

CITY OF NEWTON

IN BOARD OF ALDERMEN

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES COMMITTEE REPORT

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2002

Present: Ald. Johnson (Chair) Ald. Merrill, Coletti, Parker, Sangiolo Gentile

Other Aldermen Present: Ald. Bryson, Salvucci, Stewart and Lennon

Absent: Ald. Lipsitt, Fischman

Also Present: Dan Funk (City Solicitor), Michael Rourke (Chief Administrative Officer) Jeffrey Young (Superintendent of Schools) Anne Larner (School Committee Chair) Patricia Kellogg (School Committee) Susan Albright (School Committee) Nancy Levine (School Committee) Dori Zaleznik (School Committee) Sandy Pooler (Budget Officer) Michael Rourke (Chief Administrative Officer)

**REFERRED TO PROGRAMS & SERVICES AND FINANCE COMMITTEES**

#264-02 ALD. SALVUCCI AND LUCKY STAR GROUP requesting policy discussion regarding the feasibility of allowing taxpayers to voluntarily make donations to establish an Aid to the Elderly Taxation Fund for the purpose of defraying the real estate taxes of elderly citizens in Newton.

ACTION: HELD 5-0

NOTE: Mark Dermarderosian of Pleasant Street, Newton was present to represent Lucky Star, a Newton based group to aid seniors with covering the property tax increase in their tax bills. The group docketed the item through Ald. Salvucci. One of the things the Lucky Star Group liked about this legislation is that it is already on the books with the state and Newton could adopt it. It would fit with Lucky Star's philosophy of being voluntary. The city of Acton has had great success with this type of policy. Mr. Dermarderosian stressed that he hoped the Board would approve this, as it is a relatively low-cost way of helping people. It was noted that Lucky Star stands for strength through allied services.

Ald. Coletti explained that the substantive committee (Finance Committee) has to deal with this item. He said that City Treasurer Ed Spellman is not concerned about how the program would work but if the City were to adopt it, the check would have to be made up separately. A Finance meeting on December 9<sup>th</sup> will be scheduled to discuss this and related items. At that time, it is hoped that decisions will be made on four of the related items. Ald. Coletti stressed that one of the most important

issues is the \$750. credit which is available to anyone over 65 making less than \$40,000 a year not including social security or state pension.

Ald. Johnson questioned what the process would be for elderly people to receive aid under this fund. City Solicitor Funk said the statute states that the City would establish an aid to the elderly and disabled taxation fund and it would consist of the Chairman of the Board of Assessors, the City Treasurer and three residents of the City appointed by the Mayor. The general laws state that "Said Board shall adopt rules and regulations to carry out the provisions of this section and to identify the recipients of such aid." Mr. Funk said the statute is open-ended and gives a great deal of discretion on how to implement this type of program.

Ald. Coletti asked that the Lucky Star Group bring to the Committee as much information regarding other communities that have adopted the program. Information received from other communities will be forwarded to Mr. Funk as well as Programs and Services Committee members.

Ald. Merrill made a motion to hold and the Committee voted 5-0.

REFERRED TO PROG&SERV AND FINANCE COMMITTEES

#221-02

ALD. COLETTI et al requesting home rule legislation or any other legal instrument that would allow the City a maximum of \$350,000 to be set aside in overlay reserve to provide tax relief for eligible senior homeowners.

ACTION:

HELD 5-0

NOTE:

Ald. Coletti explained that what he was trying to do was come up with some discretionary fund that the City could administer that would be used similar to the Clause 18 fund that would exempt residents from paying taxes. At this time Mr. Coletti felt the item should be left open for further discussion. The Committee agreed to hold.

#466-02

ALD. GENTILE requesting a discussion with the Committee regarding the future of Newton North High School and the role that the Board will play in the planning process.

ACTION:

HELD 5-0

NOTE:

Ald. Gentile stated that this docket item is of great interest and he docketed it for discussion within committee to see what what role the aldermen should play in all of this. Since this is such a major item and has an effect on so many different people throughout the City, Ald. Gentile was not content to wait for information so the item was docketed to see

how other people on the board were feeling and see how they might want to get involved in the process in some way at an earlier point. Ultimately the aldermen will be asked to take some vote on this issue and he felt the more information will allow better judgements. One possibility would be that the board would be given updates from someone within the School Department or the School Committee on a regular basis to inform board members of what is being discussed on an ongoing basis.

