

APPROVED

## BOARD OF SELECTMEN & SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING

Monday December 10, 2018 – 4:00 PM – Richmond Town Hall, 1529 State Road

**PRESENT:** Mr. Neal Pilson, Chair of the Board of Selectmen; Mr. Dewey Wyatt, Chair of the School Committee; Ms. Adeline Ellis, School Committee; Mr. Alan Hanson, Selectman; Mr. Roger Manzolini, Selectman; Mr. Mark Pruhenski, Richmond Town Administrator

**ABSENT:**

**GUESTS:** Ms. Sue Benner, Candidate; Mr. Aaron Gerwitz, Candidate

Mr. Pilson turned the meeting over to Mr. Dewey Wyatt, Chair of the School Committee. Mr. Wyatt thanked the people in attendance for making themselves available to meet and have a dialog about who can best fill the position of interim School Committee member until the next election.

Mr. Wyatt then described the procedure that would take place: The candidates would be asked several questions and after that process was complete, the Board will deliberate and then take a vote as to which candidate to appoint to the position. The successful candidate would then be sworn in at Town Hall.

**Resignation of Andrea Harrington from the Richmond School Committee:** Before that process can begin, the Selectmen asked that the School Committee move to accept the resignation of Andrea Harrington, whose seat is the one needing to be filled. Ms. Harrington has resigned her position on the School Committee effective November 26<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Hanson requested that a letter be written to Ms. Harrington, thanking her for her service. Mr. Pruhenski said that he would do that. A motion was made to accept the resignation from the School Committee of Ms. Andrea Harrington. Mr. Hanson seconded that motion and it was adopted by unanimous vote.

**Interview Process:**

Ms. Sue Benner began the interview process by advising that she had been on the Board at Berkshire Country Day School and understood the difference between what is covered in the schoolhouse and what is covered by the School Committee. She had also read Richmond's Mission Statement and the 2016-2017 School Improvement document, noting that it had a lot to do with mathematics.

Mr. Manzolini asked Ms. Benner what her motivation was for applying for this position. She explained that she is currently a member of the Richmond Pond Assn. and has been working with the Audubon Society to enable them to bring some children to Richmond Pond to increase science awareness in the schools. She also became interested in the position when people began to ask her to consider it. She determined that she has the skill set that would be helpful.

Mr. Manzolini asked if Ms. Benner was familiar with the running of the Richmond School, to which she replied that she was not familiar with the operation of the school. She has looked at the budget, which is a public document. She has not had children enrolled at the Richmond School. She is currently a teacher at Berkshire Country Day School and, although she moved to Richmond because of the Richmond School, since she has been employed at Berkshire Country Day School, that's where her children were enrolled.

There was a discussion of the work being done by the Audubon Society and the Richmond School to enhance their science curriculum. Ms. Benner's role has been communication with the Homeowners' Association, of which she is a member. The Richmond Pond Association has provided funds to offer transportation to Richmond Pond for the school children. Another member of the Committee noted that she was familiar with the work Ms. Benner has been doing in experiential science learning with the children at BCD and that Ms. Benner has taken children to trips to the Everglades for the experience of science in that context. The teachers at the Richmond School also have a history of that kind of learning and the Committee member asked if Ms. Benner could address the question of further implementation of science and hands-on learning, particularly with regards to the Richmond Pond.

Ms. Benner noted that she is Vice-President of the Richmond Pond Association and several years ago, she introduced the practice of a town-wide picnic at the Girls and Boys Club in order to afford the Richmond residents the opportunity to get to know the Pond again as the utilization of the Town Beach had fallen off in recent years. In response to a question asked several years ago concerning the need to treat the invasive species in the Pond, she determined that it would be important to educate the Town about the Pond so that the question would not be raised again. She discussed her concern with the Pond Association, which resulted in two decisions: 1. an attempt to team up with the Richmond School to bring the students to the Pond and 2. A town-wide meeting to introduce Richmond residents to Camp Russell. Both of those have been quite successful and discussions are ongoing to make it even more attractive so that more children would come to the meeting and get to know the Pond as the amazing resource that it is. There will be some water testing done in the Whitewood area, and there has been talk of having the students plant native species, which Ms. Benner has been involved in.

The trip to the Everglades has been done by Berkshire Country Day School for twenty some years and the information gathered by the students is brought back to the Berkshires where the two different environments are compared.

Mr. Pilson asked Ms. Benner to describe her duties as a member of the Berkshire Country Day School Board. Ms. Benner has sat on that Board twice; first as a Faculty Representative and then as a full Board member. She was involved in budget discussions and enrollment decisions but was unable to be on any of the Committees as those meetings tended to be held during school hours, when she was working as faculty.

Ms. Benner responded to a question as to whether she had ever been involved in contract negotiations that she had not. She was mostly involved in budget decisions.

A member of the Committee asked Ms. Benner whether she had been involved in a budget process in any form other than in Education. Ms. Benner replied that at Bridgeport Hospital she designed a budget for her department with input from the Ph.D. She is comfortable looking at and working with, spreadsheets. In fact, she teaches the use of spreadsheets to her students at BCD.

