

**RYE SCHOOL DISTRICT  
SCHOOL USE FEASIBILITY COMMITTEE  
Thursday, October 12, 2017  
8:00 a.m. – Rye Town Hall**

**DRAFT**

*Members Present: Co-Chair Paula Tsetsilas, Co-Chair Peggy Balboni, Katherine Errecart, Jeanne Moynahan, Gregg Mikolaities, Paul Goldman, Salvatore Petralia, Doran Morford, Marc Sedam and Selectmen's Rep Craig Mussleman.*

**I. Call to Order**

Co-Chair Tsetsilas called the meeting to order at 8:02 a.m.

**II. Review and approval of September 14 meeting minutes**

The following was noted:

- Two PDF's files should be added to the scenarios:
  - Maintain the current configurations
  - SAU consolidation
- It should be noted that the date of the meeting should be September 14<sup>th</sup> not September 7<sup>th</sup>.
- Page 3, it should be noted that RJG should be RJH

**Motion by Marc Sedam to approve the minutes of September 14, 2017 as amended.  
Seconded by Jeanne Moynahan. Vote: 9-0-2 Abstained: Craig Musselman and Paul Goldman**

**III. Review of Today's Meeting Objectives**

Co-Chair Tsetsilas stated that they will continue to review the pros and cons for each scenario. She would then like the members to weigh in on the scenarios and evaluate them. She noted the principals will be at the meeting to talk about the scenarios. Also, the committee will plan for the 10/25 public meeting and for the November 9<sup>th</sup> meeting, which will be the last meeting for the committee.

**IV. Discussion about the work done by the committee at the last meeting.  
(Evaluation of the pros and cons of school configurations.)**

Regarding the scenarios listed, Member Musselman stated that his only comment from reading the minutes from the last meeting, is that it may go beyond “current configuration”. This started with a warrant article and went to all the alternatives; however, he is not sure they ever focused on the problem statement. One of the alternatives is more than keeping the current configuration. It is perhaps providing some leadership to come up with ways of managing enrollment fluctuations and managing whatever the shortcomings are with respect to extracurricular activities. The committee has not focused on this because they are focusing on alternatives. He thinks it may need a larger title than it has. (Referring to “Maintain established school building use”) It is not simply keeping the building as is, it is managing what the schools have in high quality education in whatever happens in the future.

Member Errecart stated that one of the other things to note is in keeping the current configuration, one of the things the committee was talking about was looking into a marketing campaign that would also examine strategies for retaining the families in town and attracting other young families.

Co-Chair Tsetsilas stated that marketing idea could be relevant for a few of the scenarios and also for a retention plan to retain the students moving from the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade to the middle school. She continued that they know they are in a period of decline. Historically the enrollment has been variable. She continued that people have asked her why enrollment is bad. What she has learned from a parent’s perspective is as enrollment declines there are programming changes. She does not believe those programming changes always uphold the excellence in education. There may be changes in extracurricular activities, even outside the programming changes itself. She thinks there are some benefits to critical mass. A school can become too small and there are social implications as well.

Member Musselman stated that some of the management things that might be looked at, with respect to the extracurricular activities, are combing some of those with other municipalities or partnering with non-profit organizations for athletic activities outside of Rye. There may be some creative ways to deal with the problems with extracurricular activities. He does not accept the conclusion that there cannot be high quality education with a middle school with less than three classes of 18 students. There are middle school all over the United States that provide high quality education at a small size.

Member Errecart stated her expectation is if they remain in the current buildings but enrollment continues to decline then the cost per pupil will continue to increase. That increasingly puts pressure on the Board to make cuts and that is not always in extracurricular enrichment activities.

Co-Chair Balboni stated it does make the School Board look at the budget more closely. In terms of justifying it to the town and the Budget Committee, the Board has to look at what they can do to adjust for the enrollment changes, which can have implications on staffing and programming.

Member Musselman stated there are two issues with respect to the financial impact of the school system. One is that the cost per pupil has gone way up. The second is the impact on property taxes. Interestingly, as enrollment drops, although the price per pupil goes up, the draw on taxes net goes down, even if staff is not cut because fewer high school students are being tuitioned out and the costs of the elementary and junior high are not going up. He continued there is not pressure in Rye to reduce the School Budget to a very low level. There is some but it's not what it is in communities that have a tax rate of \$25 per \$1000, there are more kids coming in and the tax pressure is very high. Rye has a different situation it would seem in simply looking at the cost per student.

