

Ad Hoc Committee for Inter-district Education Cost Sharing
Governance Sub-Committee
Special Meeting

April 7, 2022

6PM

Call to Order: Gary Greenberg called the Meeting to order at 6:03PM.

Roll Call: Gary Greenberg, Kathy Donahue, Rose Bisson, Wendy Sears, Juan Arriola, Cassidy Martin (6:35).

Discussion of Response to Flyer Sent to Hampton Residents:

Chairman Greenberg read the contents of the flyer in question, distributed by the “Keep HES Open” political action committee, into the record:

Are you aware that a small committee is trying to close Hampton Elementary School? If HES closes, we will be the only town/city in Connecticut without an elementary school. Closing the school will adversely affect our property values. We are concerned that cost comparisons are not being accurately presented. We will lose control of the school budget. Hampton’s mill rate is 23.70 while Scotland’s is 39. We will have larger class sizes and lose respected staff. Our school represents our future and guarantees the vitality of our community. We are a group of Hampton residents who believe that it is in the best interest of our town to keep Hampton Elementary School open. If you would like to join with us or put up a “Keep Hampton Elementary School Open” sign, please contact Rose Bisson.

Mr. Greenberg stated that the communication is causing a couple of problems, namely that it reports untruths and that member and chairman of the committee, Rose Bisson, has been named as the point person for the PAC. Mr. Greenberg explained that the committee’s focus has been to develop a cooperative agreement and a model program and budget in order to provide a viable proposal to the citizens of Hampton and Scotland on educating their students together in a single elementary school, and that entering into such an agreement is solely the decision of the Boards of Education. While expressing his appreciation for Ms. Bisson’s contributions to the committee, he stated that the flyer compromises the credibility of the committee as it names an authoritative source of information. He asked members to express their opinions on whether or not the committee should publically respond to the flyer, and whether Ms. Bisson should continue as a member and chairman of the committee.

Juan Arriola reiterated his statement that members refrain from announcing their opinions until after the committee’s reports are finalized and distributed to the public, and informational sessions and advisory votes are conducted. Given that the public has yet to be given the opportunity to review and discuss the facts, he called the public announcement of their positions by four members of the Hampton Board of Education, including Chairman Bisson, “unconscionable” and suggested she step down from the committee and that all four recuse themselves from the ultimate vote.

Mr. Greenberg read a communication from member Tom McAvoy stating his belief that members should not communicate their personal opinions on the issues until the public becomes involved at the informational meetings, adding that such actions undermine the committee’s work and that members’ opinions should not be presented until the process is complete.

Kathy Donahue expressed her dismay regarding the flyer, stating that its distribution is detrimental to the process and that it casts doubt on everyone and everything thus far concerning the committee and its work. She stated that the committee worked particularly hard on assuring the accuracy of numbers, and that while she thought Ms. Bisson should remain on the committee, she should not continue as chairman. Wendy Sears expressed her disappointment at the misinformation contained in the flyer, as it called into question the work of the committee, taking particular exception with the claim that “cost comparisons are

not being accurately presented". Ms. Sears stated that all of the committee's information is sourced through official Town and State websites, and that members have worked hard to assure their accuracy. While acknowledging that Ms. Bisson is a valuable contributor to the committee, she stated her belief that she should step down as chairman.

Ms. Sears also read a communication from Cassidy Martin, who stated she saw nothing in the flyer, nor in Ms. Bisson's involvement in it, that was troubling, adding that Ms. Bisson has raised all of the concerns presented in the flyer publicly at meetings. She advocated for Ms. Bisson's continued membership on the committee.

In response, Ms. Bisson defended each of the statements made in the flyer, noting that she is one of a group of persons who worked on it, but confirming her belief in the veracity of all of the statements published. She added that the draft version of the model budget, in its present stage, is unclear to people, particularly with respect to the estimated cost savings of combining the two schools as reported in *The Willimantic Chronicle's* recent article.

Mr. Greenberg asked members to consider whether or not Ms. Bisson should remain chairman of the committee. He reiterated his position that the problem is one of optics, and that the time for conversations on the proposal is after the report is completed and presented, not now.

Though Cassidy Martin stated that she would like Ms. Bisson to remain as chairman and praised her for pointing out the committee's faults, Mr. Arriola, Ms. Donahue and Ms. Sears all stated that they would like Ms. Bisson to step down from that role. Ms. Donahue added that the committee's research is neither flawed nor complete, and that all questions concerning numbers are subject to investigation by the committee. She also advocated for the importance of providing the public with all information, including the continued decrease in enrollment as well as the Education Cost Sharing grant to the towns over the next several years, adding that while the Boards of Education are ultimately charged with the decision, members should not make a decision until hearing from the general public. To Rose Bisson's expressed concern on the lack of clarity in the financial charts which she said is causing different interpretations of the data, Ms. Sears responded that the information presented will be read differently by different people, and that the committee has done its best to create conservative estimates of costs.

As Mr. Greenberg initially appointed Ms. Bisson to serve as chairman of the programming committee, he replaced her in that capacity with Ms. Sears. He also asked members to consider whether or not the committee should publicly respond to the information in the flyer.

Though Ms. Martin was opposed to a public response to the flyer, and Mr. Arriola cautioned against an emotional response, Ms. Donahue and Ms. Sears concurred that a statement should be issued from the First Selectmen rather than the committee to clarify some of the items and correct misinformation. Mr. Greenberg will consult with Hampton First Selectman Allan Cahill to produce a written response.

Adjournment: The meeting adjourned at 6:55PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Dayna McDermott Arriola
Recording Secretary