Ald. Coletti feels there are some serious problems that must be solved. A program has been approved and bond authorizations have been issued for a 39 million dollar project and the unfortunate part of this is that Turner Construction and the architects are moving forward spending money to design a plan which was approved by the Board of Aldermen, recommended by the School Department, introduced by the Mayor, and ultimately voted by the Board. In Ald. Coletti's opinion, if this is not the right approach, the process must be stopped. Ald. Coletti has given a new plan to the Superintendent of Schools, Mayor Cohen and Chairperson Anne Lerner of the School Committee. As an elected official, he would like to be involved with decisions that are being made.

Ald. Gentile has the same concern that Ald. Coletti does regarding where the architects are on this project. It is his understanding that a lot of money has not been spent on design plans as that has been put on hold since the reports came out that this could not be done in phases. Ald. Coletti seems to have a different impression that we have spent a fair amount of money and we continue to do so and Ald. Gentile would like that clarified. Michael Rourke explained that both the project manager and architect have been put on hold. They were notified in writing that they would not proceed until a plan had been worked out. Mr. Rourke wanted to make clear that a lot of work that has been done was necessary no matter what the final plan will be. Mr. Rourke further explained that he didn't feel it was fair to say that there was a large waste of money because much of the work had to be done. Ald. Gentile asked if any work is being done on general designs or schematics for the new building. Mr. Rourke said at the current time this has been stopped. No additional design will be done until a definite decision has been agreed on regarding the appropriate options. Mr. Rourke went on to say that there are very specific ways that the contract can be stopped.

Ald. Parker questioned when the consultants were notified to stop work. Mr. Rourke responded that they were notified about a week ago.

Ald. Bryson said she has had many constituents who have questioned some possible short-term repairs. Superintendent Young said from an

educational perspective, windows might be an excellent interim solution. From the learning perspective, the real deficit is technology. He is hopeful to bring forward to the School Committee a proposal for an interim step in technology for both teachers and kids. Ald. Coletti said the technology money has been taken out of the Newton South project because of lack of funds and the reallocation of money for the construction. Mr. Rourke said there are many projects that are possible and the hold on the decision is until the plan is serviceable, acceptable to parents, students and faculty. After input from all members of the Board of Aldermen, from members of the community that might have expertise in the area, a decision will be made that will be the most appropriate.

Ald. Sangiolo has concern regarding putting money into the building that in the future the Committee could say we want to tear down Newton North and build a new building. In her opinion, she can't see money being put into technology if the final decision may be to build another building. She also asked why a committee is needed before another opinion is sought. Another concern Ald. Sangiolo had was regarding the windows and other renovations that would make the school more comfortable for students. Supt. Young agreed that to install the full two million-dollar technology plan would be a bad decision at this point. What he does plan to propose in the near future is an interim step. There are enough cubicles and classrooms that are wired that if the staff had laptops to use for their own administrative, planning and professional work and could be plugged in at a cubicle, classroom, or at home, that would be extremely important. Supt. Young also said wireless technology could be very helpful. He further stated he feels a sense of urgency to get through this. Ald. Gentile asked about the replacement of windows. The approximate cost, Mr. Pooler said, was \$800,000 and that would not include the interior classrooms. Ald. Gentile stated all options must be explored before making further renovations. Mr. Rourke reiterated that the bottom line is how can we do the job safely, how we can accomplish all the work that was initially estimated and how can we do it in the most efficient way.

Chairman Johnson asked how this process was initially developed. The response was that the Mayor, the President of the Board and School Committee Chair Anne Lerner had talked for a few weeks trying to come up with a process for moving forward, understanding that ultimately the Board of Aldermen, the School Committee and the Mayor must have a consensus on what is built. In order to facilitate the process, it would be best to try to develop a process where some consensus could hopefully develop. The huge cost involved with this project and the fact that the school might need to be vacated makes everyone aware of making the proper decision regarding the options, whether the original plan still

makes sense with this curve ball or is another path in the best interest of the kids, the school system, and the City. Ms. Larner shares Ald. Coletti's concern about time passing with kids and staff still being subjected to a less than even good building conditions and how can we expedite the process going forward while respecting and maintaining the statutory responsibilities of the individual bodies that have a responsibility to act. Chairman Johnson said a professional facilitator is needed to come up with the needed input. She further asked what the next steps would be. Ms. Larner said this issue would be discussed at the School Committee meeting on Monday, November 25<sup>th</sup>. Another question Ald. Johnson had was who were the decision-makers. It was Ms. Larner's understanding that depending upon reaction and input, that the Mayor, President of the Board, and School Committee Chair Anne Larner would decide whether or not to move forward.

