

BERKSHIRE HILLS REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT & RICHMOND CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL DISTRICT

JOINT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING

Teleconference Meeting

May 11, 2020 - 6:00pm

APPROVED RSC

Present:

School Committee: BHRSD: S. Bannon, A. Hutchinson,
RCSD: Dewey Wyatt, Adeline Ellis, Sue Benner

Administration: P. Dillon, S. Harrison

Staff/Public: Karen Fierst, Lauren Brossal, Neal Pilson, Rachel Kanz, Eileen Mooney, Bridget Stephen, Jill Pompei, Chad Gingras, Tracy Fancher, Beth Smith, Christina Lenfest, Susan Benner, Bob Gniadek, Michelle Smith

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.

- Karen Fierst - Presented Slide Show (see attached); I am going to start the facilitation of this process. Hopefully this meeting and this slide show will help to clarify a few things. It has been about two weeks since we last checked in. The purpose of this conversation I see as just framing the project a little bit more clearly as far as my work is concerned and the goal in getting toward the timeline. I will give you some updates on the preliminary work I did in the last two weeks and talk through stages of the process I am proposing that we follow. We will dive in on the early pieces of that first stage that I think you will see is probably mostly for people as a recap of things they have been working on. Then we can talk about next steps. There will be opportunities for comments and thoughts. Any questions about the agenda for the moment? Ok, good. I like to start meetings with quotes but this one is really

relevant. We are trying to come up with a strategy here and I came across this quote; strategy is about stretching limited resources to fit ambitious aspirations. If you don't mind I would like you to take a moment quietly thinking about those ambitious aspirations and we will worry about stretching those limited resources later. Just take a moment to reflect and hold them for the rest of the meeting. I know that everyone on the call knows this but just to articulate it at the top of the meeting, the goal of the project that we are engaged in is that by November of 2020, the Richmond Consolidated School Committee and Berkshire Hills Regional School Committee will arrive at an agreement for their relationship for the 2021-2022 academic year. I put that up there because I know there are some questions around the scope of the work for the consultation and other aspects of the exploration that Richmond wants to participate in. Just to be super clear about the grant's purpose and the parameters around that, that is the project goal. Having said that, we had some discussion over the past two weeks about the parameters of that and there are a couple of things that have been talked through and sort and I think it would be useful to just discuss if people have questions at that point. Essentially, I believe that as part of the journey to reaching a healthy agreement. It is considered worthwhile to include Richmond's whole landscape of options at the beginning of this process. There are several other options that we can talk about at the beginning of the process and that process of going through the landscape of options for Richmond can happen concurrently with the collaborative work with Berkshire Hills. Then I can help facilitate the exploration of options within certain limits. So what are those limits? Essentially when it becomes clear that it is an alternative option preferable for Richmond, then the Richmond School District can proceed autonomously with the balance for that alternative option. It would be considered outside the scope of this particular grant. If Richmond wanted to continue the process with consultation, they would need to seek funding that is separate from this grant. I do think that it is possible to embed the initial examination of the landscape of options and some comparative work in the context of this because I think it is essential to be able to reach a healthy agreement. I am going to pause there and let people think about that, ask questions because that was a big part of figuring out the parameters of the work.

N. Pilson - I have a very specific question because you just said is contrary to our understanding. Our understanding is that the grant money would include exploration by Richmond of other options beyond some form of merger with Berkshire Hills. I believe we were ensured that was the case. If you are taking the view that it is not the case, that is contrary to my understanding but I would invite the members of the school committee from Richmond to provide their context as well.

D. Wyatt - I am reading this and digesting this and I think we just need to be very clear and up front with the state and referring to Christine Lynch's department to get that clarified and buttoned up once and for all to what Richmond's latitude is using those funds.

K. Fierst - I think as we proceed even through this meeting, there is a full commitment in the first stage to do that exploration. The issue is that once it starts to get really narrowed down to an alternative if that were to happen, then the funding for continued consultation and the transition would be from a different source. The exploration is embedded in the proposal but once the road starts going further down one of those options, then this grant would cease to be relevant. I agree with you Dewey that it would be negotiated with the state I would suppose.

D. Wyatt - what we wanted to do in the work or the discussion in the past several months was to be sure that we end up and land on a good solid future for everybody involved on behalf of the students. If it diverges away and doesn't involve Berkshire Hills or any kind of an agreement, it does make sense at that point that it wouldn't be funded by a regional district type of grant. I guess we need to sort out where the lines are, where the depth of certain paths can take but I think I am hearing Karen say that is a little bit down the line as we map out the different paths first before even making any firm decision of which one that is.

