

Amended Special Joint Meeting Minutes City Council and School Committee

Tuesday, February 7, 2012
West Parish Elementary School
7:00 p.m.

City Council Members Present

Jackie Hardy, President
Sefatia Romeo Theken, Vice President
Bruce Tobey
Robert Whynott
Paul McGearry
Melissa Cox
Steven LeBlanc
Greg Verga

City Administration Present

James Duggan, Chief Administrative Officer
Linda Lowe, City Clerk

School Committee Members Present

Jonathan Pope, Chairman
Val Gilman, Vice Chairperson
Kathleen Clancy, Secretary
Melissa Teixeira
Roger Garberg
Tony Gross
Mayor Carolyn Kirk

School Administration Present

Dr. Richard Safier, Superintendent
Brian Tarr, Assistant Superintendent
Tom Markham, CFO
Jean Perry, West Parish Principal

Recorded by Cape Ann TV

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 7:04 p.m. by President Hardy on behalf of the City Council and by Chairman Pope on behalf of the School Committee. Chairman Pope stated the mission of the Gloucester Public Schools, and President Hardy reminded the audience that the meeting is a public meeting and not a public hearing.

FLAG SALUTE

PRESENTATION – MassDevelopment re: Fuller School Site Reuse Study – Working Draft

Mayor Kirk emphasized that this project is still in the early stages and that we need to get some factual information on the table for consideration as we look at any kind of redevelopment scenarios for Fuller School. She indicated that there was a budget associated with the project, which constrained the scope of the work. Therefore, four scenarios were settled on, which will be discussed tonight. She stated that the presentation is for information only at this time for the School Committee and the City Council.

Mayor Kirk introduced Tanya Hartford from MassDevelopment. Ms. Hartford stated that MassDevelopment's role in this project is as the project manager and indicated that they hire and pay for the consultants.

Ms. Hartford introduced Michael Miller, Senior Vice President of Real Estate Services at MassDevelopment, Felipe Schwartz and Bob Blue from VHB, Dana Weeder from Winter Street Architects, and Pam McKinney from Byrne McKinney & Associates.

Mr. Schwartz reviewed the study goals, including the selection of reasonable redevelopment options, review of existing site and building conditions, illustration of four site layouts, analysis of reuse of the building, evaluating the new police/fire facility, and assessing the market conditions. He reviewed the existing conditions on the site, including wetlands, easements, utilities, access and zoning.

Mr. Weeder reviewed the existing conditions of Fuller School. He indicated that the building is in good shape structurally. However, there are some problems with the energy code (i.e. thermal bridging) and plumbing, as well as seismic issues, ADA issues, roof leaks, and wear and tear on the 47-year-old building. Mechanical systems need to be replaced, as well.

Bob Blue reviewed plans of the four site development options that were studied:

- Commercial office development
- Retail development (2 options)
- Mixed use with commercial office and police/fire facility
- Police/fire facility and renovated Fuller School building with a new YMCA.

Mr. Weeder discussed building reuse options. He stated that the existing building cannot be effectively used as retail space but indicated that it is ideal for office space because of the dimension between the window and the corridor. The ideal scenario would be a mixed use, i.e. using the perimeter of the building for offices and the interior for something like the YMCA, which does not require natural light. He presented site plans showing the location of potential office space, YMCA facilities, school administration, and the preschool.

Mr. Weeder also reviewed the need for a new central fire and police station. He stated that the fire chief and police chief were consulted about what they wanted in the facilities, and a new police/fire facility was designed on the site, which includes an Emergency Operations Center. Mr. Weeder explained that the facility was located on a corner of the site to enable a drive-thru bay for fire equipment.

Ms. McKinney reviewed market study results and observations with respect to office and retail space, including vacancy levels, rental rates, and demand indicators. Her opinion is that it is unlikely that office developers would be interested in the property but that a small amount of office space in a mixed use building would be reasonable. She believes it is likely that retail developers would be interested in the property since the retail vacancy level in the market is relatively low and the rents are relatively good.

Mayor Kirk indicated that MassDevelopment's presentation is available on the city's website, www.gloucester-ma.gov.

At this time, a 5-minute recess was taken.

