

June 7, 2012

The Meeting of the West Morris Educational Advisory Committee was called to order at 7:45 by Vice-Chairman Harmon after welcoming remarks by Chester Borough Mayor Davis.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor Davis, Mayor Short, Mayor Tolley, Mayor Cogger, Mayor Henry, Cristen Forrester (WMRHS), Walter Cullen (WT K-8), Bill Corbett (MB K-8), Jeff Brauner (Chester K-8), Paul Fechhelm (MT K-8), Ray Trevisan (Chester K-8), Andrew Christman (MT K-8)

MEMBERS ABSENT: Kerri Wright, Kathleen Coop, Kristen Gallagher

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE: The pledge of allegiance was recited.

VICE-CHAIRMAN'S COMMENTS: Vice-Chairman expressed regret that Chairperson Myers was unable to attend the meeting and on behalf of the Committee wished her a fast and uneventful recovery.

He then noted that the primary objective of the meeting was:

1. To discuss and agree upon the general scope of the potential feasibility study based upon the six options previously agreed upon.
2. The Mayors will vote on funding the study.
3. Agree upon authorizing the Consultant Selection Sub-Committee to move forward.
4. Receive an update on the "Circuit Breaker" idea from Mayor Cogger.
5. Discuss video recording of future meetings.
6. Set future meeting dates and times
7. Open meeting for public comment on feasibility study options prior to Committee discussion and at end of meeting for comment on agenda or non-agenda items. Comments will be directed to the chair and no debate will take place between members of the Committee and the public.

PUBLIC PORTION:

Peter Domovic of Mendham Township commented that the minutes from the last meeting were very thorough and informative. Mr. Domovic stated that the mission should be to deliver the most effective and efficient education, focused on the High School. The options should be focused and that a larger high school district may not be as responsive to parents as a smaller district. Leadership should be from within the community and there is no evidence that a district can't function as well separately as independently. Mr. Domovic also stated his opinion that measures of high school performance may indicate it is better to split the high schools.

REVIEW FEASIBILITY STUDY ELEMENTS

Vice-Chairman Harmon commented that he had a conversation with the non-profit consulting group (CRG) that recently concluded the project to merge the two Princeton Municipalities and also conducted the work on the merging of Chester Township and Chester Borough. Mayor Davis and Mayor Cogger were complimentary of the work CRG did. After the conversation with one of the Principals of the consulting firm became clear that the premise of more options equals more cost was not the case. Consulting budgets are not scoped that way. In fact, while the six options will help steer the consultant initially they may very well recommend combining or discarding options as the project progresses. Mr. Harmon also pointed out the following:

- The scope of the study must include funding models for every scenario studied. Structural options must be accompanied by funding options.
- The “status quo” will set baseline services and financial “current state” and thus can be set aside as an option.
- The Magnet School option was universally agreed to be outside of the purview of the Committee. The WMRHS BOE is best positioned to consider this. It will be set aside.
- The “Hybrid” option deserves consideration as part of a study but is really an administrative alternative versus a major structural element.
- If the status quo, magnet and hybrid options are set aside the remaining options are:
 1. A single regional K-12 district serving all five municipalities.
 2. Two separate K-12 districts, one serving Washington Township and the other serving the Chesters and the Mendhams.
 3. One K-12 district serving Washington Township and a “limited use” 9-12 district serving the Chesters and the Mendhams, leaving the K-8 districts in the Chesters and Mendhams as they are.

Mr. Harmon noted that three options are manageable and consistent with the desire for focused effort and consensus between the Mayors and their respective Committee and Council members.

DISCUSSION OF OPTIONS:

While it was acknowledged that only three structural options exist, Vice-Chairman Harmon asked each governing body to provide an update on the options their respective governing bodies had prioritized:

- WT K-8 Did not discuss as a Board
- MT K-8 Prefers broader all options. Not enthusiastic about Magnet and Hybrid
- MB K-8 Prefers broader. One K-8, Two K-12, One K-12 plus 9-12, Status Quo
- Chester K-8 Prefers broader. One K-8, Two K-12, One K-12 plus 9-12, Status Quo
- Chester Twp Prefers broader all options. Questioned Magnet and Hybrid
- Chester Boro Two K-12, One K-12 plus 9-12.
- M Twp Two K-12's and One K-12 plus 9-12
- M Boro Two K-12's, One K-12 plus 9-12, Status Quo and Hybrid consideration
- Wash Twp One K-8, Two K-12, Hybrid