K. Fierst - that is what I am saying. I am going to show you some slides that have some process points so you can see how far we can go into it and when we are closer to that point. L. Brossal - what is your source for saying that at some point beyond initial exploration there wouldn't be any further funding from the grant for exploring other options? K. Fierst - the grant will allow us to explore those options. I think the point is there is a limit to how far. If you were to start working on the transition to yet another option, then that work would not be funded. These are conversations I have had with Dr. Dillon and all the individual conversations I have had in between. If it is ok, I am going to switch to the next slide because I know that is a bit jarring but it is also ambiguous because what we really haven't defined is how deep the exploration can go and I think that becomes the negotiating point. There is a commitment to a degree of exploration. The question is what will be the sweet spot where it goes beyond exploration and is actual strategic planning for a different relationship. P. Dillon - I think it is important to realize that of the \$45,000 grant, \$20,000 is set aside for work with Richmond, \$15,000 of it is set aside for work with Hancock and New Ashford and \$10,000 is set aside for having the secretary to support the Shaker Mountain group. I don't know if it is as much an ideological thing as \$20,000 will only get us so far in having conversations and whatever range of possibilities come up to go to the next level, we will probably need to secure other money so if that money is just for Richmond or Richmond and Berkshire Hills or Richmond and Lenox or whomever. \$20,000 will buy X number of hours and days of your time. That is why I shared that idea. K. Fierst - I will show you how I integrated it so you can get a better sense. This is proposed. This is not approved in any way. It is worth discussing. Essentially I think there could be three stages to the process. In the first stage, it is essentially a whole host of things that I think boil down to a discovery period where we are exploring that landscape of options and you are defining what options we are looking at. We are also building a foundation of a way of comparing options so having a really solid list of factors for comparing options that everybody agrees to and helps work on. There are some different processes for weighing those factors and recognizing those factors, things like finances, the education model, administrative services and all these other factors that are going to be points of comparison. We will design and understand the framework for that collectively. I also think it is useful in that first stage to identify some of the external driving forces of the decision which are outside of the structure and design but some of these other uncertainties that are in the environment around population, state funding, economic shifts and all those things. We don't need to go deeply into them but I think it is really useful to have some reference that the entire working group is aware of then we would determine at the end of stage one which options Richmond will carry forward to the next stage. All of stage one is a very open phase looking at multiple options and in doing that we are actually doing a lot of work of adapting to how to do participatory work in this virtual forum, there are some things around negotiating roles in that first stage as we are going through this process, understanding common language, like unions v. mergers and things of that nature and making sure we have those definitions are very accessible to everyone because we will have to do a lot of communicating about these changes. We can test different protocols for decision making and see how they work to get through stage one. That is a really open place through May and June and looking across all of the different options. It would be in stage two which is the meat of the work where you are fully modeling viable solutions. There you are doing deeper negotiations and trying to build a shared vision between the two districts that we are talking about. It is possible that you would move an option forward, that was not Berkshire Hills and we could do some modeling for those viable solutions. I think it is still possible at that point. I think it is going to be a bit of an intuitive decision when it would start to be evident that an alternative solution was where you were going to invest the energy. At that point you could support any new solutions or

integrated solutions that we haven't talked about in the first conversation in stage one. Then in stage three, moving into October and November, it would really be about pulling together the details of the presentation, this is the plan, we are still negotiating a few details but we start to have a presentation of the whole; we can do community education at that point or at least plan for it and start planning what the implementation would look like so you would have a bucket list of things that would have to happen to make this change and this transition optimal. So I don't know if that approved process again has not been approved, helps clarify anything about the former comment but if people want to pause here and comment, again this is proposed so it can absolutely be tweaked and edited in any way.

N. Pilson - since I made the former comment, I am comfortable with that because in stage two we will be evaluating other options and other models that might be available to Richmond. If we get to stage three and we have made the decision that we want to go in a different direction, I can understand where we need further grant money. I do appreciate that in stage two these other options will be discussed and modeled. We can resolve as we move. That is okay.

L. Brossel - Have we found out if indeed the grant money can be used after June 30th because stage two extends after June 30th.

P. Dillon - I am working on that really aggressively and other folks have similar concerns. We might need a legislative act for it to happen but it hasn't happened yet and we can't get a legislative action, there is another technical way we can move the money that would be seen as appropriate.

