

Whitman-Hanson Regional School District

2020 Regional Agreement Amendment Committee Meeting

April 15, 2020
Via Teleconference

This meeting is being held fully remotely in accordance with the Governor of Massachusetts' March 12, 2020 Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law G.L. c. 30A, Section 20.

Meeting Convened at 3:10 p.m.
Meeting Adjourned at 4:07 p.m.

Meeting Minutes

VOTING COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Mr. Christopher Scriven, School Committee Member (Whitman)
Mr. Christopher Howard, School Committee (Hanson)
Mr. Justin Evans, Town of Whitman Board of Selectmen
Mr. Rick Anderson, Town of Whitman Finance Committee
Mr. Christopher George, Town of Whitman Community Member at Large
Ms. Laura Kemmett, Town of Hanson Board of Selectmen,
Mr. Bruce Young, Town of Hanson Community Member at Large

VOTING MEMBERS ABSENT:

Mr. Matthew Dyer Town of Hanson Board of Selectmen

NON-VOTING COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Mr Jeffrey Szymaniak, Superintendent of Schools
Mr. George Ferro, Assistant Superintendent of Schools
Mr. Frank Lynam, Town of Whitman, Town Administrator
Mr. Robert Hayes, WHRSD School Committee Chair (left at 4:06 p.m.)

NON-VOTING MEMBERS ABSENT:

Mr. John Stanbrook, Town of Hanson, Town Administrator not present

1) Open Meeting – (Superintendent Szymaniak – 1st meeting)

Superintendent of Schools, Jeff Szymaniak, convened the meeting at 3:10 p.m. and announced the meeting was being held in a virtual setting, remotely via teleconferencing, in accordance with the Governor's suspension of certain open meeting laws. The meeting was being recorded with audio broadcast live on Whitman-Hanson Cable Access (WHCA) and website. A roll call of attendance was taken.

2) Introductions (Superintendent Szymaniak)

a) Sub-committee of Regional School Committee

Mr. Szymaniak reported the Regional Agreement Amendment Committee is a subcommittee of the Whitman-Hanson Regional School Committee.

b) RAAC members

Superintendent Szymaniak suggested one of the School Committee members is appointed as chair of the RAAC.

VOTE: Bruce Young motioned; Chris Howard seconded; roll call voted to appoint Christopher Scriven to the position of Chair of the 2020 Regional Agreement Amendment Committee.

Justin Evans – Yes

Christopher Howard – Yes

Rick Anderson – Yes

Christopher George – Yes

Bruce Young – Yes

Laura Kemmett– Yes

Christopher Scriven – Yes

The motion passed unanimously.

- 3) Regional Agreement Amendment (Chair)
 - a) Primary Objectives

Mr. Scriven led the discussion with a summary of the current impasse on passing a FY2021 school budget and the direction from the last meeting held by a regional agreement amendment committee in December 2019. Under advisement of that committee, amending the regional agreement was placed on hold to allow the towns to work collaboratively to find an understanding or compromise in managing the local assessments. Mr. Scriven reported since that time, there has been little movement or discussion of a solution. A regional agreement committee was reconvened to determine if the solution to the current local assessment issues could be processed by amending the Regional Agreement (RA). Mr. Scriven then asked for suggestions from the Committee members to get us past the current impasse.

Mr. Howard proposed a two-phase approach to amending the RA. The first phase being to review and update the existing RA Section IV – Apportionment of Payment of Costs, Subsection E, operating costs and pupil enrollment to address the cost concerns of the FY2021 school budget gridlock. Mr. Howard also suggested a two phase plan, to first take the average of the two methods of assessment, for Fiscal 2021, and then work out a permanent long term solution at a later date, noting the estimated \$1.2 million dollar impact to Hanson, due with the change to the Statutory model in the first year.

Mr. Anderson reminded the Committee that the Town of Whitman Finance Committee voted not to support any assessment other than statutory method of assessment. In addition, the Whitman Finance Committee will not recommend any phased implementation or any other financial consideration to change the Regional Agreement. That causes Whitman to continue to pay Hanson’s Bills, and that in effect is what Mr. Howard is proposing, and he (Anderson) is opposed to any changes of that type.

Mr. Young stated that his reason for being a member of the Committee was to work towards coming up with a method of Assessment that would be acceptable to the voters of both Towns, rather than taking a hard ball approach, to stand firm on use of either method. Young then echoed Chris Howard’s approach of first taking an average of the two methods for 2021 which would work out to between \$500-600 thousand dollars, rather than the \$1.2 million for Hanson. That would be a starting point and the Committee could work it out from there.

