

Approved



SELECT BOARD WORK SESSION

**Minutes of Wednesday, April 10, 2024
7:00 PM**

Board Members participating were Select Board Chair Marshall Hook, Vice-Chair and Clerk Rafael McDonald and Select Board Members Lynne Bermudez, Cameron Brown and Boyd Jackson. Of the Select Board's staff Town Administrator Kevin Harutunian, and Executive Assistant Samantha Morin were present. The Select Board was also joined by the Finance Committee Chair Che Elwell, Member David Larson and Member Catharin Hodges. Masconomet Regional School Committee Members Zillie Bhujju, Melissa Ogden and William Hodges were present along with Topsfield Elementary School Members Candice Snyder and Elyssa Gustin. The Tri-Town School Union Regional Planning Board Members present were Andrew Prazar, Jessica Steffens, Steve Whelan, Superintendent Scott Morrison and Assistant Superintendent Scott Greenberg. Topsfield residents Doug Link, Michelle Link and Dick Gandt were present.

CALL TO ORDER

Chair Hook called the meeting to order at 7:01 PM.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Chair Hook made the following announcements:

"The meeting is being recorded by the Recording Clerk for the purpose of taking minutes; is there anyone else present who wishes to record the meeting?" There was no response.

"To attendees of the meeting, a sign-in sheet is being circulated; The Board asks that you please sign in to indicate your attendance at today's meeting."

Regional Planning Committee

Andrew Prazar, Steve Whalen and Jessica Stephens represented the Tri Town School Union Regional Planning Board. The founding purpose of the Regional Planning Board was to examine the feasibility and desirability of regionalizing the elementary schools across Topsfield, Boxford and Middleton. A consulting firm was hired using grant monies to assist in this effort. Currently, the only "regional" aspects of the elementary schools is having a shared, central administrative

office and utilizing the same curriculum coordinator. Mr. Prazar discussed possible changes that regionalization would entail, including having one union contract for teachers and support staff, a regional School Board, and a regional process for school budget approval. Regionalization would allow for easier movement of staff and students between the communities. If one town has a waitlist for preschool, a student could potentially join at another (although they all currently have waitlists). While there is the ability for students to go to school in a different town, student would primarily attend school in the town in which they reside.

The Regional Planning Board presented research performed to date and anticipates a recommendation to come in the upcoming months. If approved by the Select Boards of the three towns, drafting a regional agreement would be the next step and would be a lengthy process. The next meeting of the Regional Planning Board would entail discussing the responses and questions from the three communities. Benefits around educational outcomes and financial implications were provided by the Regional Planning Board.

It was estimated each town would save \$150,000 a year with the regionalization due to transportation reimbursement by the state. The Select Board questioned how this number was calculated as transportation costs are, per Mr. Greenberg, around \$300,000 combined for all three towns and only 50-75% of these costs would be reimbursed. This number would be more than offset by the potential increase in the union salary increases due to the fact the highest cost contract would be applied to the other two towns. The board did not have the specifics on how that number was calculated but stated they would send documentation to the Select Board.

Options regarding the governance of the potential regionalized elementary school were proposed. The Select Board asked what options are available (besides the Masconomet contract option). The Regional Planning Board did not have those options as they would be identified in the next phase (developing the governance model) if the three Select Boards agreed to move forward.

The Select Board stated its concern around the budgetary component of a regional school and the long-term financial impacts that may cause. A contract renegotiation with the one singular union could be costly and programming must be reviewed consistently to ensure all communities are receiving equitable recourses.

The Regional Planning Committee will have a formal discussion in June on whether to recommend pursuing a regional agreement. The Committee will reach out the individual Boards but the Select Board stated that if it were to

initially agree to move forward, final approval would be based on the details of the proposed agreement.

The Select Board opened discussion to the Topsfield Elementary School Committee and to representatives of the Finance Committee. Dr Candice Snyder stated there is increasing demand for pre-k but a potential space limitation in the current Topsfield school buildings. She feels regionalization would help address that limitation and also create efficiencies in the central office.

Overall the Select Board was not opposed to continuing the process, but recognized the many hurdles that still exist as well as financial and process questions which must be addressed before making a final decision.

HR Update

Police Chief Hovey presented as Chair of the HR Working Group. The group believes that modifying the hours of Town Hall will improve team morale, resident services and work place efficiencies. A one-year pilot program of a four-day work week was proposed. Eight surrounding communities currently have a four-day work week with extended hours on one day to compensate. The Council on Aging supports evening hours as much of the elderly population assists their families with childcare or actively work during the day. Inspectional Services and the Board of Health receive more walk-ins during afternoons compared to Friday mornings. The Town Clerk's office thought an extended evening would benefit those who needed to file marriage documents. The Town Clerk also stated that during summer hours, they receive more residents on Monday evenings compared to Friday mornings.

Summer hours, where Town Hall has Monday evening hours and is closed on Fridays, have received no complaints from residents. Having consistent hours the entire year would be less confusing to the residents. It is proposed that Town hours remain in "summer hours" until FY2025 and the Select Board can determine if the program should continue.

Community stakeholders would write to Town leaders or visit listening sessions if there were negative impacts. Select Board member Bermudez suggested there may also be cost savings as lights/computers will not be used during Fridays.

Pocket Park

TA Harutunian provided background, an update and next steps on the pocket park design. The Town will replace the current sign at the Shopping Village (up to a set dollar amount in the contract) and will be responsible for ongoing maintenance of the leased land. TA Harutunian presented a design to the Select Board that embraced the theme of Topsfield while ensuring safety and

accessibility of those in the pocket park. Feedback around sightlines to the businesses were accounted for and all greenery is low lying.

The initial cost estimate for initial development of the park is \$284,000, but responses to the RFP must be received before having a final cost. Utilities are not included in the design and all water lines are under soft-scaping in case of a water line break.

Funding will come from ARPA monies and private donations. The RFP has been submitted to the central registry and will go live this upcoming Wednesday. Bids are due back May 8, 2024 and TA Harutunian discussed next steps after that is received.

ADJOURNMENT

At 9:12 PM, Member Brown made a motion to adjourn. Member Jackson seconded the motion and it carried 5-0.

Respectfully submitted,

Samantha Morin, Executive Assistant & Recording Secretary

DOCUMENTS

1. Agenda
2. TTU Regionalization Feasibility Study v2.0
3. Topsfield Progress Set 3.21.24
4. Downtown Pocket Park Update 4-10-24

Pursuant to the 'Open Meeting Law, G.L. c. 30A, §18-25, the approval of these minutes by the Board constitutes a certification of the date, time and place of the meeting, the members present and absent, and the actions taken at the meeting. Any other description of statements made by any person, or the summary of the discussion of any matter, is included for the purpose of context only, and no certification, express or implied, is made by the Board as to the completeness or accuracy of such statements.