

BERKSHIRE HILLS REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT & RICHMOND CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL DISTRICT

JOINT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING

Teleconference Meeting

April 21, 2020 - 6:00pm

APPROVED RCS

Present:

School Committee: BHRSD: S. Bannon, M. Thomas, A. Hutchinson, R. Dohoney, S. Stephen; RCSD: Dewey Wyatt, Adeline Ellis, Sue Benner

Administration: P. Dillon, S. Harrison

Staff/Public: Karen Fierst, Mackenzie Greer, Lauren Brossal, Doug Bruce, Neal Pilson, Rachel Kanz, Mary Dare, Erin Rooney, Andrea Harrington, Eileen Mooney, Heather Bellow, Lauren Broussal, Even Triantafilidis, Bridget Stephen, Doug Bruce, Jill Pompei, Neal Pilson, Erin Rooney, Mary Daire, Natalie Gingras, Hannah Roller

Absent:

RECORDER NOTE: Meeting attended by recorder and minutes transcribed during the meeting and after the fact from live recording provided by CTSB. Length of meeting: hour, 54 minutes.

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Steve Bannon called the meeting to order immediately at 6pm.

The listing of agenda items are those reasonably anticipated by the chair, which may be discussed at the meeting. Not all items listed may in fact be discussed, and other items not listed may be brought up for discussion to the extent permitted by law. This meeting is being recorded by CTSB, Committee Recorder, members of the public with prior Chair permission and will be broadcast at a later date. Minutes will be transcribed and made public, as well as added to our website, www.bhrsd.org once approved.

- **Next Steps - Facilitative Process/Check-in on Shared Services/Planning for the Future** - D. Wyatt - I am the chairman of the Richmond School Committee. This is a joint meeting of the Richmond School Committee and the Berkshire Hills School Committee Shared Services. One thing to note is the meeting is being recorded. At tonight's meeting we want to discuss moving ahead with the consultant to help us navigate on this and what the future looks like. We did meet previously on April 9th. We do

have some minutes we can review (inaudible). P. Dillon - we are joined by Karen Fierst. I sent her bio around to folks that were not at the last meeting. She has a nice background in education and facilitation. What I thought we could do tonight since this is Karen's first time joining us, let's let her get to meet us by going around and sharing a little bit about what our hopes for the project are or moving forward. A follow-up to this is Karen will reach out to you individually and maybe subgroups to do some interviews or dig a little deeper. She will be putting together a draft plan that we can respond to in advance of our next meeting to see if she is hearing what we all said and probably want her to do. I think it makes sense to give Karen a second to introduce herself but then after that to really take time to not have Karen on the spot but for us to be on the spot and share in a couple of sentences what we are interested in doing. Please identify yourself as being from Richmond or Berkshire Hills and share some things that will be important for Karen as she starts to build context. In advance of this, I shared the grant proposal and minutes of previous meetings and other background and contextual information. K. Fierst - I am so grateful to be here and excited to meet with all of you. I just moved to the region on the New York side but I just moved up here. I have been living with my family in Indonesia for a couple of years. I have a deep and long background in education across multiple sectors. I hope you have my resume, etc. and I won't go into that here. Individual calls or subcommittee calls will be really critical in getting to know one another better. I take that part the most seriously to really develop an understanding of all these things and to move forward and get feedback along the way. I am really looking forward to starting the work. P. Dillon - thank you Karen. Dewey if it makes sense, do you want to lead us through and call on people or do you want me to call on people to share some of their ideas? D. Wyatt - either way. I can start. Hi Karen. This is Dewey Wyatt, chairman of the Richmond School Committee. I am looking forward to the work coming up. We have had a lot of discussion about what our future looks like in meeting all the needs educationally, programatically, financially and to say the least, it is very complicated. There are a lot of different scenarios and a lot of different points of view. We are looking forward to having some facilitate us though the process to understanding the pros and cons and needs that are out there. We have had a good five-year relationship with Berkshire Hills. We are looking forward to getting to know you better and understanding how you can help us. We have a lot of people that are very passionate about education and want to see what we can do to keep our future arrangements bright wherever they lead. A. Ellis - I am very familiar with Bank Street and Riverdell Country Day and everything that you have done and where you have been. Let me tell you one of my concerns and it is a concern of the parents, teachers and students. I am very concerned about population trends next year and the year following. I want to make certain as the parents do, that we have a number of spots at the Monument Mountain High School. I think that right now, people are starting to realize that they can work remotely. There is no cost in productivity from the people I have spoken to which makes me think that we may see more families coming to Berkshire County, to Great Barrington, to Richmond and that would mean, I am concerned about the availability of spots for our students at the high school. Parents want to always know that they are available. That is one of my concerns and parents' concerns. S. Benner - I am a relatively new school committee member so my concern is that I feel our relationship with Berkshire Hills has been very good. I am concerned about the cost to the community to joining Berkshire Hills and the cost to the community if we don't join Berkshire Hills because superintendents are very difficult to come by and Richmond would have to have a part-time superintendent. I am not sure a part-time superintendent could do everything that we want them to do as well as bring the other experts in services such as the business manager and things like that. The one thing I really want to make sure of is that the taxes in Richmond don't go up tremendously

