

[NOTE: These minutes are made available to the public prior to Town Council acceptance.]

FEBRUARY 28, 2004 SPECIAL MEETING

The Wethersfield Town Council held a workshop meeting with the Board of Education on Saturday, February 28, 2004 at 9:00 a.m. in the Fireside Room of the Pitkin Community Center, 30 Greenfield Street, Wethersfield, Connecticut.

Present: Councilors Adil, Cascio, Czernicki, Forrest, Fortunato, Hemmann, Montinieri, Deputy Mayor Karangekis and Chairperson Morin; Board of Education members Carney, DeAngelo, McKenna, Pilczak, Rodriguez, Stanziale, Walsh, Vice Chairperson Roberts and Chairperson Hodges.

Also present: Town Manager Bonnie Therrien, Superintendent of Schools C. Patrick Proctor EdD, Program Facilitator Mark Pellegrini and Town Clerk Dolores G. Sassano.

Chairperson Morin explained that input was received from the Shared Services Committee, the Town Manager and the Superintendent of Schools as to the format of this year's Fireside Chat and how the meeting can address the concerns of the elected officials. Goals and issues will be identified and discussion will be held to determine how to work toward their completion.

Chairperson Morin introduced Mark Pellegrini, who served as the facilitator for the session. Mr. Pellegrini stated that the meeting would follow an interactive format to achieve success. He said that success is not self-contained to this meeting, but rather determined by what is achieved during each elected official's term. He said that the elected officials need to keep track of the ideas discussed and work on them. There will be a positive tone set today and after today's meeting the officials will have the tools to lead to effective problem solving through teamwork. Mr. Pellegrini reviewed the objectives for and desired results of the session and the survey that follows was provided by him.

OBJECTIVES

- To build upon the working relationship between the Board of Education and the Town Council.
- To instill a spirit of collaboration between the Board and the Council.
- To gain a mutual understanding of the goals and issues both the Board and Council face.
- To identify common aspirations and goals for the Town of Wethersfield.

DESIRED RESULTS

- To arrive at unified goals, which both bodies will work towards.
- To identify the critical issues that each body will focus on independently.
- To identify critical issues that the Board and Council will work on collaboratively.
- To agree on what collaboration means for the Board and the Council.

Mr. Pellegrini then reviewed reasonable expectations for a session such as this. He pointed out that there was not a lot of time (three hours) to cover such an ambitious agenda. He noted this was the start of a process and was not a self-contained event and should be viewed as such. Also, he cautioned the participants there would not be much time for reflection or analysis of the comments or issues raised. However, the Board and Council would have the time as they proceed to follow through on the results of the meeting for that kind of more focused and detailed work. On the other hand, the session should allow the participants to take the longer view, establish an opportunity to set a positive tone for future work between the Board and Council, and begin to strengthen teamwork between the two bodies.

In order to make the meeting as productive as possible to achieve the objectives and desired results, Mr. Pellegrini proposed the following ground rules, which all participants agreed to follow:

Everyone participates in the session, sharing their ideas and opinions.

Everyone will listen attentively, and will "share the air" with others.

Participants will be respectful of others' opinions and ideas, and be open-minded throughout the session.

Participants would be positive and constructive, even when they are dealing with what might be considered the negative issues.

Participants were there to fix the problem, not fix the blame.

The session was a discussion, and not a debate. It was not important to persuade someone to take a certain point of view or position, but to get all of the points of view out so that everyone could understand and appreciate them.

The "ouch" rule was established. Participants were encouraged to speak up if, during the course of the session, any comments were made which were disturbing, hurtful, or made a participant feel uncomfortable.

Confidentiality would be respected. Even though it was a public meeting, members were encouraged to share their experiences and to relate the comments made at the session without attribution. The emphasis was to create a safe environment so people would be willing to be honest and open during the discussion.

From this point forward the minutes will be summarized under the agenda item heading.

What is our vision for Wethersfield?

Participants were asked to complete the sentence "At its' best the town of Wethersfield would be" The following are the responses generated by the participants at the meeting:

Thriving economically and independent.

Educational excellence.

A welcoming, *inclusive, progressive* community.

The most desirable place to live and work in Hartford County.

Responsive to residents' needs and desires.

A community that celebrates culture and *diversity*.

Benefited by volunteerism.

A community that capitalizes on its' unique historical assets and contributions to the State and the nation.

A place where residents and government officials acknowledge their own roles and responsibilities and carry them out for the betterment of the community.