Tally of Prioritized options:

Regional K-8	6
Two K-12	9
One K-12 & One 9-12	8
Status Quo	4
Magnet	0
Hybrid	4

It was agreed that the feasibility study will include a baseline assessment of the status quo followed by three structural options:

- One regional K-8 district serving all towns
- Two K-12 districts, one serving Washington Township and one serving Mendhams and Chesters
- One K-12 serving Washington Township and one limited use 9-12 serving Mendhams and Chesters

It was also agreed that the Hybrid option would be incorporated and that the Status Quo would be covered by the “current state” baseline of services and financials plus funding formula scenarios. Funding formula options will accompany all structural scenarios.

Vice Chairman Harmon asked the members of the committee to advise their respective governing bodies that in addition to structural and administrative options, the consultants will be provided a list of other issues for analytics, research and integration into the assessments. Some of those considerations include but are not limited to:

- Contract issues
- Costs

- Assets
- Debt Service
- Educational Impacts
- Statutes, policies and regulation

The Consultant Selection Subcommittee will provide a comprehensive list of issues as part the RFP process.

Mayor Cogger commented that Trenton based issues, process and priorities may not be consistent with our own.

MAYORS VOTE TO FUND AND MOVE FORWARD WITH FEASIBILITY STUDY

Vice Mayor Harmon polled the Mayors as to who was prepared to vote for funding the feasibility study. Mayor Cogger, Mayor Short and Mayor Henry were prepared to vote. Mayor Tolley and Mayor Davis were not willing to vote without further discussion with their Committee and Council colleagues. **It was unanimously decided to table the Mayor's vote for funding until the next meeting.** In the interim Mayors will brief their respective Municipal governing bodies on the outcome of the options discussion. The Mayors committed to come to the next meeting prepared to vote up or down on funding of the study.

Mayor Tolley stated that he wants to review the selected options with the Committee before he commits funds.

Mayor Tolley suggested that rather than pay a consultant to conduct the study that we ask local citizens and members of governing body who have a finance background to conduct the study.

Vice Chairman Harmon asked the Committee to consider the benefit of paying and managing timelines with an impartial and experienced firm to conduct the study versus a consortium of volunteers.

Mayor Davis said that the single K-12 option is off the charts for Chester Borough due to concerns about where children will attend schools in a regional district.

Mayor Short commented that it appears that the genesis of these efforts was funding inequity which then morphed to a quality of education debate and then transitioned into finding a reason to break up the district. He stated that solving the issue of perceived funding inequity, maintaining and accelerating educational excellence should be the objective rather than breaking up the schools.

Mayor Short wanted the record to reflect that he holds WMRHS bonds and is checking with an attorney as to whether that is a conflict.

Mayor Cogger commented that he was interested in an analysis as part of the study which calculates actual “per household” cost of funding the schools, splitting out commercial tax contribution. He used the example of Chester Borough paying much less per household than Chester Township given the higher proportion of commercial entities in the Borough. It was suggested that any funding formula analysis include this element.

Mayor Davis inquired about a 50:50 ratio of per pupil to assessed value funding formula. This information is included in an analysis provided last year to the Mayors. Mayor Davis also asked about the impact of the 2% cap on the total budget versus on the town shares.

Mayor Tolley suggested that it may be an option to write a new funding formula and secure approval by the County Superintendent and the State if it seems to be discordant from the law. Mayor Cogger said that the Attorney General will not pre-act on such initiatives. They act only once something is implemented and there is an issue. Mayor Tolley asked that if the funding formula with “Circuit Breaker” idea is acceptable would the County, State DOE accept it?

Mayor Tolley commented that educational issues remain the “glacial drop-off” and suggested that if the funding formula were addressed perhaps people would accept the educational issues between schools that some feel are an issue.

CONSULTANT REVIEW AND SELECTION SUBCOMMITTEE

The Committee decided unanimously that the delay in the Mayors vote on funding the study should not slow down the consultant RFP and selection process. It was decided that the Subcommittee will meet and begin the process of gathering names of firms and solicitation of RFP’s. The Subcommittee will also put together a list of issues to provide context and direction relative to structural and funding options.

