**TOWN OF WILLINGTON**

**SPECIAL TOWN MEETING MINUTES**

**January 30, 2020**

The meeting was called to order at 7:01pm by Erika Wiecenski. First Selectman, Erika Wiecenski read the call of the meeting and asked for nominations for a moderator. Ralph Tulis made a motion to appoint Suzanne Chapman as moderator and was seconded by Christine Psathas.

Motion carried.

Moderator Suzanne Chapman asked to abstain from readying the call again. Everyone was in agreement. She also set ground rules and explained the paper ballot voting process to everyone.

**Item I**

To see if the townspeople, on the recommendation of the Board of Finance, will appropriate $16,900 from the Capital Reserve Fund for the purpose of patching the roof at Center Elementary School and Hall Memorial School.

Motion made by Bob Jellen and seconded by Geoffrey Prusak.

Discussion Followed.

Phil Stevens commented that because of the requirements by the state, there was not enough time to get the whole roof replaced by this time frame, which is why it is set for this summer.

Patrick Lord asked about the asbestos management plan and whether or not the roof had been assessed or was part of that plan. Superintendent Stevens said they aren’t aware that there is any abatement associated with the patching of the roofs and wasn’t sure if it was in the management plan.

Jim Bulick mentioned that CIP allocated $1,070,000 for the roof and wanted an update on that.

Superintendent Stevens replied that the dates to get reimbursed didn’t match up with the roof project. The earliest they would be able to do the full roof would be this summer.

Linda Minor wanted to know why they couldn’t tarp the roofs as a temporary fix until the project started. Superintendent Stevens replied that they did not look at that option.

Jerzy Debski wanted to know if the roof was approved why they are coming back to the town to ask for money for the repair job.

Bob Jellen commented that he had served on the local board back in the 80s which it was a concern then. He stated we need positive action on this motion and that the children need a safe environment to be in. He would suggest positive action on the motion tonight to get it started.

Herb Arico stated that they have discussed this matter over a period of time. The roof is leaking and it has to be taken care of for the safety of the children and to be done as soon as possible.

The question was called to vote by the Moderator Suzanne Chapman.

Motion carried.

**Item II**

To see if the townspeople, based on the recommendation of the Board of Finance, will appropriate $160,252.73 from the general fund balance for the purchase of a new Freightliner 114sd-Plow Truck for the Department of Public Works.

The question was called by Peter Tanaka and seconded by Jim Humphrey. Question carried.

Discussion followed.

First Selectman Erika Wiecenski spoke on behalf of the purchase. It would be able to replace one the trucks they are having issues with. It would also offset the lack of having a contractor. This would enable them to have a spare truck in a storm. If they don’t have a spare truck and something happens, it lengthens the time of the plow routes.

The question was called to vote by the Moderator Suzanne Chapman.

Motion carried.

**Item III**

To see if the Townspeople, on the recommendation of the Board of Selectmen, will establish a School Building Committee for a Building Project of a Pre-K though 8 School. Registered voters attending shall cast a certified paper ballot yes or no vote for this item.

Motion made by Michelle Doucette Cunningham and seconded by Judy Threatt.

Discussion followed.

Superintendent Phil Stevens made a Statement:

Over approximately 7 years, the Willington Board of Education has been identifying avenues to address the future of our aging school facilities. The discussion started because of declining enrollment, which has been now flat over the last 6 years, with the hopes of finding some savings. The Board of Education investigated regionalizing with Ashford and Mansfield, but it was determined it would cost Willington taxpayers significantly more money so the concept was dropped. The Willington Board of Education had a facilities study completed in 2017 to identify options to address the aging buildings and smaller student population. After significant data collection, public presentations and input, the BOE made a unanimous recommendation at their September, 2019 meeting requesting the Board of Selectmen to establish a School Building Committee to pursue the building of a Pre-K through grade 8 school to move all students into one building.

The selectmen have the authority to create a school building committee without holding a town meeting. However, should any funds be spent prior to Town Meeting approval regarding questions 3, 4, and 5 before you today, the Town would not be eligible for reimbursement from a school construction grant if a project were to happen. For example, if the committee were formed, and the town approved $10,000 at town meeting for architectural drawings prior to questions 4 and 5 being approved, the money spent may not be eligible for reimbursement should a project occur.

The State Department of Administrative Services School Construction and Grants Office requires the questions before you today to be approved by the legislative body which is a town meeting in Willington. The questions were developed collaboratively with their grants department.