The following matters were discussed with respect to the presentation:

- MassDevelopment did not consider industrial use of the site and cannot commit to expanding the scope of the study to include that use since they have a limited budget. Councilor Tobey requested that the administration consider adding this option. Mayor Kirk indicated that if the city were to reopen the scope of the study, perhaps residential use should be considered, as well.
- Councilor Whynott would like to expand the scope of the study to include a municipal complex option. Mayor Kirk indicated that MassDevelopment does not look at that type of redevelopment, which is why it was ruled out. She stated that the city would have to undertake another exercise with another group to look at a municipal complex. She stated she has no intention of doing that because of the limited need for municipal office space, which would make that option impractical and costly. President Hardy respectfully disagreed and stated that a number of people in the community would like to see such a report. Without it, the taxpayers are being denied the opportunity to at least discuss it. For that reason, President Hardy will be calling for a public hearing on the matter when it gets to the City Council.
- President Hardy stated that, “I think everybody here agrees that the highest and best use of that property is for a school but, unfortunately, it will take a lot of money to repair it.” Ms. Teixeira expressed the need for a study on how much it would cost to renovate Fuller School for use as a school and to compare that with the cost of a new West Parish School. Her understanding is that it could cost as much as \$20 million to renovate Fuller School.
- MassDevelopment did not calculate the relative property valuations of each of the options and the resulting real estate tax revenue to the city. They are in the process of completing an appraisal of the property under the various alternative uses and will be able to provide a set of facts upon which the city can make an informed decision.
- The YMCA does not have an interest in buying the whole facility. They would only like to have a controlling interest over their area. Mayor Kirk indicated that those options have not yet been explored.
- It was recommended that the property be developed to suit the needs of someone who is drawn to Gloucester; in other words, identify a user before building the site.
- The next step after Fuller School is declared surplus would be to identify the aspirations for the site. Ms. McKinney reiterated that the plans presented represent a test fit only, not a prescription for what should be done. They provide an understanding of how much square footage there is and how it might be used, given its special characteristics, but the market will determine the ultimate use of the building. The different uses shown on the plans can be accommodated in terms of parking.

- Ms. Hartford reported on how MassDevelopment is funded. Part of what they do is real estate and planning services. They fund the upfront costs of a study, as well as manage the project. The cost of the Fuller School study was \$56,000. Should the property be sold for a profit, MassDevelopment would be repaid by the city.
- Councilors Tobey and Verga commented on the inordinate amount of time spent on the YMCA option. MassDevelopment indicated that the YMCA had expressed an interest in relocating and having a modern facility. Therefore, that scenario was included in the study.
- MassDevelopment has not spoken with Sam Park about whether he is interested in the site.
- Despite the fact that the study focused on four options, it was always anticipated that, ultimately, there would be an RFP and that nobody would be precluded. The community needs to decide what uses they want to see there and what is possible, given the constraints and costs associated with the site. If the goal is to get the highest price for the property, the recommendation is to not constrain the alternatives but to give the market the opportunity to respond.
- With respect to response times from a fire station located on the site to Magnolia and Lanesville, the fire chief would undertake that inquiry. Mayor Kirk indicated that the fire chief has participated in the discussions and recognizes that if Central Headquarters were to be moved anywhere, this would be the location where it should go, with a general understanding that there would be better response times from Blackburn Circle to Annisquam and Lanesville.
- Mayor Kirk clarified that the school administration and preschool space was earmarked in the plans in the event that there is no other place for them to go. However, it is not an assumption that they would go there. Ms. Teixeira expressed concern about having an agreement between the city and the School Department to preserve the School Department's right to use the building for those purposes if it is declared surplus.
- There will be a cost savings if a developer reuses most of the building. If the building is going to be demolished and rebuilt, the rent would need to be higher in order for it to make financial sense.
- Dr. Safier stated that the School Committee is looking at the issue of Fuller School from a financial aspect as well an educational aspect. Estimations have been done on the cost of consolidation, and they have been reexamining the conclusions of the Plan for Effective Learning Communities, which is only four years old. They have also been doing research on large class sizes and effect on student achievement and the quality of education with respect to smaller community schools versus larger schools.

- Chairman Pope added that the School Committee is in the process of assessing the educational viability of Fuller School and the potential of moving the preschool, the administration, the transportation department, and the playing fields to different locations. He noted that the School Committee will have no say in what is done with the facility after it is declared surplus.
- Ms. Teixeira would like to ensure that the District Court is kept in the conversations in light of the possibility that it will be staying in Gloucester.

Mayor Kirk thanked the team from MassDevelopment for assisting the city in this matter. She also thanked the members of the City Council and School Committee. She stated that they will reconvene with MassDevelopment to talk about additional scoping and how that might be financed. Finally, she indicated that she believes there is potential for the city to be an “anchor tenant” and use 50,000 square feet of office space for municipal offices at the site.

President Hardy thanked Maria Puglisi for recording the meeting and Principal Jean Perry for accommodating everyone.

REFERRALS TO COMMITTEE – None.

ADJOURNMENT

On a motion by Councilor Whynott, seconded by Councilor McGeary, it was unanimously

VOTED: To adjourn the Special Joint City Council and School Committee Meeting of February 7, 2012 at 8:39 p.m.

Maria Puglisi
School Committee Recording Secretary