CIRCUIT BREAKER FUNDING UPDATE

Mayor Cogger presented a letter from Matt Wetzel, Legislative Director for Assemblyman Anthony M. Bucco, 25th Legislative District. The provided an update on a proposal for legislation to allow for automatic changes to the municipal school funding apportionment. Mr. Wetzel noted that implementing automatic changes in apportionment requires legislative approval and that he has begun working on drafting legislation for consideration by Senator Tony Bucco and Assemblyman Anthony Bucco.

The consensus of the Committee was that the process of legislation that would allow the “circuit breaker” idea to be implemented will likely be quite protracted. It was decided that this legislative process will move forward on its own but that the feasibility study, associated funding formula options and any public initiatives that result should not be delayed as any potential legislation is pursued.

TAPING OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Mayor Tolley proposed that future meetings be video recorded and made available to the public across all five municipalities. The cost per meeting is \$750 which breaks out to approximately \$80 per town/BOE attendee per meeting. There was consent that there is value in making the meetings available to residents of all towns but there were operational concerns in that Mendham TV is not available across towns, Verizon may not provide public access channel and there was uncertainty as to Comcast’s willingness to make public access videos broadly available.

A poll will be sent out to all members of the Committee to get a gauge as to whether everyone is willing to pay the \$80 fee/meeting. Respective Mayors will also make inquiries as to whether the videos can be shown and by what stations. A vote will be taken at the next meeting as to whether tapings will occur.

FUTURE MEETING DATES AND TIMES

The next three meetings will be held on the third Thursday of the month at 7:00 PM:

- July 19
- August 16
- September 20

Mayor Henry offered his facility in Mendham Borough tentatively. He will confirm availability.

PUBLIC PORTION:

Jackie Schram of Chester commented that the conversations and information being shared are very valuable. We are all in the same legislative district now and it five peer towns are working together. It was hoped that the meetings will not go on forever but reach a conclusion.

June Cioppetini of Mendham Township commented on the makeup of the WMRHS Board and asked that any results from a feasibility study address what she considers disproportionate representation between towns.

Charlene Arrington of Chester represents CBS and urged the Committee to adopt all three options. CBS does not support the single regional K-8 district option.

Kevin Corbett of Mendham Township agrees with taping the meetings and feels that people will watch.

Russell McCabe of Mendham Township suggested a 50/50 per pupil to value funding option and then run other scenarios. Have formulas run on all options of the study. People may say that the devil they know is best. What does the formula look like with two K-12 or one regional K-12. Don't spend money on a study only to have it shelved. Positive on taping meetings.

Vice-Chairman Harmon stated that the results of a feasibility study will become the foundation for decisions and action by the municipalities, districts and residents of our five towns. The study results should be in clear language and be definitive in terms of the analysis and scenarios. It will provide guidance and context for elected leaders and voters.

Mayor Cogger cautioned that no study will provide a magic bullet or 100% straightforward solution. It will be up to us as leaders to interpret the results and act.

Peter Domovic of Mendham Township said that he applauds the process. He asked for a time frame and when a vote can be anticipated. Vice Chairman Harmon responded that it is our strong desire to move this along. RFP response and schedule worked out with the chosen consultant will largely set the timeline.

Jackie Schram of Chester suggested that the process may discourage potential candidates for Mendham Borough and Mendham Township Superintendent from applying. Andrew Christmann of the Mendham Township K-8 BOE said that this has not been a problem and has not impacted the Borough or Township search.

Vice-Chairman Harmon thanked the five Mayors and the BOE members for their time and efforts. The collaboration and consideration that is apparent with the leaders speaks highly of the importance of the issue at hand, the willingness to work together to find fact based solutions and to lead by example.

NEXT STEPS – Prior to Next Meeting

- 1.) Mayors and BOE members brief their respective groups on results of options discussion.
- 2.) Mayors come to the next meeting prepared to vote up or down on funding a feasibility study including commitment sufficient to allow hiring of consultant to be completed.

- 3.) Consultant Selection Subcommittee to hold initial meeting.
- 4.) Mayor Cogger to investigate funding options and report findings.
- 5.) Poll Committee members on recording and televising meetings. Mayors investigate public access TV options.
- 6.) Mayor Henry to confirm hosting of next meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 8:40PM