

Community Conversation Follow-Up Minutes
June 9, 2009

Attendance: Sam Asikainen, Amy Ayer, Thomas Ayer, Diane Barlow, Joan Barlow, Michael Bilica, Art Brodeur, Jane Budd, Melinda Carpenter, Garry Carabeau, Terry Cote, Maureen Crowley, Guy DiBiasio, Bob DiQuattro, Kathy Healey, Paul Homer, Tom Latham, Linda Loretz, Gerald Marmat, Brendan Owens, Dale Warren, Ralph Yulo

Kathy Healey presented the summary report from the April 30 Community Conversation to an audience of 22 people.

The three central issues that emerged from the original community conversation were highlighted:

1. The Physical Condition of the school
 - A. Common concern about the deterioration of the school, especially safety and code compliance
 - B. Common concern regarding sufficient space for special education, technology, and extra activities
 - C. An acknowledged need for greater energy efficiency throughout the building, such as more efficient windows

2. Faculty, Staff and Curriculum
 - A. Acknowledged recognition that teachers are doing a great job
 - B. General acknowledgement that educational success is dependent on the work of teachers, parents, and children
 - C. Acknowledgement of a sense of community in the school – “staff and teachers know our kids”
 - D. Common desire for an increase in enrichment activities for older students, while recognizing that younger and older learner needs are different

3. Cost and Logistics
 - A. Concern for before and after school support as parents and families rely on such services
 - B. Concern regarding the amount of time kids spend on buses
 - C. Concern among parents about losing educational influence if all of Eastford’s students go to a regional school in another town

Representing the Building Facilities Committee, Mr. Brendan Owens reported that the Community Conversation process has been “a huge asset.” Being able to obtain community input and information from the report was also seen as “amazingly helpful.” Community residents are asking for more details and information, he noted, and consequently, the committee will be talking with 2 or 3 architects to obtain real numbers and real costs associated with the different options being considered. As a result, residents will be able to see side-by-side comparisons. In general, the community conversation highlighted the need to get information out to the town’s residents.

Meeting participants also learned that the Building Committee voted to remove the Cooperative K-8 School with Pomfret option from among the possibilities being considered at the Committee’s meeting of May 21, 2009. Mr. Owens shared that the following options are still being discussed:

1. A middle school arrangement that includes tuition
2. A combined/cooperative school for older students (with younger students attending Eastford Elementary School)
3. An expansion of the current Eastford Elementary School
4. The renovation of the current school facility

Mr. Owens noted that the Facilities Committee conducted significant research into the various options. Through this process, Committee members:

- Met with representatives from the Union School District (which is similar in size and demographics to the Eastford School District) to learn about their decision to build a new school rather than to regionalize with another district (including a decision not to renovate their existing facility since a new school was shown to be less costly)
- Determined to go ‘as green as possible,’ regardless of the design or final option. Energy efficiency and cost-savings are key determinants
- Shared that the Friar Report, completed two years ago, did not consider an option to expand, but focused, instead on only two options

Following Mr. Owens’ response to the Community Conversation, some participants expressed concern that the K-8 regionalization option had been taken off the table by the Facilities Committee, while others noted that they were pleased to see progress. Seeking confirmation that the vote by the Facilities Committee reflected the Community Conversation, a straw vote was requested. After much discussion, a vote yielded overwhelming support for the Facilities Committee having removed the option for future consideration (13 out of 18 eligible voters or 72% of those attending this follow-up meeting).

Representing the Board of Education, Garry Carabeau, noted that the Board appreciated hearing from the community. He shared that the Board also appreciated the public recognition of the value placed on having a community school for serving the Town’s children’s needs. He also emphasized that some steps have already been taken to address building facility needs. For example:

- The newly purchased boiler, subsidized by a grant, is already yielding energy savings
- The upgrading of the School’s lighting has resulted in lower utility bills
- The building’s old single pane windows should be replaced, which would result in greater efficiency and lower utility costs
- The upgrades in technology are an ongoing necessity and some, such as the installation of Smart Boards, have already been addressed

- The School’s science room has already been redone, but Town residents should consider what “renovation” really means, as there have been multiple piecemeal attempts to renovate in the past without having a consolidated view of long-term improvement needs

Following the initial presentations, the audience sought particular information which Dr. Guy DiBiasio, the School District’s Superintendent, was able to provide:

- Eastford Public School enrollment trends: How many kids will be coming into kindergarten over the next three, five, seven, ten years? Current data indicate that the trend in local enrollment will continue to be about what it is now. An update on enrollment projections, beyond 2014, as well as other relevant data, can be obtained from UConn.
- The role and function of the Community Conversation, the Facilities Committee, and the Board of Education in considering options for the school: The statute places the power and authority for final decision-making in regards to building facilities with the Facilities Committee. The Board of Education, however, has a role to play – though the Facilities Committee has the authority to identify and hire architects, review plans, etc. The Community Conversation process, however, has shown committee members the importance of getting information out so that citizens will be fully informed about issues being put before them for public vote.
- The role of the Board of Education was also clarified, as the Superintendent noted that the Board could vote on an option such as grade configuration, and while such a vote would have influence, the final decision would still rest with the Building Facilities Committee.

Over the course of the evening’s conversation, several themes emerged:

- The Community Conversation was a powerful mechanism for bringing diverse voices and perspectives to the table, and thereby, enriching the dialogue.
- Community participants desire more information, including a side-by-side cost comparison of the options to help them determine the best approach.
- Getting information out through a broader distribution network was key; participants suggested the following means as a way of keeping people informed about the plans concerning their community school:
 - Post information and reports on the school’s website
 - Publish articles in the local newspapers
 - Present on local radio talk shows and on the cable access station
 - Distribute the final report at Eastford’s Heritage Day
 - Insert the report in *The Communicator*
- Planning members expressed satisfaction with the turnout for the initial conversation, noting that folks in town are now talking about the issues – residents’ conversations are being heard at the school, other meetings, and neighbor-to-neighbor.
- The degree to which residents value education when it interfaces with the needs of their pocketbook emerged as a recurring topic. One participant, for example, suggested that we look at other regionalization models, such as healthcare, as these avenues may offer a means to retain rather than lose community values.
- Loss of power and influence over their children’s education and community was seen by some participants as a negative outcome of the regionalization alternative.

- Many emotional and intangible aspects of what constitutes a community school were raised through personal anecdotes. This rich discussion unearthed many concerns about the potential gains and losses associated with the different options being considered.
- Discussion about potential models, such as grade configurations (K – 8, middle school, etc.), led participants to ask for research studies relating to various school models to be made available for review.
- An overwhelming sense for maintaining a school presence in the town emerged through the community conversation process.

In concluding the meeting, participants identified *the next steps* to be:

1. Keep town residents informed and up-to-date; provide them with the relevant data in a manner (side by side comparisons, for example) that will help them make an informed decision on issues that affect their children's school.
2. Make the notes from this follow-up meeting available to everybody.
3. Collect information (the Facilities Committee) over the summer from the architects and prepare for residents a side-by-side comparison of costs associated with the options being considered.

Apply to the Graustein Foundation for an alumni grant for a new conversation to be held in the fall to bring the community together to discuss the Facilities Committee's findings.