K. Fierst - any other thoughts on the proposed process before we move forward?

D. Wyatt - I think it looks good for now.

K. Fierst - we can come back to any of this, shift them, move them and discuss things; if timelines aren't working, they are movable. Hopefully this will be a starting point for us. I am going to dive in on what has already begun in stage one. Certainly stage one is a discovery period and I think I said on the superintendent advisory call that we had over a week ago, I used the analogy of puzzle pieces. This is a puzzle and we were looking at all the pieces scattered all over and just turning them over and seeing what each piece person or stakeholder and each little fact is a piece of a puzzle. We are just turning them over to unpack all of the different parts of this complex challenge. In the spirit, this is some of what has been done in the discovery period. I had discussions with the current superintendent, Dr. Dillon and I have had individual calls with the Richmond School Committee; we had a group call with the superintendent advisory committee; I've had individual calls with the superintendent advisory chair and the principal at Richmond. I have done some personal exploration of resources that are available through Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education because they have an interest in district rezoning and have in the last decade put together some various resources for comparing data. I have had individual calls with the Berkshire Hills School Committee chairman and, I have a couple of calls with more people from Berkshire Hills that are planned for this week. Then there is a plan in the next week to talk to Dr. Dillon and Sharon Harrison, the business administrator and the purpose of that meeting is the first deep dive into the financial questions and how we are going to parse the pieces of that challenge. That is the first step into discovery. The next part of stage one, and for me this is about having a common foundation of what the process will look like. This is a table; we can put some information into a table but I think that it will most likely not fit neatly into a cell when we start digging in; it will be more of a check box I think in some ways, like have we looked at the financial picture in each of these models, have we looked at the education program of each of these models. I just wanted to give you an overview of what the initial process really looks like. It looks like we are looking at the landscape of options and I threw in Richmond alone, Richmond 9-12 with Berkshire Hills 9-12; Berkshire Hills PK-12, Shaker Mountain Union and any new options, there has been a mention of Lenox but we will later in this call go ahead and take a look at what the options are on the table and have a change to chime in with any additional

options that people feel need to be there on the landscape. On the other side of the board, you will see there are factors. I threw in a few factors; there are more on a future page but these are the points of comparison that we want to be looking at. We want to have a financial picture for each option, we want to have a sense of the impact on the education program, there are concerns about how the school committee would function in each model and what would be the impact there; what would the administration operations look like. It is important that we do a bit of work around the prioritization of those factors or you could also call it the weighted meeting because some of the aren't equally weighted but weighting those factors as we discuss but that has to be to a certain extent fairly collaborative work although there will be individual prioritization as well. This is basically the framework and the foundation and sort of a simplified example of the work we will be doing in stage one. This is where I think it is useful for people to understand some of the external driving forces. These have come up in all of our conversations, things around population, things around various aspects of funding, student enrollment, school choice programs and things that are really external. Again we don't have to dive deep into them, we are not trying to change them but it is useful to have in working through this, a shared understanding of what some of those driving forces are and it may also in this climate useful to have just a bucket that we keep somewhere together of some critical uncertainties that probably linger in people's minds as we are making this decision. Again, these are not big parts of the work and the source of this work of driving forces and uncertainties is really when you are doing scenario planning with a lot of uncertain outcomes. Obviously we are hoping for a very certain outcome from this project but I think you can avoid that some of these things are going to be on people's minds as they are working through the choices. Before I go on to the landscape of options, does anybody have any questions about this sort of model? The next bit is just looking at the landscape of options. This is a little draft of a couple of options that are on the table now. They were almost all on the other one and Lenox is on there because it has come up in conversations. This is an opportunity to be generative, to be putting all the options on the table. The question marks are there to open the discussion to anybody on the call who wants to indicate a new option that is not there or if one of the options that there is a split up option or if you see Berkshire Hills 9-12, the high school option, then there is the full merger and I just sort of inferred if you are thinking about a merger with Lenox, it would be the same two possibilities. Are there other things out there in the landscape I missed? N. Pilson - What is interesting is, while there have been discussions internally within Richmond, there have been discussions with Shaker Mountain and Berkshire Hills and I might not necessarily be aware of it. Has anyone had conversations directly with Lenox? We talk about it, we speculate about it but I am not aware that there has been an actual conversation at this time. I don't want to take it off the table, but I am just curious; has there been any contact? D. Wyatt - the only contact has been an email with Lenox after the news report of your selectmen's meeting and just suggesting that they would be open to discuss. In my point of view, I think there is a level of responsibility and I guess we owe it to continue to look at factors with Berkshire Hills before just jumping and moving somewhere else. It is a whole other layer of complexities but that is the only thing was an email acknowledging receipt. K. Fierst - The school committee chair reached out after the Berkshire Eagle article and just put in on the table. There was an outreach. Having said that, I do think as we go down this road, we keep a placeholder for it and I said this in another conversation, even if it is down a whole roll of factors, there are a whole host of question marks and I think you are just making an acknowledgement that was put on the table during this process. N. Pilson - I'm not sure we don't exhaust our discussions with Berkshire Hills before we have an initial conversation with Lenox. I am not sure that is how it should work. I want to think about this. D. Wyatt - as with all of this, is

