

**JOINT MEETING BETWEEN THE CITY OF KEENE
AND THE KEENE SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Monday, November 14, 2011

6:00 pm

Keene Middle School

Present from the City:

Mayor Dale Pregent
City Manager, John MacLean
City Clerk, Patricia Little
Health Director, Medard Kopczynski
City Attorney, Thomas Mullins
Human Resources Director, William Prokop
Finance Director, Martha Landry
Councilor Mitch Greenwald
Councilor Tim Dunn
Councilor Phil Jones
Councilor Charles Redfern
Councilor Cynthia Georgina
Councilor Ruth Venezia
Councilor James Duffy
Councilor Nathaniel Stout
Councilor Kris Roberts

Present from the School District:

William Gurney, Co-Superintendent
Kathleen O'Donnell, Keene Board of
Education Chair
Kristin Blais, KBE Vice Chair
Dorothy Frazier, KMS Principal
Carl Panza, KBE Secretary
Ann Szot, KBE
John Stewart, KBE
Christopher Coates, KBE
Kris Roberts, KBE

Others Present:

Members of the Press (2)
Britta Reida, Stenographer

Ms. O'Donnell welcomed everyone at 6:40 PM. She thanked the Keene Food Service for the dinner they provided.

Ms. O'Donnell stated that the City Council and the SAU had a joint meeting last year, and that this year the meeting will be recorded. She continued that the public would like there to be greater workings, knowledge, and interactions between the SAU and the City. The two entities have tried to work together on many things – for example, Mayor Pregent served on the KMS Marketing Committee. The KBE tries to invite people into the process and be receptive to input. It is good for the City to hear what the Keene School District (KSD) is doing and ask questions, and vice versa. Whatever one reads in the paper only scratches the surface.

Mayor Pregent thanked everyone for coming. He stated that with the new middle school being built, he tried to have the City work closely with the KSD. This meeting is good for both parties. There is confusion about the two entities being separate – many people think they are the same. People ask City Councilors questions about the KSD, and ask

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KSD staff questions about the City. The more information they can get out to the public the better.

The group introduced themselves to each other and shared how long they have served either the KSD or the City.

Councilor Lane expressed appreciation for the KBE. He stated that taxes are down, largely due to the KBE's work, and everyone appreciates that. Mr. Gurney spoke about the budget process. Ms. O'Donnell stated that the budget is presented at an all-day meeting on the first Saturday in January, and the following Saturday is a follow-up meeting to answer questions that arose at the first meeting. The full KBE then meets again to make changes to the budget before it goes to the public hearing. She encourages people from the City to attend the Saturday sessions.

Councilor Stout asked about the Keene Middle School (KMS) project status. Mr. Gurney gave an update on the project, which will be complete on April 1, 2012. He and Ms. O'Donnell reported that the extension likely will not require extra money being spent, and the project is actually under budget in regards to what was approved by the voters.

Councilor Venezia stated that someone approached her to ask if the Jonathan Daniels building, if it becomes a storage facility, could include space for the senior center. She is bringing it forward as an idea for the KSD to discuss.

Ms. O'Donnell explained the history that led to the formation of the Elementary Ad Hoc Advisory Committee, which was charged with reducing costs in the elementary school system while preserving the community's educational priorities. Ms. Blais explained the extensive work of the Elementary Ad Hoc Advisory Committee, of which she was Chair, and how they reached their decision to recommend moving from five elementary schools to four and moving to a narrow grade span. The committee included representatives from all stakeholders, including the City.

Ms. O'Donnell clarified that it is not a done deal that Jonathan Daniels is the school that will close. That is the administration's recommendation. The KBE has to vote on it.

Ms. Blais spoke about how each school was thoroughly examined, and why Jonathan Daniels was chosen as the best school to close based on information from Marinace Architects and Banwell Architects. There will be a community forum on November 30 for the KBE to gather input from the public, which will inform their vote on the matter. What will be done with the Jonathan Daniels building is unknown. Preliminary ideas have been suggested, and there will probably be a Repurposing Committee. Some parents have asked that children have access to at least part of the site as a park or playground. The City Manager replied that the Jonathan Daniels site may play a role in the Parks and Recreation Master Plan.