because of the new building project or something like that. I worry about what happened over in Central Berkshire with Waconah's new building. Those are my concerns. D. Wyatt - Karen, Richmond has formed a superintendent advisory committee several months ago with a cross section of our community to help them understand and analyze but it has been a little difficult getting going so the question for the future is with that committee in place, how to engage that committee to go down a path as well. So far, it is a group that has been asking some very thoughtful and important questions. L. Broussal - I am one of the co-chairs of the superintendent advisory committee and also former chair of the school committee a few years ago. I am also familiar with your background. I have a daughter and son-in-law that work for Teach for America. I have concerns representing the superintendency advisory committee about whether Berkshire Hills is the right choice for Richmond because that has come up at a lot of our meetings because we don't really understand at this point what would be the ultimate structure for Richmond; what it would mean for Richmond and complications down the road and how it would look in the long run for Richmond. That is my main concern and I think it is a concern of the superintendency advisory committee. N. Pilson - I am a selectman in the town of Richmond which means I am an elected official, somewhat similar to a town councilman in New York, which I was many years ago. My responsibility is to the entire town. The school budget represents close to half of our total town budget but relative to Berkshire Hills, we are a much smaller part of the puzzle and our concern is several. There is an intense loyalty in our town to the school itself to the point where my sense of the town sentiment is that there really is not much interest (maybe not a final decision, but I want you to know where we are coming from) in a full merger in our school district and Berkshire Hills. There is interest in terms of discussion of a possible merger or a combination of some kinds with Berkshire Hills with respect to the high school. That becomes an issue not only of what is good for our students, what is good for our parents, what is good for the school, so my responsibility is a good idea to the town. How do we approach these discussions with the perspective that I am the sole town elected official on our committee and we have more than enough time for you to get acquainted with our little town of Richmond. We are a unique town. We are considerably different from Great Barrington, but not so different from Stockbridge and West Stockbridge; two towns that did elect to merge their systems with Berkshire Hills. I look forward to working with you. You have an interesting background. At some point, I am sure you will let us know what led you to come back from Indonesia to New York which is quite a cultural difference. I know we will get to know each other better at future meetings. A. Harrington - I was a school committee member in Richmond. I am a graduate of Richmond school. I moved away but when I moved back to Berkshire County, I specifically wanted to move back to Richmond so my kids could attend Richmond School. I have an 8th grader and a 3rd grader who are students at Richmond School. For me, my goal in this process is to position our school for the future and prepare our students to excel academically to really contribute to our community, to be kind and generous people. I think our town is in a great position right now to negotiate from a position of strength. I think we have that to our advantage right now and I think we need to look to the future in deciding where we want to be for our school in the next 5 to 20 years. I think that the partnership with Berkshire Hills has given us access to a level of expertise in a lot of different areas. I think Superintendent Dillon, we have really benefited from his experience and his involvement and being able to use the policies and procedures. Sharon Harrison has been an amazing business manager and we have benefited from the use of the Berkshire Hills building and maintenance. I think we could do a lot more benefiting from their technology which our school really needs a lot of help with. A small school just on our own trying to do these things, we wouldn't be able to accomplish those things without outside help. For me it is important that Richmond pays it's fair share of the high school