The first question before you is to form a building committee and at this point, absolutely no money has been approved to go along with the formation of this committee. If the committee is formed, and after their own review of all the materials that have been gathered, they wanted to request money for a consultant, such as an engineer or architect, they would need to request the funds from the Board of Finance, which if approved by that group, would result in a Town Meeting for legislative approval. Again, at this point, no funds are tied to the establishment of the building committee and if questions 3 passes, it does not mean a school building project is going to be completed. The 1990 School building committee was formed in the same manner, with similar questions, and no project was ever completed.

Questions have been asked regarding the responsibilities of a school building committee. The responsibilities would be written into a charge and approved by the Board of Selectmen. Some examples of items you would expect to see on a charge of a building committee may include:

1. Obtaining the approval of the town legislative body for all obligations incurred throughout the process.

2. Defining a prek-grade 8 school that meets the educational needs of the town. Please note this does not say a new school on a new site. The building committee would determine whether to renovate an existing building or build a new building which is why the question is worded, “building project of a prek through grade 8 school”.

3. Finding and recommending a site to meet school construction and town needs should the committee pursue a new site.

4. Identify potential future uses of the two current school buildings.

These are just some examples.

Questions 3, 4 and 5, if passed, would lead to the creation of a school building committee, but no money can be spent without additional approvals.

Discussion followed.

Jerzy Debski commented if they decide to build a school it should be a decision made by the townspeople. He had a petition that was rejected by the Board of Selectmen, if anyone would like to see a copy he has one. He was glad to have the meeting today, and thinks the townspeople should be involved in the process.

Peter Latincsics commented that he had served as a member of the Board of Finance, Board of Education, and the 1990 School Building Committee. He believes that the town is putting the cart before the horse, and that the needs should be defined before making a decision on the three questions.

Bob Jellen stated as Superintendent Phil Stevens had already said, creating a school building committee commits to nothing. The town should wait and see what the committee finds before making a decision. As a Board of Education member and a teacher, he has been on both sides. The town should give it a chance, they might like what they find out.

Todd Bissonette commented that the housing market in Willington is not moving. Crumbling foundations have affected out tax base. If you go online and look at the schools profile you can see that there has been a steady decline. It’s the teachers that teach not the building. He believes we should build on what we have and make it better. Stop putting a tax burden on the elderly, retired, and hardworking residents of Willington.

Elaine Newcomb commented that last fall there was talk about a School Building Committee and plans, but was never publicized and there was no discussion. A survey was sent out that offered numerous possibilities. Enrollment is falling, taxes are going up, and people are in trouble with crumbling foundations. She thinks it is ridiculous to imagine adding to a tax burden without town input.

Judy Threatt stated that she is a real estate agent and foreclosures are happening because of crumbling foundations, and houses of people who have passed. She stated that Willington has one of the lowest tax rates in the state, but she has families that refuse to look in Willington because of the schools. To counteract with the crumbling foundations, we have to have something to draw people back in. We have to do something better with our system.

Maureen Lowechoa-Lee asked if we should just build and a school and wait for people to come. More of the residents are above the half century mark and won’t be contributing to the school. She asked what the quorum was for the Willington Board of Selectmen. First Selectman Erika Wiecenski responded with two. Maureen stated that we have one Board of Selectmen member that has not been present for any meetings, and all of a sudden in January everything was moving forward. She works for CREC and has seen schools get built, and there are always hidden costs. She believes we should take what we have and build on it.

Jason Bracich commented that he moved to Willington because of the schools. The programs are fantastic but our facilities are not so great. A new school improves the town. We just need a chance to look at it. He asked what the makeup of the committee would be. First Selectman Erika Wiecenski responded that it would be an 11 member committee. It would be composed of a member of the Board of Education, a member of the Board of Finance, and Board of Education staff member, a member with construction industry experience, the First Selectman (or whoever he/she designates), five members from the community and the Superintendent as an ex officio. Mr. Bracich said he would strongly suggest voting yes to this.

Robert Testa stated that he moved to Willington because of the low taxes. This committee will get rolling, and once something like this gets rolling, it’s hard for it to slow down. It’s hard to justify burdening ourselves with higher taxes when the number of students is going down. He encourages people to vote no.

Christina Mailhos commented that as a former First Selectman and member of the Board of Education, there were many meetings and nights where this was discussed. To keep maintaining the schools might cost more in the long run. Appointing a committee will help research the avenue with numbers. She thinks voting yes to the first question even if people don’t feel comfortable with voting yes to questions four and five.

Michelle Doucette Cunningham stated that the meetings have been going on for years. The Board of Education has reached their capacity with knowledge of building a school, until a consultant comes in. Maintaining two schools and operating costs versus one school would be something to look at. Until a committee is formed and research has been done, it is hard to make a decision.

