

The Claremont City Council held a meeting on Wednesday, October 24, 2012, in the John Goodrich Business Room of Sugar River Valley Regional Technical Center, 111 South Street, Claremont.

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Neilsen at 6:35 p.m.

Members of the Council present were:

At-Large Councilor Keith Raymond
Ward I Councilor Victor Bergeron
Ward III Councilor Nicholas Koloski
Assistant Mayor Andrew Austin
Mayor James Neilsen, IV
At-Large Councilor Christopher Irish
Ward II Councilor Roger Formidoni
At-Large Councilor Kyle Messier
At-Large Councilor Thomas Burnham

Members of the School Board present were:

Gene Grumman, School Board Member
Brian Rapp, School Board Member
Kristin Kenniston, School Board Member
Richard Seaman, School Board Chair
David Putnam, School Board Member
Charlene Lovett, School Board Member
Heather Irish, School Board Vice Chair

Absent:

Chloe Kennison, School Board Student Rep

Also present were:

Guy Santagate, City Manager
Middleton McGoodwin, School Superintendent

NEW BUSINESS

Meeting to Discuss Collaboration Between the School Board and City Council to Jointly Address Common Priorities

Mayor Neilsen suggested one member from the Council should sit on the School Board and vice versa and that both groups should get together quarterly to keep the channels of communication open. He said the schools need attention. He said the City has a CIP (Capital Improvements Program) and asked if the schools could put a similar program together.

Mr. Burnham commented that both boards rely on property taxes, so the state needs to look at that. Our state reps need to put a stronger emphasis on what the state can do for the City and schools.

Ms. Messier would like a list of what we have in common as boards (i.e. sharing expenses of large volume commodities such as oil) that we can work on together.

School Board Vice Chair Heather Irish said the lack of communication between both boards, which has brought frustration and anger, is unproductive. The goal of both boards is to do what will benefit Claremont. Both boards are arguing over the same pot of money to get to the goal. She believes you can build a bridge by having one member sit on each other's board and then share the information with their own board. She would like to look at priorities as a group and work together for the same goals. She would like to air differences and move forward.

Mayor Neilsen noted that without understanding the goals, it is not easy to put a positive light on responses that are given to citizens.

Mr. Putnam agreed with Ms. Irish because each board has expectations that have not been shared with each other. It's about economic development, good schools and a good image. This is the moment to identify priorities.

Mayor Neilsen said citizens want a tax reduction. The City can't succeed without the school and vice versa. It will take money to fix and the money comes from taxes. We have to address the school issue so businesses will want to come here; that will increase the tax base; and then that will decrease taxes.

Ms. Kenniston said the schools and the community have an issue with internal and external attitudes about Claremont and the schools. That is a common goal we have to work on to fix.

Mr. Austin would like both groups to work together. We need to be responsible; we need to see where the money will come from for the school without increasing the taxes too much.

Mr. Seaman said he does not have negative feelings toward the Council as a School Board member. He understands there is contention because we are looking for the same money. He is hoping we can collaborate even with the different strategies of each group.

Mr. Koloski agreed with Mr. Seaman and he doesn't have negative feelings toward the schools.

Mr. Seaman said he and Dr. McGoodwin were called by the Union Leader and he tried to emphasize that this is not "we and they." Mayor Neilsen said there was constructive editing to the story. He said if it is not clear what the other group is doing, then we need to communicate and understand the process and reasoning.

Mr. Irish talked about an unknown perception of Claremont. He thinks this is a good step to get past it. We are not separate entities. He likened this to a company with two boards running it with a responsibility for \$56 million in budgets. The school gets 59% of the tax rate; the City has 136 employees and the schools have 400 employees, so it is all relative. He quoted George Bald saying that attitude is everything. He said the City and schools are separate governments and he would like to see both boards put back together as one. He talked about having mutual respect for each other. He talked about the difference between the Council and the School Board and who has to vote for projects. The Council is elected to vote on projects, however the school has to have the support of the voters. He talked about collaboration, i.e. attending City events and school sporting events, having a Cardinal Country sign at Barnes Park and behind the Mayor at Council meetings. He suggested encouraging Parks and Recreation Department to work with Aaron House, Athletic Director at Stevens High School (SHS), to help each other out.

Mr. Koloski asked about getting an electronic version of the School Board minutes as well as they getting an electronic version of the City Council minutes.

Mr. Irish requested the School Board consider the school developing a ¼ credit course to deal with Claremont civics.

Dr. McGoodwin said tonight is more than just the Council and School Board coming together; with the responsibilities and challenges of both boards, this represents the Claremont community coming together and the challenge is to sustain that. He is looking forward to working together as a unit for the wellness of Claremont.