A place where elected officials listen to citizens and act in the best interest of the Town.

A clean and safe community.

A community where artisans flourish.

A community where teachers enjoy teaching students.

A community with access to beautiful open spaces and recreational areas.

A community with a *diverse* population.

A place where living would be desirable and affordable (*affordable* housing, affordable cost of services and government, etc.).

A community of architecturally attractive homes, businesses, and districts.

A place where the sounds of peace would prevail throughout the community.

Recognized as a leader in local government initiatives throughout the region.

A place where the children living in Wethersfield today would want to live as adults.

A place that values, cherishes, and markets its' history.

A place where facilities are well maintained, and where the facilities have a reputation of very high quality outside of the community.

A place with *highest quality* recreational and educational services and amenities.

A good place to shop and own a business.

A place with *excellent* services for *all* residents.

Possess a *quality of life* that is extremely positive in a community that is responsive to all of its' citizens needs, especially its' children.

One community working together for a common goal with a common understanding.

A *destination* for families and businesses.

A place where families want to live, raise their children, and retire.

Although time did not permit, it was suggested that these individual ideas, with further analysis, could be distilled into a common vision statement for Wethersfield, with perhaps a list of aspirations or strategic objectives to support that vision. In order to do this more time would be needed to identify ideas that are similar enough they can be combined, and separate ideas which could be visions for the community as it is experienced by residents and visitors, from a vision for the governance of the community.

It is also important to define some of the terminology that is used (in particular the items underlined in the list above) to ensure that everyone understands what these terms mean (e.g., inclusive, diverse, destination, etc.) or to develop some kind of measure to define a term (e.g., excellence, high quality, affordable, quality of life, etc.)

Identification of Key Issues Facing the Board and Council

At this point the Board and the Council divided into two small groups, and each group identified what they believed to be critical issues, and then the issues. The issues were then organized into categories. The combined categories and issues or ideas are as follows:

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Business retention.

Attraction of businesses to Wethersfield.

Improve the aesthetic appearance of business districts (Silas Deane).

Limited amount of vacant land in a built-out community.

RECREATION AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Need to develop standards to determine if our facilities are adequate given the needs or demands of our community.

Need active and passive recreational facilities.

Natural resources protection, in particular the restoration of the Wethersfield Cove.

CONSOLIDATION OF SERVICES

Continue to use the Shared Services Committee to explore opportunities for the consolidation of services between the Board and the Town functions.

FUNDING

Special education costs increase while State reimbursements decrease.

Financial constraints due to limited resources.

The growing fiscal impact of Board of Education needs and issues on the taxpayers.

Dwindling government funding.

Competition for limited economic (financial) resources within the Town.

Difficulty balancing the school districts' growth with limited and reduced financial resources.

- Need to make corrective adjustments to the budget, which inflates the bottom line.
- Weaknesses in binding arbitration and its negative impact on local finances.
- Unfunded mandates add requirements, increase costs, and need to be eliminated.
- Need resources to fund the current and future needs of the schools.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- The Town needs an infrastructure revitalization plan.
- There needs to be more structured planning for identifying the infrastructure needs of the schools.
- Need to properly maintain school buildings.
- Need to address traffic congestion at our schools.
- Must correct the inability to maintain the current facilities.
- Need to plan for the expansion of facilities for future needs.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND COMMUNICATION

- Need to build community trust in and unity around school issues.
- Educate the public on districts' needs.
- Need to develop an "our town" spirit among employees, government officials, and town residents.
- Need to educate and inform the public on the diversity of the needs in the school system.
- Need to address the common perception that there is a "fat" Board of Education budget, and the Council will "automatically" cut the Board of Education budget request.
- Governmental bodies need to be responsive to the community.
- Need to develop maximum community buy-in on education.

PLANNING

- Need to integrate a short-term and long-term comprehensive planning process.
- Should standardize practices across the school system.
- Need to improve and provide more professional development in the school system.
- Need a plan to improve student academic achievement.
- Need to update very old textbooks and curriculum.
- Keeping up with technology.
- Need to anticipate teacher shortages in specific study areas (math, science, etc.).

The previous six issues were listed in the planning group but may be stand-alone educational issues that require planning to resolve.

- Need to build more continuity of plans (elections every two years can be disruptive to carrying out a plan).
- Should update the Strategic Plan of 1995.
- Need a compilation of all Town plans including the Plan of Development, and identify and prioritize actions to be taken out of those plans.
- Reduce class sizes where needed (*is this a stand-alone issue*).