Ms. Kemmett then noted that the Committee should work for some type of Compromise and she was hoping that would be the direction of the Committee, and if we are working without a compromise as a solution then “Why are we meeting”.

Mr. Evans stated that objectives of the Committee needed to be laid out, but any amendment, due to time limitations for approval by the DESE and the Commissioner may not be possible for this budget cycle,

and the Committee should target their efforts on this budget cycle in accordance with Chapter 70, and the rules that exist right now.

Mr. Anderson also noted that this Committees goals could be an exercise in futility, AS one Town is NOT going to accept any compromise that includes that Town's Departments having to supplement their budgets of with the budgets of the other member Town, and then suggested that we go back six years and calculate the 4.2 million dollars that Whitman has overpaid and use that to Average out some sort of Compromise, and to that extent the compromise has already taken place and Whitman is still on the losing side. He also outlined several of Whitman's current Financial Challenges i.e. Highway Facility, and new Whitman Middle School.

The Committee deliberated compromise, authority of assessment processes and recent advice from the Department of Elementary and secondary Education (DESE). It was understood there is a \$1.2 million impact to Hanson's local assessment by way of the proposed school budget being processed under the statutory method. Meeting timelines and attempts to approve an amended agreement in both towns was also discussed.

Superintendent Szymaniak specified the Committee was meeting to review its' objectives and determine if it is possible to modify the RA to address the financial issues. He reported that two years ago, modifications and language updates to the outdated 1991 Regional Agreement did not pass in the towns. The new Regional Agreement Amendment Committee is charged with putting forth an amended agreement and to look at its' entirety or to agree on a financial (appropriations) section for FY2021 budget cycle. Mr. Szymaniak reminded the Committee the School Committee voted to use the statutory method of assessment for the FY2021 operating budget. The Superintendent also spoke to the financial uncertainty in the nation and community due to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Mr. George spoke to the end result of an amended agreement should reflect a statutory method of apportionment and amounts beyond foundation budget may use the pupil population methodology. There was additional discussion with regard to funding the proposed school budget, acknowledging the statutory methods and finding a solution for this year's impact to the Town of Hanson. A motion was made and subsequently withdrawn by Ms. Kemmett, to acknowledge the Regional Agreement Amendment Committee will be talking about a path forward that will ultimately lead to a statutory method in the Regional Agreement appropriation language section. There was a second to the motion by Mr. Evans. Ms. Kemmett also suggested that representatives from MARS should be invited to attend the next Committee meeting and they could enlighten committee members of various issues involved in the assessment process and amending the school district regional agreement.

Mr. Szymaniak noted that if a budget is not established, a 1/12th budget will be forced by the state under the statutory method of assessment using FY2020 budget figures. The Superintendent spoke to the loss of in excess of 35 positions due to the District responsibility to cover full unemployment costs that may/will arise in this situation.

Mr. Anderson requested a summary of the meetings held with town officials regarding a compromise. Ms. Kemmett stated the primary focus of discussion was the audit of the school district. The other 5% of the discussion focused on the local assessment under the statutory method and if the Town of Whitman could compromise and offer anything up. They spoke of developing a line item that Whitman would be put in place to cover a shared district cost, for instance, \$400,000 in curriculum. Ms. Kemmett added the conversations were had to try and preserve the relationship between the towns. Mr. Evans agreed that was accurate. Mr. Young then emphasized that he was not ready to vote on the Motion as yet. He reminded everyone of the current severe Economic Uncertainties facing the Country and the State and the devastating effect it is having on unemployment and projected significant decreases in State revenues and

also Chapter 70 funding, which would have an additional adverse effect on the Assessment to the Town of Hanson over and above the current 1.2 million dollars increase caused by the use of the Statutory Method of Assessment.

Following the comments by Mr. Young, MS Kemmett then acknowledged his concerns and proceeded to withdraw her motion

Mr. Hayes advised the Committee was brought together to discuss amending the RA and not to discuss the school budget. It was recommended to invite representatives from the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools (MARS) to consult at future meetings.

Mr. Szymaniak will contact the representatives from MARS to attend the next meeting of the Committee. Mr. Szymaniak requested the Committee email him in advance their questions for the MARS representatives.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned by roll call vote at 4:07 p.m.

Justin Evans – Yes

Christopher Howard – Yes

Rick Anderson – Yes

Christopher George – Yes

Bruce Young – Yes

Laura Kemmett– Yes

Christopher Scriven – Yes

Minutes respectfully submitted by Michelle Lindberg

Meeting handouts and materials:

- WHRSD Regional 1991