Co-Chair Tsetsilas stated in looking historically at what has happened in the schools, especially at the junior high, they have shifted over the years from a four teacher team at each grade level to a three teacher team. If enrollment does continue to decline it could mean further structural changes. This creates more burden on the teachers to teach across curriculum in areas outside of their specialty. She thinks with enough advanced planning, we can respond proactively. She reiterated it does put a strain on teachers. It also creates an environment within the school of uncertainty among the staff.

Member Morford stated that higher costs per student are as much a marketing issue as anything else. Marketing is going to be a crucial factor in the next year for the School Board. He continued that loss of class size, loss of student population, does become a vicious cycle. The lower the population of the school the harder it is to maintain the perception that the school has all the resources that is needed, whether or not it is true. The perception is that this is the reality.

Member Goldman stated that based on his experience on the Budget Committee he can say that the parameter of cost per student can vary. However, in looking at the school budget increases over the past few years, it is very small.

Co-Chair Balboni stated that over time the budget creeps. The school budget is never going down. It is always going to be going up. It might be that the cost per student is lessening at the elementary school level but there is not a decrease in the budget because of a bump in high school students that have to be tuitioned out. It is a balance of costs.

Member Petralia stated he completely agrees with the perception. The school district faced that head on a few years ago when there was a perception that things were being taken away and students were not going to get a fair shake, which was absolutely not true. He pointed out that a high cost per pupil or low cost per pupil does not necessarily equate to a high quality education. Great things can be done with low per pupil cost. He continued that he looked at the Excel sheet submitted to the committee showing the Greenland data. He pointed out that at the junior high for the next three or four years, the enrollment numbers are relatively stable in the 130 to 138 range. It is actually a little bit higher than where it is now. He was encouraged to see those numbers which speaks to stability for the next three to four years. He recalls being at a school board meeting where they were discussing going to a middle school model. He was asked if he was going to keep taking things away from the programs. He stated that they were going to at

least maintain the status quo for the next three to four years. The population that has been projected in the Excel sheet supports that.

Member Musselman stated that he did not mean to imply that costs were going to go down. There is no question that staff salaries are inflating and are inflating faster than the rate of inflation. The cost of benefits have been high. The fact of the matter is, graphing percent change and cost per pupil with declining enrollment, it would be found that this would be climbing very quickly. With the reasonable way the school board and the Budget Committee have managed the budget, the increase in the school budget has been moving at a reasonable rate. If there is more decline in the future, there will be more pressure on the cost per pupil but that will not necessarily put more pressure on the draw of the tax.

Member Doran pointed out the facilities' costs don't go down either.

Member Moynahan stated the cost per pupil does go up when changes are made in programming. That has a huge impact. She thinks one thing that is really important to remember is that they are extremely fortunate that the town's people support the school budget every year. She pointed out that there are a lot of houses in Rye that do not have any kids in them but they vote to support the schools. When the school board has its all day budget session, they try to keep the budget as low as it can possibly be without affecting the education that is being provided for the students. She thinks the school board does a pretty good job doing that.

Co-Chair Tsetsilas stated that she is new to the budgeting process but she has seen other towns where the townspeople and budget committee have not been supportive. She feels Rye's school board is fortunate. She continued the school board has proactively looked at responding to the enrollment adjustments.

Member Goldman stated that he and his wife both have wonderful educations. Their children have wonderful educations. They understand the value of an education and where someone can go in this world with a good education. People he knows in Rye, who are educated and have children that are well educated, typically will never make a statement against a prudent process. If the process is good, the people of Rye support it because they have first-hand experience to what a good education is all about.

In summary, Co-Chair Tsetsilas stated that the Committee has mixed feelings about whether or not declining enrollment is a negative notion.