because there is a sense from other towns who are paying for the high school that Richmond isn't paying their fair share. I don't think that that is just but it is also very important to me that we have a certain amount of autonomy that we can really be in charge of the culture of our school. My kids have really benefited from the special education department and other kids also have the benefit of those kinds of services. I do think that Richmond has a lot of room for improvement in terms of academic excellence. I think it is important for the town to recognize that and realize how important it is to keep investing in our school. E. Roney - I have two students at Richmond and I am on the superintendent advisory committee and I am wondering if you will be meeting with the committee soon and will that whole committee come back around and will we see you so we can talk specifically about what we have come up with and all the things we have talked about. K. Fierst - that is the intention that I will go through a whole round of inquiries, speaking to people and stakeholders in different configurations and groups that are comfortable meeting together. E. Roney - that would be great. One thing that has come up from the meetings we have had is that the current situation with all the shared services is not working. Teachers have stated that it is not working, parents have said that it is not working. There is the working together aspect and there is having different specialists available but really in the end when it comes right down to it, it is not working. I think the committee has a lot to tell you about what we have already come up with. K. Fierst - the whole initial stage will be me listening and trying to understand. E. Roney - how long do you expect to go through the listening? K. Fierst - that's a good question. We haven't mapped out a timeline. The listening is endless. The task is also to keep things moving. Then if we have to dive in deeper and listen more to specific things, then we do. Each meeting should feel like progress. E. Roney - a timeline would be great. P. Dillon - Erin, that was one of the things we started talking about and in advance of our next meeting, Karen will share a draft proposal and a timeline. Let me shift gears a little bit because I want to be mindful of timing on this. I think we got most of the people from Richmond that wanted to say something at least in this first round. Did I miss anybody from Richmond? N. Pilson - could I add one more point? We here in Berkshire County are aware of this but the COVID-19 virus is going to hit our county particularly hard. We are a county where the economy is heavily based on cultural events during the summer, which probably all of which will be cancelled. We are having this discussion with the context of a rather significant economic blow that is going to occur to our county and upstate New York as well. We are uniquely going to feel the impact of the cancellations and in that context I have to view how the town of Richmond approaches these conversations. I just wanted you to be aware of it and sensitive to it. K. Fierst - thank you for bringing that up. I agree. P. Dillon - on the Berkshire Hills side, let's start with Steve; he can share a few ideas and then I will work through other people on the committee. S. Bannon - I think this is a process that we have to work through. I am hearing some things tonight that are brand new to me; that shared services are not working, which is brand new. I think what we really have to work on is the process and everyone is heard and we work through it. What is most important is the education for Richmond and Berkshire Hills students. I think if we can work on that, the rest of it can be worked out. This is the beginning of a process, not the end. I would defer to Rich Dohoney who is the chairman of our shared services committee. R. Dohoney - We are very happy to have you onboard. Everyone you have heard from tonight on the committees are volunteers and adding a level of professionalism to this is a real pleasure. S. Stephen - I am looking to what will be best educationally for the students and what is financially going to work for all of us. It is going to be a bit of a slog to get through some of this stuff but that is really what I want to get down to the bottom of. A. Hutchinson - we want to do what is best for the students and come up with something that is workable. It has been sharing a superintendent across three school systems and that has become unworkable. We want to

do what is best for the kids and go forward. Whatever we do about building a new school or revamping our school, is not going to be in Richmond's pocket. It is on the three existing school towns.

M. Thomas - I pretty much agree with what others from Berkshire Hills are saying. It is about the kids, the education and the future of it all.

P. Dillon - is there anyone else out there that I missed?

D. Wyatt - there are strong points of view and opinions, and all are valid but we are at that point that we need to get down and analyse things so that we can understand what the best arrangement is. I think everybody would agree that we just want to formalize only something that makes sense for everybody. Having somebody with independency helps facilitate us through this and figure out what we really need in place for the future. I am really looking forward to that.

P. Dillon - I think our next couple of things, and Karen I am trying not to put you on the spot, do you want to say anything more about process and then Dewey and Steve, do we want to try to set another date and presumably the focus between now and that meeting, Karen will talk to various stakeholders, try to map out the beginning of a draft plan and use the next meeting to share that plan with the group to lock it in and go from there.