Mayor Neilsen said he is glad we are together as we want what is best for the children to be able to work here and stay here.

Mr. Bergeron said he came with a lot of hesitation because in the past there was a “we and a them”; now we need to stop that. He disagreed with Mr. Irish that just because he is a member of the City Council does not take away his right to speak and disagree with the School Board. There used to be a we and them, but the City won’t move forward unless we move past that.

Ms. Messier said she is very enthusiast about what she is hearing from the School Board about the high school. Children are of value to Claremont and it is important to support them with good facilities and programming; it is important for economic development. At the end of the process when the School Board makes its decision on the design and cost, the voters will vote. She supports school improvements.

Mr. Formidoni said he has not personally felt the “we/they” (his wife is a teacher). He would like to hear some concrete ideas of things we can do.

Mr. Putnam said he appreciated all that had been said. This community has its own identity. Some people really struggle; he and Mr. Formidoni cook and serve breakfast to 35-40 kids at Trinity Episcopal Church on Friday mornings. These kids would not have a breakfast without that program and the kids are respectful and grateful. The whole community needs to be served

by these boards with that attitude; have a willingness to do what you can to help the community. Coming together is a critical beginning. We need to identify the most important first steps toward improving the next phase of Claremont.

Mr. Burnham said family insurance for a City employee costs around \$25,000, he asked how that could be lowered. Then he suggested both groups could go in together on the insurance as well as purchasing supplies to save money.

Ms. Lovett said everyone needs to be educated on the challenges each body is facing then maybe an idea would come up that would benefit the community as a whole. She suggested coming up with three ideas and sharing them at a joint meeting.

Mr. Raymond agreed with Mr. Seaman that it is not we and they. Claremont has a lot to look forward to if the groups work together as a team.

It was noted that Mr. Koloski and Ms. Kenniston would both have to leave early.

Mayor Neilsen invited the public to speak.

Bernie Folta, Ward 3, said that if minutes were to be e-mailed to the two groups, citizens would also like to get them as well. He suggested the groups should get advance copies of the packets and copies should be placed on the website. He said he is a watchdog of the City Center Steering Committee with better attendance than some of the members, but he doesn't get an advance copy of the packet. He has to do a 91-A request. He suggested that could be improved.

John Cloutier, Ward 1, thanked and commended everyone for having this meeting; it is important to work together more. He said November 6th is Election Day. He encouraged both groups to meet in December or January with the new Senator, county officials, Governor, Governor's Councilor and state reps. He said being a local official is tougher than being a state rep. He said legislators need to hear from the School Board members and Councilors to see what they want as well as what they want them to oppose. If re-elected, he will put in a school building aid bill that if any school whose accreditation is threatened should be given top priority in school building aid.

Don Clarke, Ward 1, said he agreed with Mr. Cloutier; there are opportunities for the schools, City and county to collaborate (i.e. bulk purchasing).

Ms. Kenniston said making minutes available to everyone would be helpful for the public.

Mr. McGoodwin said the school website is under construction and will have the ability for more posting of information, videos and presentations to expand communications. He said he is looking forward to enhancing the communication.

Mr. Burnham suggested combining the City's and schools' websites into one and then having a highly qualified person working on it.

Mr. Irish agreed with Mr. Formidoni for concrete ideas. The website is a good place to start. Each board is spending lots of money for each website. Citizen input could be helpful and that is an instant collaboration. For a concrete suggestion, he would like to see an appointment for each board tonight. As someone sitting on those boards, they would each get advanced copies of the packets to be shared with their boards.

Mayor Neilsen said what he would like to see for the website would be sections (i.e. City, GCC, school) then the citizens would only have to remember one website. Doing that and having just one place to send information would justify having a dedicated website person.

Mr. Seaman said he asked what the difference is between the kids of Claremont and Hanover. The answer is pride. He has heard people put down components of our City and also our kids. We need to help kids build pride in their school and community; parents have an enormous influence on them. He gave credit to Aaron House for building school pride. The School Board has two goals between now and the vote in March; one is competency based grading and the other is improving SHS. The last time work was done was in the 1960s. He said his intent for SHS has been for the kids and for economic development of Claremont. He has a freshman and senior going through the school. He has been asked why they are going so fast for the bond vote and he said it is an extension of the last vote. The building still needs improvements. Now is the time to do it. He asked for input from around the table. The community benefits from a good high school. He said the School Board needs to bring on an advisor to help them through the process and they have selected architect Banwell Associates. They have been instructed to use the information already available and to seek information from the school and community. He would like to hear if there are any higher priorities than SHS.