## **V. Continue evaluating Pros/Cons of School Configurations**

**The Committee finished evaluating pros and cons of school configurations. The summaries of the pros and cons discussed are attached.**

- Tuitioning students into Rye
- Tuitioning Rye students to PMS
- Maintain established school building use with marketing and retention effort

## **VI. School Principals Input to Various Scenarios – (Marie Soucy, RJH Principal and Suzanne Lull, RES Principal joined the committee for discussion.)**

Co-Chair Tsetsilas stated that when the pros and cons of different scenarios were discussed at the previous meeting, the committee was working with the understanding that Greenland may be considering expanding their building because enrollment is increasing. The question was, “as they expand could Rye’s students be tuitioned into Greenland?” Since that time, she has met with a school board member who explained Greenland is going through its own process of looking at the middle school structure. Their middle school structure is 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades share the same group of teachers in a “looping” model. The 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades share a different set of teachers in a similar “looping” model. Classroom size is approximately 25 students/classroom. Because Greenland is looking at a library expansion, a school expansion conversation is most likely several years away, which could mean temporary modular school units in the interim. Greenland is going through a similar exercise as this committee, and everything is on the table. The question that has been raised, is, “Rather than Rye tuitioning into Greenland, would there be capacity for Greenland to come to Rye?” She commented that they are considering this. Ms. Tsetsilas explained she posted combined school enrollment figures to show what it would look like based on the projections that the committee received in June. She thinks safely Rye could accommodate two of their grades. To have all three grades, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, would be tight. The numbers would be higher in the middle school than it has historically been.

Member Petralia stated there has to be conversation between the two boards. Similarly, what was done at Rye Junior High, with engaging parents and community in the decision making, the Greenland conversation is in its infancy right now. There is a lot of information that has to be not only received but also transmitted to the community in regards to any possible changes to where students may be attending school. He asked why the Greenland parents want to move their children from a beautiful facility. What would be the driving force to transport a child to Rye Junior High? He commented that Greenland has a beautiful facility.

Co-Chair Tsetsilas stated that it would give access to more programming and potentially reduce the student to teacher ratio. There are some solid reasons for Greenland to consider it.

Co-Chair Balboni commented that the committee should not spend a lot of time judging how Greenland is going to feel about it. The door has been open. They should look at it and say that is a possibility. Rye should negate the idea of tuitioning their students to Greenland.

Discussion on possible scenario eliminations:

- **Share with town hall**

Member Musselman stated it should stay on the list for community input, as it was part of the warrant article. He does not think it should be thrown out before it goes through that process. It should be thrown out afterwards. He commented they should get input. If it is not going to be recommended the committee should have a rationale as to why not because it is a fundamental part of the warrant article.

Member Errecart stated in order to rule something out, it should come down to, this question, “will it negatively impact the educational experience or it is not feasible?” To her, that is definitive enough that they could confidently say this should not be on the list.

Co-Chair Tsetsilas agreed. One of the objectives up front was to preserve excellence in education. She does not believe this scenario accomplishes this goal based on information from the principals. She thinks it would be fair to say the committee took a comprehensive look at it, and it was decided to not consider it further because of x, y and z. She does not think it has to be part of the public input session so long as the committee says they vetted it internally.

Co-Chair Balboni suggested that at the public input session they present all the scenarios so they understand that the committee did look at this. As part of the presentation, the committee should present why they felt it was not a viable option. That way it is out in the open that it was considered.

Member Goldman stated that he agrees with Member Musselman. The reason is that it may or may not be a viable option but part of it has to do with public will. He continued that he went through four cycles on the Town Hall Committee where they felt they had a really good rationale for not considering something but the public didn't. This is a systemic issue. It is not just the committee. It is public will and public input.

Member Errecart stated that if ruling something out feels too definitive for the committee's mandate, they could present the universe of options that they devised and flag the key concerns for certain options.

Member Musselman stated that he was going to suggest for the meeting in November that they take tuitioning to Portsmouth Middle School and tuitioning to Greenland off the list. He does not think either of them are imminent. Leaving them on the list as an option for Rye Schools casts a pall on the future of Rye Middle School. He thinks they ought to make the decision that they want an elementary school and a middle school, in some configuration here in Rye and not have that on the list of things that are going to carry forward for the next two or three years. He does not think it should be taken off the list now. For the public meeting, all of the ideas should

be presented with discussion on all the pros and cons to get people to tell the committee what they think. After due diligence, the committee can decide what to do in a report in November.

- **Pre-K through 8; Pre-K through 4 and 5 through 8; Pre-K through 6 and 7 through 8**

**Pre-K through 6 and 7 and 8:**

**Elementary School Principal, Suzanne Lull**, stated that the biggest issue with this scenario is space in the elementary building. The students who should be in a middle school model would now be in elementary model. By 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the students are ready to move on. She reiterated the biggest issue is space, especially with special education that is mandatory. Art and music programs would be put on a cart. It would be lowering the standard of education. Also, Rye Recreation would be totally out or in the gym, which would affect other after school programs like PTA and after-school enrichment programs.