timing and how it diverges. K. Fierst - is there anything else out there that we can theoretically remove those question marks; there is nothing beyond this that people are sitting on. If we did some diligence on some of these options, it would satisfy people's curiosity and maybe some doubt as we go forward. I think that is probably the total list, if anything else comes up, you know this is here and we can discuss additions another time. Here is another one for people to chime in on and it is essentially a brainstorm around the factors. The ones on the left in color are ones that came up fairly frequently and strongly in our early conversations. You will see there is a slight color coding where you have your educational programming, your high school choice, your special education services need to be looked at, finances in the immediate future, finances in for a long-term outlook are critical, obviously the administrative services and the operations that come with each of these mergers and packages or that would need to be found independently, transportation came up and representation came up and by representation I mean how the school committee is configured in each option. Beyond those options, are there factors that people are contemplating that they want to add to the conversation? P. Dillon - I have two things and they are hard to quantify but some sort of discussion around the educational impact. Then maybe something around the potential impact on staff. D. Wyatt - that was going to be my suggestion, faculty and staff. L. Brossal - I am not sure if this is the right place for it but I don't see local autonomy at the elementary school level. K. Fierst - I am not sure exactly where...I will need to think about that one and how to get that in there as a factor. D. Wyatt - it does touch on the K-8 governance. L. Brossal - it is more than just the school committee representation, which I think is what you have there, representation; more than just that; it is a lot more it is also curriculum, funding, etc. K. Fierst - I will think about an overarching label for that. We will come back to it and if I don't nail it, you can say no that is not quite that either and we will keep working on that part. N. Gingras - is this the place for term, like if it was going to be a contract for X amount of years. K. Fierst - I think that would be great to have a term. Absolutely. It is a commitment question. What is the degree of commitment in each. Just as a little bit of foundation building for working together as a working group, any time a working group comes together, we all come with really different needs for our own working preferences and there are exercises you can do around this. It is not my intention to do those exercises but I do think it is useful at the end of a little bit of work together to think what preferences we bring to the table and then in the process to try to see if everybody needs can be somewhat met. Essentially how this works is it works around the compass. People who gravitate toward a preference of north are incredibly action oriented and they will want to move into action as quickly as possible whereas people who are to the west are going to really dive deeply and want to understand all of the details before they can make any decisions about what action to take. People who gravitate toward the south are really concerned about people. People who are concerned that everyone's voice is being heard, concerned that the transitions are changed, or that people are taking action without thinking through all the impacts on people will really hold them up. The east people really want to see the full picture and have an end vision before they get moving and before they are prone to action. I put this up here just as a small reflection for people because around the table, we all move around the compass in our work. We have to be able to do all four of these things but we all have one of them that is really strong for us and in our preferences, we can often miss the strengths of what other people are bringing to the table so I thought I would throw that in there as a piece of self knowledge and a piece of empathy for others as we are putting together this work. Does anyone have any questions about that? Or does anyone want to disclose their orientation? Most conflict around conflict will come back to people who have different orientations feeling really at odds with one another. N. Pilson - I am not comfortable with that because frankly I think I personally have a foot in