K. Fierst - It seems pretty evident in the conversation, what I can bring at first is to structure the discussion, and there are a lot of organizational pieces in making perspectives really specific and visual. Having resources available so people are on the same page of discussion. I think that feels like a really important goal for me to play, to take it all in and bring it back in a way that is very clearly laid out and allows people to work through decision making in a linear way; to identify ways that we already have consensus and we don't have to belabor them any further. Things of that nature. That process does require my own deeper dive; my own sort of tour of empathy and come back and put it together for the next conversation so you can see a timeline and a variety of tasks. I am very flexible about configuration and how to do those conversations so everybody really develops a shared understanding of where we are headed and how the decision was made and exactly what will be needed to make the transition successful. There is a decision then there is transition and all of those things people need to have a shared understanding. I noted the comment that Rich made that everybody being volunteers and also being spread very thin for a whole host of reasons. I think it will be super helpful to have somebody who is dedicated to this project and moving everybody through it in a linear way.

P. Dillon - that is really helpful.

Dewey, do you want to talk about potential next dates for a meeting.

D. Wyatt - can I just add one more thing? Any analysis with state funding that is available and understands what is working and wants can work but if something doesn't make sense, don't do it. There are complex factors here. Is this really the right thing to do and speaking from the Richmond side, what is the right thing? Getting a scope of it all and seeing what different scenarios look like so everyone feels like we are making a sound decision at the end of the day. Is seven to ten days a reasonable timeframe for you to put together a draft outline of what this would look like and I guess this would involve interviewing people in different groups.

K. Fierst - I don't think the interviews will be done at that time. We can start quite a few of them but I would be surprised if that was one week from now and they are all settled. I could be misunderstanding how many people this is. We could certainly come back around and I could put together an initial draft that would be pretty tentative depending on all the feedback that needs to come. It would be an initial draft where people could say we think this needs to shift. It is tricky not knowing what will be unpacked in those conversations to be certain about the timeline. I am still in a place where I am quite differential on estimating some of those things.

D. Wyatt - that would be a refreshing first milestone is to get a feel of how you see this process working.

K. Fierst - I think I will be in the middle of conversations with people when that comes out. I don't think I will be done with those conversations but I can certainly put together a draft for people to look at. I realise this is a very ambiguous idea on day one. We will make it less ambiguous in that

timeframe but I don't think I will have achieved the level of understanding that I would want to be sure by that time. D. Wyatt - we can provide you with a list of contacts. K. Fierst - Just to help me understand, I would love to know the number of school committee members, the number of advisory committee members and then your perspective on the value of meeting with subgroups and individuals rather than other groups together. P. Dillon - I can respond to some of that. There are three school committee members from Richmond; there are ten from Berkshire Hills but only five of them are on the subcommittee. Lauren, what is the total number on the advisory committee? L. Broussal - there are 14. K. Fierst - I feel that it is manageable for me to have one-on-ones with everybody but I won't be done in seven days but that is probably the best way to begin talking to everybody individually for at least a half hour. S. Bannon - I have a question. What is the rush for seven to ten days? Why not give a couple of weeks so at least she can start the interview process and then come back to us rather than being halfway through it. D. Wyatt - it was more about putting the milestone shorter rather than longer to keep the process going but in all fairness what do you need to do in order to do a good job? K. Fierst - I need those conversations. I would be happy to give you a basic idea of what makes sense in the process but I think once those conversations come out, it will start to be more clear of the places that we need to dive deeper and where we need to spend more time. For 22 calls, two to two and a half weeks; I don't know if that is overwhelming but I think going from 7-10 days to 14-18 days would help a lot. I am also juggling homeschool with my children. If they were in school, this could go a little more quickly. P. Dillon - we are all there. D. Wyatt - maybe we could pencil something in on the calendar. Did I hear two weeks or maybe a little longer? K. Fierst - If you think late in the first week of May or early in the second week of May; I don't know if there is a typical day of the week people come together. P. Dillon - May 4th, 6th or May 11th, 13th? K. Fierst - those are all fine for me. The 6th or the 11th. S. Bannon - the 11th would work at 6pm. A. Ellis - I just want to alert you that this is the day before our school committee meeting. D. Wyatt - that would be good. S. Bannon - I am not sure what that matters? K. Fierst - that would be good then you could go back to your committee and debrief. A. Ellis - that is what I was thinking of. No need to get snotty; whomever did that. S. Bannon - it was Steve and I wasn't being snotty, I was asking a question if it matters. A. Ellis - well, it does matter because we might want to percolate the ideas and think about them and get all of that ready for the school committee meeting. P. Dillon - I think we go with the 11th and check in and if we need to move it, we move it. If we don't keep making progress, as we get closer we lose momentum. D. Wyatt - this is a long time coming and we need to get the superficial discussions down to the nuts and bolts and analyzing facts and figures and so forth. N. Pilson - speaking of nuts and bolts, we have asked for, I believe almost a month ago, some basic financial information on what Berkshire Hills would be considering. We need to evaluate what the cost to Richmond is, the range of the cost to Richmond would be if we were asked to participate at the high school level. In terms of the various formula that are used with your association with West Stockbridge and Stockbridge, what we are basically asking for is to evaluate what the financial picture would look like if we were to merge with Berkshire Hills at the high school level and we have not gotten that information and without it I know our selectboard, and I think our finance committee, would probably say until we see that we are not able to evaluate the ultimate discussion points that we have been talking about here. P. Dillon - I am not sure how to respond to that. My feeling is we have to identify what some potential goals are before we look at that. Absent context, those numbers are potentially meaningless and whatever Richmond wants to do, I think has to be negotiated so it might be premature for me to share that information. D. Wyatt - Karen, hearing that, I think it gets to the process that Richmond has a need for information and that is where you could come in and identify that, how do we resolve that;

