/Comments**

Laura Tartaglia, 163 Homestead Street, asked about lunch times for the school. She also felt the 5<sup>th</sup> graders need a playground, not marching around a courtyard for recess. She wondered if there was room for speech, OT, and PT classes. Ms. Tartaglia also wondered how 6<sup>th</sup> graders would be role models when they have core classes in different buildings. She stated having the parking lot so far from the Cheney building was not reasonable. She thanked everyone for working on this plan.

**Mr. Luther** pointed out there is already a parking lot right next to the Cheney building that would remain; the other parking lot is for additional parking.

**Mr. Chella**, Principal of Bennet Academy, reviewed that currently the students have a 35 minute lunch period in which they generally take 15-20 minutes to eat and have approximately 15 minutes of recess. During the recess they can walk

the courtyard, play four-square, or utilize the upper gym for basketball. He noted currently lunch waves start at 10:30 and end at 1:00 p.m.

Ms. Tartaglia felt the lunch period was not adequate and would lead to childhood obesity and eating disorders with students being rushed through lunch.

**Mr. Chella** noted that students are not rushed and may utilize the entire 35 minutes allowed to stay inside and eat if they desire.

**Mr. Luther** noted the increased lunch room plan will provide for three waves of lunch to avoid a really early or really late lunch time. He also noted there is green space next to the Cheney building that may be able to house a play-scape or playground for the 5<sup>th</sup> graders and that discussion is underway. There will also be a paved play area on School Street between the buildings.

**Dr. Kisiel** noted that by law we have to provide for the needs of all children and there are accommodations in the plan for speech, OT, and PT spaces, which were pointed out.

As for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade being role models, **Mr. Geary** stated there will be opportunities set up for the classes to interact.

Jerry Bidwell, 126 Saddle Hill Road, would like to see the area in the rear which is currently a field and planned to become a parking lot remain a playground. He feels more parking could be added up front instead. Mr. Bidwell wondered if the firehouse was at all an option to acquire. He also wondered if there are any other buildings in the area that could be acquired to be leveled and use that space for play or parking. Mr. Bidwell wondered if the cafeteria addition was two levels.

**Mr. Luther** noted that more parking could be added out front, however the green space currently there is an asset. As for the field in the back, it is currently not in demand. Mr. Luther noted that the plan includes removing many of the cross walks in the courtyard so play would be easier. As for the cafeteria, the currently cafeteria sits up half a level, and the addition will be even with that. Mr. Luther felt that the firehouse is not a viable option as part of the negotiations regarding using the boiler building was to leave the firehouse untouched.

Tom Stringfellow, 183 Hillstown Road, felt this was a good, thorough presentation. He would like to see more families of color giving input on the project. Mr. Stringfellow wondered if other towns that close schools have been studied. He would like to hear from other residents in town, including renters and those without children. He feels we need to pull together. Last, Mr. Stringfellow wondered about lighting and safety in the parking lots.

Tracy Maio, 52 Horton Road, asked about how drop off and pick up are handled, both currently and in the plan.

**Mr. Chella** stated currently the buses use the front of the school and parents pick up along School Street with staff present. He stated that approximately 10-15% of parents pick-up, about 7% of the students are walkers, and the remainder ride buses. Mr. Luther notes the bus and parent areas may flip in the plan.

Heather Zilora, 446 Briarwood Drive, has sons in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade at Keeney currently. She is concerned about the lack of a playground in the plan. As a school psychologist in a K-2 school, she feels the 15 minutes currently provided for play is a shame, noting that kids need time outside to develop social skills and have opportunities for making memories.

**Dr. Kisiel** stated that playground space will be considered for the 5<sup>th</sup> graders. This has not yet been addressed, but will be included in the plan.

Jennifer Beatty, 69 Jensen Street, dislikes the push for bigger schools. She has had three children go through Bennet and it was wonderful. She feels the bottom line is all about money and not the heart of the parents and town. She feels we need to find a way to keep neighborhood schools and focus on education and not state aid for building larger schools.

**Dr. Kisiel** wants the community to understand this building originally housed 500 students and this is not a new concept. The plan is consistent with the original use.

Jim Zilora, 446 Briarwood Drive, has not made up his mind on the plan as this is the first time he is seeing the presentation. He agrees with his wife that a weakness of elementary schools is how little recess the students have for their physical and emotional wellbeing. He does not like the idea of a parking lot replacing a play area. He feels teacher parking can be placed across Main Street with a cross walk activated. As for leaving the façade of the boiler building, he feels it is awkward and wonders how hard we pushed for the right to simply remove the whole building. He appreciates the work done thus far on the project.

**Mr. Luther** noted the Cheney Preservation Trust realized that blocking the removal of the boiler building might derail the whole project and were accommodating. The State Historical Society, however, had concerns. They issued a letter of adverse impact stating they did not want us to touch the building. The plan to keep only the façade is a discussion that is still ongoing as

a compromise. Mr. Luther noted that once he worked through it, he is in favor of the concept as it helps mesh the project together and he would argue to keep that design. However, the chimney in the boiler building serves no purpose and he would like to be able to remove that. Talks on that are still in progress.

Jeff Orszak, 61 Lorraine Road, does not feel the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade plan is independent of an elementary school plan. He feels this is a program motivated by finances. He would like to hear the cons of putting 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade together, not just the benefits, so he can make an informed decision.

Autumn Struk, 26 Little Street, cannot say yes to this plan without knowing the elementary school plan as well. She also wonders how long this grade configuration would remain. She hears 20 years, but notes in the past the different configurations of 6-7-8 and 6 with 7-8 separate have not remained for 20 years.

Tom Stringfellow, 183 Hillstown Road, spoke again, stating we need to get the word out to everyone. He asked again about parking lot lighting and security. He feels we need to value diversity.

## **8. Closing Comments**

**Mr. Pattacini** thanked the members of the public for coming out and listening to the proposed plan and for being engaged community members. He noted the Board has a decision ahead regarding this plan and the plan for the elementary schools and they have to come up with a plan that the voters will support. Mr. Pattacini also thanked the members of SMARTR and the other speaks for coming out this evening.

## **9. Adjournment**

**Mr. Pattacini adjourned the forum at 8:39 p.m.**

Respectfully submitted,

Jason Scappaticci  
Board Secretary