

MINUTES - SPECIAL MEETING OF CITY COUNCIL - OCTOBER 29, 2002

SPECIAL MEETING

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At a special meeting of the City Council and Harrisonburg City School Board held this evening at 7:30 p.m., there were present: Mayor Joseph Gus Fitzgerald; City Manager Roger Baker; Assistant City Manager Kurt Hodgen; City Attorney Thomas H. Miller, Jr., Vice-Mayor Larry M. Rogers; and Council Members Carolyn W. Frank, Dorn W. Peterson, and Hugh J. Lantz. School Board members and administrative staff present included: Greg Coffman, Tim Lacey, Jean Gearing, Dr. Cathy Slusher, Tom Mendez, Dr. Donald Ford and Lisa Lantz.

Council Member Rogers gave the invocation and Mayor Fitzgerald led everyone in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mayor Fitzgerald introduced a request by the American Legion for permission to hold a Veterans Day parade on Sunday, November 10, 2002. The proper application forms have been submitted and the parade route approved by the Police Department and Public Works. Council Member Lantz offered a motion to approve the request and the motion was unanimously approved.

Discussion then moved to the School Boards long-range construction planning. Mr. Coffman reviewed the public input process to date and noted that December 17, 2002 was the tentative date for the decision on which option they would recommend to Council. This date could be moved back. It was noted that attendance at the public input meetings had not been as good as hoped for.

Council Member Lantz asked what the general sentiment had been at the meetings that had been held to date. Mr. Coffman stated that the consensus seemed to be that the grade configurations should stay as they are. There were varied responses to the other configurations and no clear compromise position. Option 4 probably received the most opposition. Mr. Lacey stated that there was strong support at the meetings for maintaining the K-5 configuration but no clear second choice. Mr. Coffman noted that parents wanted as few transitions for their children as possible. Mr. Mendez stated that a lot of parents were not interested in any compromise, they wanted the best decision for the kids made and the best school system possible.

The impact of ESL requirements on school space needs was briefly discussed. ESL students now make up about 30% of the student population. Dr. Slusher mentioned the need to look at alternative ways to address this situation such as establishing an intake center with a 6-8 week program. Staffing and space

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needs will continue to be an issue.

Mr. Mendez reported that we now have 4,024 students enrolled in our system and may reach 4,100 by the end of the school year. Mr. Lacey stated that we need to take another look at our overall population projections as well as our school projections. Where will the city be at build out and what can we expect as older student housing is converted to family units?

Mayor Fitzgerald noted that we are about to begin updating our Comprehensive Plan and that those issues will certainly be discussed and addressed. Council Member Peterson stated that we probably need to look into these things before completing the Comprehensive Plan.

Council Member Lantz stated that while the current grade configuration may be the most popular, we need to look at the most efficient as well. There are two sets of constituents, those with kids who want the best possible school system and those who don't have kids in the system and want their taxes to stay low while still providing a good system. He noted that input so far on the configuration options was probably from those who have a direct interest in the school system and that if the City Council held public hearings on the issue there would likely be people who don't want to spend another \$20 million on schools. Mr. Lacey pointed out that it wasn't just a matter of building the schools, but also operating and maintaining them.

Council Member Peterson questioned the differences in the staffing costs among the various configurations and asked for additional information explaining the differences. Dr. Ford gave a brief overview of the differences and advised that the information is available in greater detail at the School Board offices.

Mayor Fitzgerald then asked what the next step is in the process. How do we strike a balance between School needs and the overall needs of the City?

Mr. Coffman stated that the School Board will deliberate over the next two months and make a recommendation to the City Council. Dr. Slusher noted that the Board will try to eliminate some of the options and then get back with the Council for more input before a decision is made. Council Member Lantz stated that Council Member Peterson had made a good point in questioning the operational, staffing and annual costs of the various options. Those costs may be more important in making a final decision than the up-front construction cost of a particular option.

Discussion ended on the K-8 planning process and Mr. Lacey then gave an update on the construction progress of the new high school. Other than interruptions due to rain, site work is going well and the financial outlook for the project is still good. Mayor Fitzgerald noted that it appeared the new football and baseball

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stadiums will remain part of the project, as it appeared to be cost effective to do so. Council Member Frank asked for an explanation as to how this was cost effective. Mr. Lacey explained that everything would be on one site, there would be less busing involved in transporting students from the new site to the old stadiums, and the facilities at both sites would actually be needed to support the various athletic programs. The new facilities would also be built to the new code standards and would be a crown jewel for the city.

The next agenda item concerned budget issues and the impact of the state budget cuts. Mr. Coffman noted that in preparing next year's budget, school staff had been instructed to program a 0% increase in their budget submittals. Dr. Ford reported that no information had been received from Richmond yet; the school system has been spared to date.

Mayor Fitzgerald raised the issue of establishing a funding formula, which would specify how funds would be allocated to the School Board on an annual basis. Is this something the council and board would be interested in looking at? Would this provide any sense of stability?

Mr. Coffman stated that given the special needs issues that the Board continues to have to deal with, it may make it difficult to be able to commit to a specific formula. Growth and demographic changes would also make it difficult for this Board to commit future boards to a formula. Mr. Lacey said he would prefer to maintain and improve open communications with the City Council and dealing with the budget.

The next item of discussion was on the development of a policy addressing the School Boards unappropriated fund balance. Mr. Coffman stated that the Board would like to maintain at least 1% of their budget as an unappropriated fund balance and noted that the Board has had to draw from that balance in past years. Dr. Ford reported that the current fund balance amount is \$1.2 million, of which \$500,000 has been set aside in case it is needed for the high school project. The fund balance can be reduced by the Council through the budget process by allocating less than the School Board is requesting and allowing the difference to be made up from the fund balance.

Strengthening School Board City Council communication was the next agenda topic. It was suggested that a meeting between the two bodies be scheduled in any months that have five Tuesdays (except December). Mayor Fitzgerald noted that he met on a periodic basis with some of the School Board members and suggested consideration of a buddy system in which School Board and City Council members agree to meet with each other intermittently to foster better communication and understanding of each others roles and responsibilities. Mr. Lacey stated that at the least he would like to see the liaison committee meet more frequently.

The next agenda item was a discussion of legislative issues. No particular legislation was discussed, but it was noted that currently at least 38 different languages were spoken in the school system and we need to do anything we can to encourage greater support for ESL funding and assistance from the state.

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Both bodies then tentatively agreed to a January meeting, although no date was set, and the meeting is dependent upon the School Board being ready to make a K-8 configuration recommendation to the Council. Council Member Lantz commended the School Board on their planning efforts to date.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:25 p.m. on a motion by Council Member Peterson which was adopted unanimously.

CITY CLERK

MAYOR