Ms. Blais explained why closing the Jonathan Daniels school and reconfiguring the other four elementary schools would save \$1 million per year, even factoring in the renovations

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that will be required at the other four to comply with the Building Code. There will be \$1 million of annual savings without reducing programming. Ms. O'Donnell reported that at many public forums, people repeatedly stated that they did not want programs to be cut. Unlike many other districts that have been slashing many programs, the KSD is not, and is actually expanding programs in some way.

The City Manager replied that the KSD's commitment to maintaining its programming is important. People will come to Keene because it is a place where their children will receive a good education. This is very important for the City's future.

Councilor Duffy asked about class sizes with the new configuration. Ms. Blais replied that the architects used the district's policy when doing their calculations which is a maximum of 20 students for grades K to 3, and 25 maximum for grades 4 and 5. Currently class sizes vary widely, and moving to a narrow grade span will create equity.

Councilor Lane commended Ms. Blais's work. He stated that the "elephant in the room" is the State. The State provides a significant portion of funding, and no one knows what it will be in the future. It is good that the KSD is being proactive and will be prepared for reduced State funding. Councilor Roberts agreed, and spoke of how the decreased money from the State creates the need for compromises. The community will need to give up certain things in education in order to retain their absolute priorities.

The City Manager stated that the KSD and the City are both doing a good job reducing their budgets and being efficient. He continued that the third tax entity, the County, needs to be at the table and needs to work on reducing their budget as well.

Mr. Panza asked City staff why the Zoning Board of Adjustment (ZBA) denied the variance request for the 34 West Street building (which the SAU owns and is trying to sell). The City Manager replied that there are guidelines and objectives that need to be met for the ZBA to grant variances. Even wonderful projects will be denied variances if the information is not there. It is not the City's fault. The issue is preparation. This is a good project that was not well prepared. There might be an appeal process. Mr. Panza and Ms. O'Donnell replied that the buyer withdrew.

Councilor Redfern noted that KMS is not at capacity. He asked if any surrounding towns have approached the KBE in regards to sending their students to Keene. Mr. Coates replied that they have been in discussions with Sullivan and Gilsum. Those towns are currently sending their students to Monadnock Regional and are interested in Keene. This would be great for the Keene School District. Mr. Gurney stated that the academic wings at the KMS were built for 750 students. They have requested a waiver from the NH Department of Education to build a common area for up to 1000 students. They assume enrollment will pick up at some point, and extra capacity was built into this building.

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Councilor Roberts stated that the County is evaluating the nursing home. It will determine whether or not there is a need to spend millions of dollars to renovate and bring it to Code, or that they will need to build a new facility.

Ms. Blais spoke of how many people do not believe the school system has a financial crisis. Changing that perception is hard. She stated that members of the public repeatedly suggested moving the 5th grade to KMS to get KMS up to capacity and take the strain off the elementary schools. She explained why it is not that simple and would not work – an extra wing would have to be built for about \$6 million. Mr. Coates and Ms. O'Donnell added that even if putting 5th graders in KMS could work from a building perspective, no one has looked at whether it would be educationally sound.

Ms. Szot spoke about how having the voting polls at Fuller has become a safety issue. She asked if there is another location for Ward 3 to possibly vote in. Ms. Little replied KMS.

Ms. Szot, KBE's liaison for KHS's North Campus, spoke of truancy problems. Changes to the Children In Need of Services program (CHINS) have resulted in fewer students being eligible for it. Truant students age 16 and up cannot be forced to go to school because there is no City ordinance requiring it. Councilor Roberts added that homeschoolers complicate the matter if, for instance, a homeschooler graduates at 16.

Councilor Roberts and Ms. O'Donnell spoke of the need for dedicated people to join the KBE. It is difficult to find new members, because serving on the KBE requires so much knowledge, time, and energy. Also, for some people, the stipend paid to KBE members does not even cover the cost of the childcare required for KBE members to attend the meetings. Despite the challenges, it is very important for citizens to be serving in these positions. Former educators are especially encouraged to join.

Mayor Pregent thanked Ms. O'Donnell and the KBE for tonight's meeting. He thanked the City Councilors for the great turn out. He asked Councilor Lane, who will soon be Mayor, to continue this process.

The meeting adjourned at 7:44 PM, and KMS Principal Dorothy Frazier gave everyone a tour of the new facility.

Respectfully submitted by
Britta Reida, Stenographer

Approved by the Keene Board of Education: December 13, 2011