

SPECIAL MEETING – MANSFIELD TOWN COUNCIL  
January 23, 2013

Mayor Elizabeth Paterson called the special meeting of the Mansfield Town Council to order at 7:30 p.m. in the Council Chamber of the Audrey P. Beck Building.

I. ROLL CALL

Present: Freudmann, Keane, Kochenburger, Moran, Paterson, Paulhus, Ryan, Shapiro, Schaefer

II. OPPORTUNITY FOR PUBLIC COMMENT

Greg Samuels, Wormwood Hill Road, stated the taxpayers should have been provided with a decision matrix indicating the pros and cons of the school building project. Mr. Samuels expressed his concerns with the proposed project's budget; the effect closing Southeast School would have on property values; the belief the project is being driven by UConn; and the inability of residents to get their questions answered by Council members. He believes all Council members should be replaced at the next election.

Greg Zlotnick, Wormwood Hill Road, applauded the previous comments and expressed concern with the potential increase in taxes for the next fiscal year. Mr. Zlotnick would support the project if he believed it would benefit the children, but he feels the current schools are fine.

Arthur Smith, Mulberry Road, presented information he obtained from the Department of Administrative Services Communication Office concerning instances where schools have been approved for renovate-like-new status both with and without special legislation. Mr. Smith also reviewed his concerns regarding a number of Freedom of Information requests he has submitted to the Town. He questioned the Town's transparency. (Submitted information included as a communication in the January 28, 2013 Town Council packet)  
Mr. Smith clarified that the instances of special legislation which he submitted have been granted within the last 5 years.

III. SCHOOL BUILDING PROJECT

Mr. Ryan stated that although he believes the Board of Education deserves an opportunity for a vote on the project at a referendum, it is ultimately the Council's decision. Mr. Ryan intends to vote no on any proposal to send the school building project to referendum as it is too expensive for the taxpayer and might require additional cuts in other budgets which would be detrimental to many in Town.

Deputy Mayor Moran has supported the school building project and believes it is educationally the smartest and financially the most economical approach to take. However, given concerns with revenue losses and potential tax increases, Ms. Moran, too, will not support sending the project to referendum. Ms. Moran stated the school building project has nothing to do with UConn.

Ms. Keane noted that she, Mr. Paulhus and Mr. Freudmann have consistently opposed the building of new schools and support proactively maintaining our three existing schools. She stated the proposed project is not affordable.

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Mr. Kochenburger moved that the Council adopt the following motion regarding the school building project:

1. That the Council not send the proposal for two new schools to a referendum at the present time.
2. That the issue of repairs to the three elementary schools, as well as the Mansfield Middle School, be referred to the Board of Education, which is within the expertise and jurisdiction, for their prioritization of repairs and improvements needed to maintain the schools.

The motion was seconded by Mr. Shapiro.

Mr. Kochenburger spoke to his motion, noting a lot of work has gone into the project to date, especially the work of the School Building Committee and the Board of Education. If new schools are not built, even given our good teachers, the Council must confront the issues of declining enrollment and the maintenance of aging schools. Mr. Kochenburger briefly reviewed the history of the options the Council has explored and the issues which might yet impact this decision. He is not in favor of just repairing the schools for the next 20 years because at some time all towns must rebuild their schools. This, however, is not the time. Mr. Kochenburger stated it is important to refer the issues of repairs to the Board of Education.

Mr. Freudmann agreed with the comments of the other Council members and reminded them that he, Mr. Paulhus and Ms. Keane have long opposed the project. Mr. Freudmann stated our schools are old but structurally sound and can be upgraded and repaired as necessary. He stated the existing schools will continue to serve the Town well and provide a good education for many years to come.

Mr. Shapiro pointed out that last fall the Council directed staff and the project team to examine what effect building the schools sequentially and/or stretching out the life of the bonds would have. The result of this endeavor showed it would be even more expensive. Mr. Shapiro reemphasized this motion is not implementation of Option A but rather a plan to, with the Board of Education's input, keep our schools safe and educate our children. School safety will need to be addressed. Mr. Shapiro expressed his agreement with Mr. Ryan's comments and believes the cost of the project is beyond the means of some of the residents of the Town.

Mr. Schaefer also agreed with Mr. Ryan's comments and expressed his hope that at some future time the Town will be able to build two new schools, as they are desperately needed. Mr. Schaefer noted that although it would be less expensive to build the project now the increase in taxes would be too high.

Council members discussed whether any additional clarifications regarding previous actions would be required and, by consensus, agreed the motion under consideration would supplant all previous actions.

The Town Clerk read the motion.

The motion passed unanimously.

Mayor Paterson suggested the Council engage in a joint meeting with the Board of Education to discuss what needs to be done in the future to keep our three schools up and running. The Mayor stated the proposal is not being rejected but rather pulled off the table for economic reasons. This meeting should take place before the Council gets involved in budget discussions and should include a variety of issues, such as moving the 5th graders back to the elementary schools.

By consensus the Council agreed to a joint meeting with the Board of Education. The Town Manager will arrange the meeting.

Ms. Moran thanked the consultants for all the time and effort they put into the school building project and the support they provided for the Council.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Paulhus moved and Mr. Ryan seconded to adjourn the meeting at 8:05 p.m. Motion passed unanimously.

Elizabeth Paterson, Mayor

Mary Stanton, Town Clerk

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