The above list represents the combined work of the Board of Education small groups and the Town Council small groups. Therefore, under each category above issues, suggestions, or problems were generated from all participants and grouped into similar categories. This shows the similarities in the goals and the obstacles both bodies' face.

Ms. Stanziale left the meeting at this time.

It was decided there was strong commonality and the following issue categories: Public Perception and Communication, Planning, Funding, and Facilities and Maintenance (infrastructure). Since both the Council and the Board identified issues that fell into these groups, it was agreed that for the remainder of the session participants would

work in smaller groups, each group consisting of both Board and Council members, to generate strategic objectives or approaches to deal with these issues. The suggestions these groups generated are listed below:

PUBLIC PERCEPTION/COMMUNICATION

Organize community focus groups to gather residents' perceptions.

Have representatives of both bodies attend meetings of existing organizations and groups in Wethersfield.

Create one resource where residents can go to get information on the activities of the governing bodies (website, library, television stations, etc.).

Develop a collaborative newsletter between the Board of Education and Town Council and distribute information through existing media in Wethersfield.

Conduct citizens' surveys.

Conduct neighborhood-based meetings and establish neighborhood liaisons.

The Council should develop a means of community relations.

Analyze the success of the Silas Deane Middle School project and implement those principles for future projects.

PLANNING

Revisit the Board's 1995 Strategic Plan, the Town's Council Strategic Plan, and follow-up with a meeting to develop one Council/Board's Strategic Plan.

Align the Council/Board's needs with a long-term budget plan and share that plan with the public.

Conduct more joint collaborative planning sessions (after the adoption of the budget).

Have the Town Manager and Superintendent of Schools develop a plan (either a facilities' plan or strategic plan) to present to a joint session three or four months from now.

Develop a comprehensive plan for Wethersfield and give the public the complete plan, including time lines and priorities at once.

Continue to have facilitated sessions between the Board and Council.

Develop a plan on how to consolidate services and prioritize projects.

Re-evaluate the planning process currently used by Wethersfield, and restructure it to be more collaborative and all encompassing.

FACILITIES AND MAINTENANCE

Investigate capacity for bonding to pay for improvements.

Conduct a needs analysis for facilities and maintenance and develop a collaborative approach for dealing with the issues identified.

Pursue comprehensive upgrades and repairs as opposed to interim "band-aid" repairs.

Concentrate on a building or area of the community, identify projects, and complete the projects to show success.

Develop a complete inventory of community facility needs and develop a time line and funding plan that can reasonably address those needs.

Prioritize, and look at reimbursement rates and go to referendums for major repairs.

Compile a schedule of projects, project costs, and all available funding sources and fund-raising capabilities, determine where funding shortfalls are, and investigate solutions.

Be more focused on facilities needs.

When developing maintenance plans for buildings, consider operating and staffing expenses as well.

Lead by example by taking care of municipal buildings to encourage other property owners to do the same.

Foster and encourage community stewardship of all public facilities.

FUNDING

Look for opportunities to increase the revenue stream including: evaluating bonding indebtedness and property tax rates to determine if there is any room to increase revenue from those sources.

Increase the amount of grant revenues coming into the Town by researching what grants are available and considering investing through consulting or staffing grants personnel to increase that revenue source.

Before the session adjourned the participants discussed the process. There was general agreement that most of the objectives and desired results either had been achieved or that progress had been made. Participants appreciated the opportunity to work with each other and hear each other's perspectives and opinions. It was suggested following the day's ground rules in future dealings between the Board and Council would help to strengthen the teamwork that had begun today. Mr. Pellegrini stated that it is critical that the Board and Council continue to work together and that their focus, trust and open-mindedness will lead to success.

It was agreed that the facilitator would compile the summary of the proceedings and deliver them to the Board and Council. The Town Manager and Superintendent of Schools would review the draft summary before it was distributed. It was also agreed that the Board and Council would meet again after reviewing the summary and decide how to proceed on the vision statement and on the recommend[ed] actions to deal with the priority issues.

ADJOURNMENT

At 12:00 p.m., Councilor Adil moved "**TO ADJOURN THE MEETING**" seconded by Councilor Forrest. All Councilors present, including the Chairperson voted AYE. The motion passed 9-0-0.

Dolores G. Sassano
Town Clerk