

MEMORANDUM

TO: Cortland Facilities Study Advisory Committee
FROM: Alan Pole and Bill Silky
RE: Meeting Notes-Meeting of September 13, 2017
DATE: September 15, 2017

Attendance:

Committee Members: Breck Aspinwall, Susan Byrnes, Kevin Cafararo, Rick Gamel, Sister Harriett Hamilton, Lisa Kaup, Roberto Maniaci, Stephanie Mitchell-Madden, Amy Sundheim, Karen Williams, and Mark Yacavone

Consultants: Alan Pole and Bill Silky

Observers: Michael Hoose, Jeff Craig, Kimberly Vile, Bob Martin, Betty Bentley, Rebekah Stull, Christine Gregory, Abbey Albright, Jenny Robinson, Craig Miller, Janice Miller, Corinne Bennett, Heidi Shelley, Lisa Smith, Jaclyn Couchman, Cheri Williams-Areis, Mary Kostuk, Bob Gregory, Tom Dovi, Emily Stevens, Jonathan Robinson, Kathleen Elliott-Birdsall, and Cliff Kostuk

Location: Randall Elementary School

1. Alan Pole welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked Randall principal Cliff Kostuk for the tour of the school prior to the meeting. He reviewed the meeting protocol as well as the schedule of meetings that had taken place and will take place over the next few months. He asked if there were any changes to the notes from the last meeting and there were none.
2. Alan also reviewed the purpose of the study which has been modified slightly and now reads as follows:

"What options exist to arrange the grades and school buildings to maintain, and perhaps enhance, the education of Cortland City School District students while ensuring fiscal responsibility to the taxpayer? How could the grades and schools be organized?"

This modification in the purpose of the study reflects the desire of the board of education for the consultants to provide a study with options for their consideration rather than a single recommendation.

The major study conclusions that had been identified during the first three meetings of the committee were also reviewed.

3. Alan then provided an overview of the district's staffing. He noted that the vast majority of employees work directly with students: the district has 48 teacher aides, 255 teachers, and 33 teaching assistants. Fringe benefit costs for the district's employees are approximately 47%.

Alan also reviewed two options for reducing staff if that should be an outcome of the facilities reorganization, involuntary reductions and attrition. The consultants will be recommending that the district use the attrition method which has great potential as a strategy since the district has annually hired 50-55 people for the past five years.

4. Bill Silky presented an overview of the school district's financial situation. Budgets have passed in nine of the past ten years and, for at least the past five years, the full value tax rate for the district has been essentially level. At the same time, both the district's restricted fund balance and the unassigned fund balance have been declining. The district's expenses have also exceeded its revenues in recent years; this is a major reason why the district's reserves are being depleted. It is quite obvious, and it has been confirmed by the district's auditors, that the district is "moderately stressed" financially and faces some significant financial challenges in the future. This conclusion is consistent with the budget presentation the district made this past May to the public.

Bill indicated that a common strategy districts use when assuming new capital debt is to do so when existing debt is being retired. He noted, however, that there will not be a significant reduction in the district's debt service until after the 2025-26 fiscal year. This situation has implications for any facility option the Board ultimately adopts.

5. Following a review of the criteria for selecting options for Board consideration (feasibility and desirability), Bill then summarized the ten options for reorganization that were developed at the August 2 advisory committee meeting. They are as follows:

#1-Keep the current grade arrangement and fix up the buildings according to a priority list determined by the Board of Education based on the recent building condition survey.

#2-Move the 6th grade to the Junior-Senior High School and create a 6-8 Middle School.

#3-Create a 6-8 middle school using one of the existing elementary schools.

#4-Make the elementary grade configuration Pre-K-1, 2-3, 4-5, and 6-8.

#5-Make one building a Pre-K center for all Pre-K students.

#6-Consider a Pre-K-8 configuration.

#7-Make the elementary schools specialty (magnet) schools like science/tech or fine arts.

#8-Create two grade centers at the elementary level (PK-2 Smith; 3-5 at Parker/PK-2 Barry; 3-5 at Randall), close Virgil Elementary School. Make the Junior High a 6-8 Middle School.

#9-Close all elementary schools and build a new single elementary school to house all the students in grades Pre-K-5.

#10-Add a second floor to Virgil and add students from other schools.

He then discussed some pro's and con's of each of the options and noted that the consultants currently are focusing on options #1, #2, and #8 as feasible and desirable options.

6. Bill then reviewed the “take-aways” from the meeting as follows:

- 1. The purpose of the study has been refined to provide options for grade and school organization.*
- 2. The cost for staff salaries and fringe benefits is approximately 2/3 – 3/4 of the district's budget.*
- 3. Should staff reductions be part of the future facilities plan, it is very reasonable to assume that those reductions could be accomplished through attrition.*
- 4. For at least the past 5 years, the full value tax rate for the district has remained approximately the same.*
- 5. The district has financed operating deficits with fund balance and reserves which has negatively impacted the district's financial condition.*
- 6. The district has some significant financial challenges for the future.*

7. The advisory committee members were then asked to break into groups, review the options and the consultants' views on feasibility and desirability of each, add any pro's and con's to the options that were appropriate, and offer any new options that they believed were worthy of consideration. Comments from the advisory committee members included the following:

- 1. It is important to consider the cost savings of each option in order to be fiscally responsible.*
- 2. If the 6th grade is going to be moved to the junior high school, it is very important to separate the middle school children from the high school children, perhaps by creating a physical barrier between the two groups.*

3. *It is clear that some building has to be closed.*
4. *Revise option #8 to; (a) close an elementary school other than Virgil; and/or (b) create a UPK building.*
5. *What is the payback period for option #9, building one large elementary school?*
6. *The option of creating a middle school in one of the current elementary schools should be considered further.*
7. *How much could the district expect to generate financially if it were to sell the five elementary schools?*

8. The meeting was then opened up to the audience for questions and/or comments. One audience member suggested that the committee and the consultants consider making K-5 elementary schools in four of the district's elementary schools instead of implementing the sister school concept identified in option #8. The committee agreed with this as an option that should be explored.

Another audience member suggested closing Barry instead of Virgil because Barry would be a more saleable school and Virgil is the least expensive building to update as identified in the Building Condition Survey.

Another audience member recommended that Virgil be left as a K-5 building and the other four elementary schools be structured as sister schools.

9. The next advisory committee meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, October 4, 2017 at Smith Elementary School. An optional tour of the school will begin at 5:45 for anyone who is interested. The business meeting of the advisory committee will begin at 6:30 p.m.

Since the meeting, the October 4 meeting is being canceled because the consultants have too much analysis to complete and be ready by that date. Therefore, the next meeting will be held on November 8, the date that was originally scheduled for the next meeting after the October meeting. Since the presentation of the final report to the board of education has been postponed from December 13 until January, the committee will hold its final meeting to replace the October meeting on Wednesday, January 3rd.

We believe this covers the essence of the discussions at our meeting on September 13. If you have questions with these notes, please feel free to contact me. We will also review these notes as an agenda item at our next meeting.

Looking forward to seeing you again on 11.8.17. The tour will begin at 5:45 and the meeting will start at 6:30!!

C: Michael Hoose