each of the four; I think every one of those is part of the decision making. That is what I do for both as an educator/teacher and as a business person. You may lean in a given direction but I think a lot depends on the facts of the situation. It is an interesting graphic but I'm not sure you can put people in various categories even if they are willing to go. I am not sure how relevant it is but I am not concerned about it. K. Fierst - I think your point is well taken. I think people work all the way around and I agree with you that there is a sequence that each situation demands and you have to be able to go through it. I think my point was simply that sometimes frustration and conflict arises because of the individual difference where people are in a moment and what they are feeling a need for. N. Pilson - I agree with that. I just don't like to categorize people as best east, west, north or south. All of us have pieces in each point of the compass. K. Fierst - I am going to continue the individual conversations and the financial conversations; what we need to do together and then I will open the floor, determine the frequency of the meetings and group configurations you want to go forward with. There will be some work and once we get the factors laid out in more detail, it would be great if people would send out some information about those factors and have people do a quick exercise, probably in the form of a survey to talk about the weight of the factors which is really a reflection to help move forward. I will go back to the open floor and see if people want to chime in. N. Pilson - is this open to the public as well as committee members. Who's voices are you soliciting? K. Fierst - I think it would probably be best to start with the committee members and then we can go public. I don't have a preference. I think we have time allotted, if there are things people want to bring forward. P. Dillon - I think we need to have an aggressive timeline to move stuff forward. I would argue for meetings every one or two weeks, probably two weeks gives you more time to do stuff between the meetings and if we are meeting every week, you don't have enough time to get some things done. I think anything more than two weeks would really slow us down. K. Fierst - I have questions on all of the options all together or going back and doing Richmond School Committee work and Richmond Superintendent Advisory Committee work and then coming back to this group. Is there a way we want to configure those different groups or is it preferable for a variety of reasons that we stick to this merged group consistently. Am I making sense? That piece is important to figure out. L. Brossel - I think the superintendent Advisory Committee has to defer to the school committee on this; what format they would like us to be in. D. Wyatt - That is fair. The one aspect with analysing options is to identify the parameters that are near the top of the list that will be something that is successful or not successful. I know on the Richmond side, the financial piece has been a big question, there has been a lot of dialogue and interaction back and forth, but it would be good to answer that piece because if the criteria can't be met, let's know that early and what other elements of the different ideas would we identify as something to fail fast on. That is what I think about and I agree with Peter's comment about two weeks or no more than two weeks as we have to be aggressive and steady to get to an end point. However we analyse things structurally we don't commit time or waste time, everybody's time, on something that isn't viable. How can we identify that early? K. Fierst - there are sort of two things happening in this next gap between our next meeting. I will work with Peter and Sharon on the financial information and start unpacking and what information we can get. The other piece was about the transparent weighing of the factors is exactly to your point. There will be factors that are weighted more heavily and those top of the list factors that could eliminate options right from the beginning. A. Ellis - We started talking about process, I feel as a member of the school committee, we have an advisory committee and then we have you to guide them. I feel like I need to sit back and you need to report your finding and the opinions of the committee to me and to the other members of the committee. I feel that is what my role is; to sit back and listen to your findings and opinion. If you

could do some research based....when you guide the committee, if you could also guide it with research-based findings to help guide them. K. Fierst - this is sort of a low-level question, but in that request it is it your thought that you would want me to come to Richmond School Committee meetings specifically without the entire group and do some reporting there? A. Ellis - the group could be there but I think that we need to be enlightened and guided by the committee that you are leading. K. Fierst - ok. It is a new way of looking at it. I think that part of what you want me to do is facilitate in part the Superintendent Advisory Committee and that makes sense. I have a ton of notes from our first conversation; we talked for two hours and I have lots of things from that. I drew on all of that from generating the process and of course all the meetings are open; I understand that. From that conversation, would you like to in the next week, just have a school committee meeting? Would you want a Richmond meeting in a week, a full group meeting in two weeks? Does that feel like the right cadence and in that meeting I can get you a detailed report not only of what was found only in conversations last week but those happening this week as well? A. Ellis - I think that is a good way to go. K. Fierst - so we need dates for one week from now. Is there a way the school committee tends to prefer to schedule their meetings? D. Wyatt - we can look at the calendars and follow up and find a date next week. K. Fierst - in two weeks we would do this full group again. D. Wyatt - do we need to confirm the roles and responsibilities and ultimately is the school committee responsible and the idea of the advisory committee was to get some good resources crosscutting the community to help boil out and digest so I agree with Adeline on that point. I just need to button down and make sure there is no misunderstanding or confusion about that part of the process. K. Fierst - I absolutely think so. I put it in the proposed process in stage one that there were negotiated roles. If roles were set out in a certain way and they evolved and things shift and change and then you want to reset them into something that works better for the process then that is definitely a stage one thing to work on and make sure we move through the process of doing this and getting going that is absolutely a goal. You want it all teased out. D. Wyatt - yes, that is definitely key to make sure there is clarity there. P. Dillon - two weeks from today is Memorial Day, so I am assuming that is not a good day. What about two weeks from tomorrow, Tuesday the 26th. Does that work for people? K. Fierst - yes, that is fine with me. D. Wyatt - that is good for me.

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