Mr. Irish said there is no greater priority than SHS. The project and the money are not the issues, the process is the issue. Without public support the vote will not pass. The perception of the process is the problem. He thinks March is too soon for a bond vote. He thinks with working together that it could be done next year.

Mr. Seaman said process is important; he would like to overcome the perception that they are divided.

Mr. Rapp said the School Board unanimously agrees they need to move forward with SHS.

Mayor Neilsen said Councilors did not come to the meeting prepared to speak about the March vote, but they can at this time if they want to.

Ms. Irish said right now the School Board does not know if it will present anything for a March vote. They are asking to look at an engineer's perspective to see if it is possible. To move forward, she said the City Council would need to be a part of this. The architect will tell them within 45 days whether or not a March vote is a good idea.

Mr. Bergeron said we need a new high school in this community. To vote in March may be too soon. Ms. Irish said the engineers may or may not put it together by then. The first priority is that the vote succeeds. Mr. Seaman said if March is the date, then some things need to be done immediately and that is what they will work on while waiting for the engineer's report. They are building on what they already have.

Mr. Koloski said he looks forward to the presentation. He thinks the school is a very high priority.

At 7:56 p.m. Mr. Koloski departed.

Mr. Formidoni asked to clarify that this would be a renovation. Mr. Seaman said yes. Mr. Formidoni asked if we can use the same blue prints. Mr. Seaman said everything that was used before is available.

Mr. Putnam said the architects guaranteed they will use the engineering studies. The engineering studies were extensive and the project touched on every aspect of the building. The engineering studies are valid. Mr. Seaman said the studies belong to the school as they are the ones that paid for them.

Ms. Messier asked if there would be work on the other schools. Mayor Neilsen said they are going to do a comprehensive plan of all the schools. The first piece will address the high school.

Mr. Putnam said engineering and architectural studies have been done on those building. The Facilities Committee prioritized those lists. Banwell did most of the architectural studies of those buildings.

Mr. Santagate said he was on the committee for the superintendent search and Dr. McGoodwin will make a great attempt to improve education in Claremont. He said Dr. McGoodwin mentioned wellness. Wellness makes you think of healthy and a healthy community has pride and that is based on real accomplishments. You'll know you are there when the youth of the community wants to stay because there is a career path and a quality of life here. There is a great quality of life here; he talked about the new community center, school complex, Arrowhead, trail system, Sugar River and Ascutney mountain. When he talks to businesses outside the city, taxes are not the top of their list; employees want their kids to go to a quality school; and lack of life skills is an issue. So, he has worked with River Valley Community College to promote a skilled workforce. Businesses here berate the educational system here and throughout the country because they are not teaching students basic skills (how to interview, how to dress, how to write a resume and show up on time). We are in the middle of Dartmouth College and Keene. He tells people we are not as bad as we are perceived to be. He said Dr. McGoodwin is making some changes, but it won't be easy.

At 8:08 p.m. Ms. Kenniston departed.

Mr. Santagate said the priorities are the schools, but we also need to focus on the downtown area more. The City Center Committee recommendations are about to come forward and zoning will have to change. He will be in contact with the downtown merchants, Claremont Chamber of Commerce, City Center Committee, Heart of Claremont, Renegade Art Group, Farmers Market, etc., to restart that area. We want to improve that area; we have some businesses that have anchored that area in tough times and they need help growing that whole area. Cooperation and honesty are important. Brainstorming in public is tough. He talks to the civics class several times a year and what he hears from them is important because it tells him where the community is at. He said a curious person is an educated person. We have the ground work in Claremont; because of the quality of life and the infrastructure, we can grow and not ruin the country side. The water and sewer plants are at 35% of capacity. He is confident and upbeat where the City will go.

Dr. McGoodwin said it is important to be honest and forthcoming with the community. His accomplishments so far have been because the School Board has his back. There will be some difficult decisions, but it is about the community support and the people they hire. He is looking forward to future meetings and what is happening in the Claremont school district and the community of Claremont.

Mayor Neilsen said he is very involved in his local church; he is vibrant, visible and vocal so that makes him vulnerable. His best legacy as Mayor would be cooperation with the school. He is committed to meeting quarterly and having people on each other's boards. He thanked Chairman Seaman and the School Board and the Council for its support.

CONSULTATION WITH LEGAL COUNSEL

None

ADJOURNMENT

At 8:18 p.m., a motion was made by Mr. Burnham and seconded by Mr. Bergeron to adjourn.

Voice vote: motion carried 9-0.

Respectfully Submitted,

Dorée M. Russell
Clerk to the Council