at what point or what technique and again speaks to getting the right answers at the right time. K. Fierst - sure. Everyone having the right information or scenarios of information...I agree. D. Wyatt - let's do May 11th at 6pm for the next meeting and keep the process moving ahead. P. Dillon - thank you everyone for your understanding on this. This kind of meeting is a hard one because it is like two steps backward to catch Karen up and get things going where they want to go but I think this lays the foundation for her to now reach out to people and go forward and do this kind of work we need to do. Obviously, this will include a complex financial analysis, multiple scenarios as well as hear educational needs and structures. There very well maybe some things we agree on will be easy and some things we don't agree on which will be hard. This only works if it works for everybody and if we can't make a case for it to work for everybody, we don't do it. L. Broussal - I would like to ask a question. Is everyone assuming we are moving forward with shared services for the coming fiscal year because I think this goes to the heart of what Neil was trying to ask or was commenting on. Richmond is in the process of setting or trying to set our budget for the annual town warrant for the annual town meeting which right now is scheduled tentatively for mid-June. It is a huge difference or at least some difference if we are assuming that we are moving forward with shared services with Berkshire Hills for the coming fiscal year as opposed to trying to find a part-time superintendent for Richmond or going back with Shaker Mountain for the coming fiscal year. That is coming right up in a couple of months. I don't know that we are all clear on what is happening beginning July 1st which is right around the corner. S. Bannon - Dewey and I talked about that today and we had an understanding between school committees that we would not leave Richmond high and dry next year that we do have an agreement. We have not voted on it at school committees but we do have an agreement. Dewey, do you want to add to that? L. Broussal - so that agreement is to go ahead with shared services? S. Bannon - yes. D. Wyatt - there is a lot going on so one of the key things is how to keep things stable while we analyze things. What we are looking to do is to extend for an 8-12 month period where we extend toward this fiscal year while we work off these details. I know there is a complexity of Shaker Mountain school union where they are going...I'm doing that structure at the state level until more is known. The plan is to continue the shared services while we analyze and work on this and understand what is the best for everybody involved. I think having to go out and look for another superintendent is unattainable at this time. L. Broussal - I think that has an effect on the school budget and I wanted to clarify that. D. Wyatt - one more point on that is the proposal we will have as a contract is for our school committee to their school committee is that amount plus a nominal 3% increase that is to be decided and from a line item standpoint, that is less than what we are holding right now but just a little bit. It is a round figure as a placeholder. N. Pilson - that is a good piece of information. It helps us. I was asking a more comprehensive question of if we go forward what is the financial plan for us to be part of Berkshire Hills for purposes of the high school. What does the financial plan look like, and we need to work on that. P. Dillon - part of the reason we got this grant was to have a thoughtful and deliberate process to evaluate a whole range of possibilities in a systematic way. While I could throw out a number today, in my mind it doesn't make sense to do that until we go through the process of looking at a whole host of things.

Business Operation:

Education News:

Old Business:

- **New Business:**
 - Public Comment
 - Written Communication

MOTION TO ADJOURN - D. WYATT SECONDED: A. ELLIS ACCEPTED: UNANIMOUS

Meeting Adjourned at 6:54pm

Submitted by:

Christine M. Kelly, Recorder

Christine M. Kelly, Recorder

School Committee Secretary