Ald. Bryson said she agreed with Ald. Johnson that perhaps a professional facilitator is needed. Ald. Gentile said that there were two loud and clear messages delivered at the Newton North meeting. One was not to move kids en masse to another site, in particular out of the City, and that has been responded to as the Mayor has taken that option off the table. Secondly, when you go back to the drawing board, the aldermen want input and we want the process to be very transparent. Ald. Parker agreed that the community ought to be involved with this process. Ald. Coletti said many people have not been included in this decision such as Newton Taxpayers and Chamber of Commerce. Ald. Coletti would like this group to make a recommendation and refer it to the School Department who then would look at it, make a recommendation to the Mayor and then go back to the full Board of Aldermen. Ald. Bryson would expect this issue to come back to the Board of Aldermen and to the School Committee with a recommendation and then back to the Board of Aldermen.

Michael Rourke said that we have learned from the meeting to slow down and get more input; for the alternatives to be thoroughly flushed out and then to go back to the Board of Aldermen, School Committee and other parties to be sure that everyone is on board. Ald. Johnson asked if it would be possible to put something in writing that would explain the start and stopping of this project.

Ald. Sangiolo asked why the Committee can't be just the Board of Aldermen body that holds all the public hearings. She said we all want public input but questioned why it has to be broken down to specific people. She also asked who would make the determination of who would be on the committee from the School Committee members, Board of Aldermen members, and community members. AnneLarner said that what

was envisioned was the Chairperson of the School Committee and the President of the Board would make those appointments. The Task Force Chair has not yet been designated. Ald. Sangiolo recommended that the Board of Aldermen have input on who will chair that committee and that there be more power given to the board for their input on the community people who will be involved in this. Ald. Gentile felt it was reasonable that the representatives of the three different branches collectively choose people for the process.

Robert Cerra, 77 Auburn Street, Newton spoke and said he attempted to get a copy of the contract of what the consultant for the City of Newton was doing for \$28,000 a month. He felt when he went to the Law Department, he was stonewalled from gathering public documents. Mr. Cerra read Ms. Larner's comments in the Boston Globe regarding how she felt this process was open. He felt the memorandums were just window dressing. He also went over to the School Department and requested a public record, sent an email to Ms. Heidi Black of the School Department and has not had a response. Mr. Cerra went on to say that this was not an open process and does agree with statements made by Ald. Coletti, Ald. Gentile, and Ald. Sangiolo.

Ald. Stewart felt the people who will be on the Task Force should not all be young parents. In his opinion, the Task Force has to be named in a reasonable time and move forward. Ald. Sangiolo said most parents at Williams School would like to see a new Newton North. She went on to say that the first thing she would do is announce meetings on certain dates, schedule public hearings where the School Committee and Board of Aldermen will be present and have it open for ideas. Out of the group that attends, it would be decided who would take charge of the different aspects to be examined and a timetable implemented.

School Committee Member Kellogg said at other public hearings there had been so much repetition that it was very hard to progress. Ms. Kellogg feels while it is important to have public input, she is not sure that a Task Force should not be the facilitating body for that and the continuity of public members in a Task Force would allow more efficient progress.

Ald. Coletti wants to see the problems solved now. Ald. Coletti suggested that the Building Commissioner also be included in this committee.

Ald. Gentile feels the balance is very important and he felt the board involvement, at the very least, would be expected to give updates at all meetings and he also reiterated that there needs to be public meetings where citizens are able to attend and be informed on what is going on.

Ald. Johnson said as Chair of Programs and Services Committee, she would keep this item on the agenda in order that one member would come in and furnish updates. Ald. Parker suggested the following new docket item:

#466-02(2) PROGRAMS AND SERVICES COMMITTEE  
requesting monthly progress reports from the task  
force on Newton North High School.

#346-99 ALD. SANGIOLO requesting creation of an ordinance that would prohibit dogs(leashed or unleashed) from all elementary school playgrounds.

ACTION: HELD 5-0

The meeting adjourned at 10:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Marcia Johnson, Chair