Jim Bulick stated that he reached out to a finance bond sales expert to get a rough cost. There is chart attached to the October 2019 Board of Finance minutes. It was about 2.5mils over 30 years. There are risks involved. State finances are not in good shape right now. Ned Lamont still supports the regionalization of schools. He encourages people to vote no.

Nancy Gauthier commented that in her father’s town they built a school and the taxes doubled. Are we willing to have our taxes doubled?

Bill Welz loves this town as he moved here six years ago. It’s a great town, but it could be a better town. Living on St. Mortiz, there are many young families with young kids. The community came together and stepped in with the crumbling foundations, and he hopes the town will step in with the school also.

Elena Testa commented that they said a School Building Committee will cost nothing, which is no true. The meeting that was held 7-10 days ago they were asking for $100,000 for the School Building Committee. If we do not end up building a school, that money will be wasted. It’s going to cost us money.

Mike Iacampo stated that we should be asking people who know what they are doing so we can make an educated decision. The longer we wait the more it will cost. Two schools are being heated that are half full. Let’s get some educated answers instead of listening to a cousins brothers uncle that told us his taxes went up in there town.

Tyler Hall commented as a member of the Hall Foundation and Curator at the Gardiner Hall Museum. He asked for people to look at the historical and cultural value of the buildings. If we do abandon Hall Memorial School, the school goes back to the foundation. What is the loss vs the gain? Superintendent Stevens replied that it isn’t his or the Board of Selectmen’s decision. It is the Building Committee’s decision. If they can’t find something else to do with the school then something is wrong. We shouldn’t want to put the Hall Foundation in a pickle. We have to honor the history of that building. Mr. Hall mentioned that in surrounding towns there are schools that have been abandoned and just sit. If Hall Memorial School is left vacant in the middle of town it wouldn’t be good.

The question was called to vote by Liza Boritz and seconded by Bob Jellen. Question carried.

Vote was taken Yes: 132 No: 82

Motion carried.

**Item IV**

To see if the Townspeople, based on the recommendation of the Board of Selectmen will authorize at least the preparation of schematic drawings and outline specifications for a Building Project of a Pre-K through 8 School. Registered voters attending shall cast a certified paper ballot yes or no vote for this item.

Motion made by Jason Bracich and Judy Threatt Seconded.

Discussion followed.

Peter Tanaka stated that it is premature to be voting for money, and that he urges people to vote no on item four until with get answers from the committee we just voted on.

Patrick Lord asked if these monies would be reimbursed. First Selectman Erika Wiecenski responded that additional funds would be requested and gone to town meeting, and that after applying for the grant if approved the money would be reimbursed, if voted yes on this question. Mr. Lord asked if this includes drawings of a renovated school as well. It doesn’t state a renovated school or a new school, and would be up to the School Building Committee.

Mark Masinda commented that we are in the planning phase and there is a great deal of information that has to be gathered. Most towns hire a consultant. The question how it’s worded is giving the ok to go ahead with the schematic drawings. If things were left out of the schematics the town will be on the hook for those items. It has to be done right. There should be a dollar amount attached to this question. Superintendent Stevens responded that they have to put out a RFP, a request for whatever services the Building Committee determines. If they found land, they needed a professional consultant, it would have to go to the Board of Finance and then back to Town Meeting. That amount would be included in the reimbursement rate. Superintendent Stevens clarified that the questions how they were written is exactly how it’s needed for the grant process.

Chiara Bambara noted that she was understanding the questions that was answered by Superintendent Stevens previous.

Laura Gottier called the question to vote and Sara Reis Seconded. Question Carried.

Vote was taken Yes: 112 No: 98

Motion Carried.

**Item V**

To see if the Townspeople, based on the recommendation of the Board of Selectmen will authorize the Superintendent of Schools to apply to the Commissioner of the Department of Administrative Services to accept or reject a grant for a Building Project of a Pre-K through 8 School. Registered voters attending shall cast a certified paper ballot yes or no vote for this item.

Motion made by Michelle Shine and seconded by Sara Reis.

Discussion followed.

Elena Testa commented that the Superintendent is an employee of the Board of Education and asked what authority the Board of Selectmen has to be commissioning him to apply. First Selectman Erika Wiecenski replied that Board of Education can only authorize the specs and that the Superintendent is authorized by the local governing body which in our case is Town Meeting. No application could happen before local approval and going through a referendum.

The question was called by Michelle Shine and seconded by Sara Reis. Question carried.

Vote was taken Yes: 111 No: 96

Motion Carried.

A motion was made by Erika Wiecenski and seconded by Michele Doucette-Cunningham to adjourn the meeting at 8:56 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Amy R. Lam

Willington Town Clerk

December 9, 2019