**Pre-K through 4 and 5 through 8:**

Ms. Lull stated this scenario she really likes because outside of education it frees up space for Rye Rec. They can have the downstairs with a little tweaking. There is also an extra parking lot. There are a lot of reasons that would work. She does not see a lot of cons with this scenario. She continued that a lot of schools that she has seen group the grades or it could be a separate 5<sup>th</sup> grade. She thinks it works depending on how it is structured.

**Marie Soucy, Rye Junior High Principal**, stated she is not in favor of the pre-k through 8<sup>th</sup> and the pre-k through 6<sup>th</sup>. From an educational standpoint, it totally changes the middle school philosophy and would change the structure of what they are doing now. The students would not have access to as many resources or programs.

Referring to the 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> scenario, Co-Chair Tssetsilas stated that one thing that concerns her is they just went through a period at the elementary school where they tried to have the 5<sup>th</sup> graders operate under a middle school model. The first two years were somewhat successful but last year there were some issues so they reverted back to an elementary school model. She asked how the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class would function at the middle school.

Ms. Soucy explained there are different ways to set it up. She leans towards keeping it self-contained. Basically, the three classes would come over with the three teachers to the junior high building. The structure of how the classroom is run would not change; however, they would have more access to resources and programming. She continued they have the space for that. It would positively impact the student population, as far as more children being in the building. She thinks it would split the responsibilities between the schools a little more evenly. She pointed out once 5<sup>th</sup> graders experience the junior high offerings they may be less likely to leave for 6<sup>th</sup> grade to go to private schools.

**Greenland tuitioning into Rye**

Ms. Soucy stated the benefits of this model is the potential of four core teachers with each having an area of specialization. Also, there would be more children in the building.

**Pre-K through 4 and 5 through 8:**

Referring back to the pre-k through 4<sup>th</sup> grade model, Co-Chair Balboni stated that she met with the Recreation Director to get her perspective on that option. The Recreation Director really likes that option because it meets a lot of their needs. It also provides opportunities for interactions between seniors and students.

Member Moynahan asked how they would keep this type of model, in the space they have now, if the population rebounds.

Member Musselman commented this gets both buildings much closer to about the same percentage utilization.

Ms. Lull explained this scenario, with enrollment the way it is, it would free up three upstairs classrooms, which would allow the two downstairs rooms to be turned over to Rye Rec for a period of time. If the population came up, the worst that could happen is they would be in a scenario where space needs to be shared with Rye Rec.

Co-Chair Tsetsilas commented that this scenario does not address anticipated decline in enrollment numbers, which are projected for the next four or five years. If this model was combined with a retention and marketing program, the enrollment figures could increase.

**Greenland tuitioning to Rye**

Member Musselman stated he likes this model. It has programming upside and financial upside.

Member Errecart commented her concern is what does it mean in terms of stability for the students. If Greenland raises capital funds in two or three years, does this mean that everything is going to shift again?

Member Petralia stated there is too much assumption with consolidation. It is relying on other communities and other boards to make a decision today.

Member Errecart noted that she has very small children who feel vulnerable to her a lot of the time. She is open to the idea of 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> but parents would need to be brought along in the process and convinced of the benefits of 5<sup>th</sup> graders going into middle school, not just it spreads out the population.

Member Mikolaities stated that one thing that was identified in the Rec Space Needs Study was the lack of programming for junior high kids. If the rec department had space at the junior high, it would allow for some after school programs for junior high students.

**K through 8:**

Ms. Soucy stated this model will change the structure of how business is conducted in the schools day to day. It is going to be costly. If the junior high goes over to the elementary will there be science labs? Will they have the room and resources they have now?

**VII. 10/25 Public Input Session Presentation Planning**

**a. Review draft outline prepared by Paula Tsetsilas**

The committee discussed the process for the public input session and how the information will be presented.

**b. Determine presenters**

- **Paula Tsetsilas – Power point presentation**
- **Katherine Errecart – Present her data**
- **Gregg Mikolaities – Answer questions on behalf of Rye Rec**

**VIII. Public Comment**

- **None**

**Adjournment**

**Motion by Salvatore Petralia to adjourn at 10:07 a.m. Seconded by Doran Morford. All in favor.**

Respectfully Submitted,  
Dyana F. Ledger