A member of the Committee asked to explore Ms. Benner's understanding of the differences between private versus public education funding. She replied that she was aware of those differences and noted that both of her children attended public schools when they left BCD; one in the Lenox High School and the other to Pittsfield's High School. She is aware of the Mcas exams and when she teaches science at BCD, she provides her ninth graders with a previous year's test in Biology to make sure that what she is teaching is appropriate and that they will be able to move into High School with the correct level of understanding.

A member of the Committee asked Ms. Benner to comment on standardized testing. She noted that in looking at any education, private or public, there is always a constant tug of war between experiential and more traditional education. The standardized testing is a requirement and is important for funding and for determining the school's standing in Massachusetts. What draws students and families to a town is how well the school does in that standing. It would be foolish not to be aware of that, but it should not be the driving force of the education being offered. If it is, the students are truly missing something important. Looking at the number of students being seen with anxiety and depression clearly indicates an issue with high-stakes testing. There needs to be a careful balance in effect. Ms. Benner believes that many teachers understand the necessity for that balance.

Mr. Manzolini asked the School Committee Chair whether the Committee currently is feeling a lack of specific expertise in working with spreadsheets when working on the School budget. Mr. Wyatt replied that one of the advantages the school has in connection with the Shared Services program through the Business Office and Sharon Harrison is the availability of just that kind of skill set to provide those kinds of numbers, assessments and comparatives. He felt that there was no immediate need for that ability, which is not to say that he would not welcome another person with that talent. The School Committee is interested in policy and curriculum, but without getting involved in the procedural aspects. But the testing and the curriculum and how it will be taught and how standards will be met, those do start with the School Committee.

A member of the Committee said that she was particularly concerned that minutes and agendas are automatically posted as needed. That is the area she felt most immediately needed improvement.

Mr. Wyatt said that meetings have always been held on the Second Tuesday of the month and asked Ms. Benner if she saw any conflict with that schedule. She did not see any conflict

beyond the possible occasional time during the summer. There are some additional meetings required during the budget process and some related to the Shaker Mountain School Union and a Shared Superintendancy with Berkshire Hills Regional School System, so the need is for someone who is generally available. Ms. Benner was asked if she is familiar with the Open Meeting Law, which she did know. Ms. Benner did not foresee any problem with that schedule.

Ms. Benner noted that at a meeting she attended recently, some topics were raised such as early childhood education. Does the School Committee receive advance notice of what will be discussed so that members can do research into that topic before the meeting? Mr. Wyatt said there was always room for improvement, but the intent is to set agendas ahead of time so that the Committee members have an opportunity to do research in order to have a truly constructive discussion leading to a well-thought out decision.

Mr. Aaron Gerwitz was then asked to come to the table to introduce himself to the Committee. He was a part time resident of Richmond since the First Gulf War and, starting two years ago when he retired from his full-time job, his family began to spend more time here and they are now in Richmond full time. He did mention that he has committed to teach a class on Economics in Queens College in New York City on Mondays, so he should be able to accommodate the Tuesday meeting schedule.

He noted that he is applying for this position because it has been a long time since he has done any public service since his stint in the Peace Corps as a young man. Now that his schedule has more flexibility, he feels an obligation to do what he can and if the Committee feels he can be of use in this position, he is at their service.

Mr. Pilson asked how much Mr. Gerwitz knows about the Town of Richmond and the operations and workings of the School Committee. Mr. Gerwitz admitted to very little knowledge of both; he had seen a notice in the Town's Newsletter seeking applications for the position and it felt like a good fit, given his background.

Mr. Manzolini asked Mr. Gerwitz to outline what he felt were the most important qualities in a teacher. He listed empathy, understanding where the student is coming from and what their level of understanding is. A willingness to learn from experience, trying to adjust how you do things, how you communicate, how you evaluate, how you design a curriculum in a way that will better achieve your objectives. He felt that teachers should be evaluated and have reviews, and, in his career, he found that reviews were very helpful to his growth, even when they were not easy to hear or as good as he felt they should have been. He also felt that a relationship between a review and the pay scale is just the way the world works although he was aware that civil servants are dealt with differently.

Mrs. Adeline Ellis noted that Mr. Gerwitz has a position as Adjunct Professor at CUNY Queens and assumed that he has had to prepare a curriculum for that class. She asked how he goes about preparing that. Mr. Gerwitz said that he defines for himself the general objectives; what does he want the students to get out of the course (U.S. Economic History until 1914). Some of

that is knowledge of how the U.S. economy evolved, told in a coherent way. Some of it is to sharpen their skills as Economists, to use the tools of an Economist. The Committee member stated her belief in the importance of a good curriculum, even more so than good instruction. Mr. Gerwitz noted that he has no influence over curriculum as an Adjunct other than his own course, which must be approved by the City University bureaucracy, so he does not have the opportunity to define a curriculum. He believes he knows what they are doing wrong, largely based on his having hired a lot of recent Economic Major graduates in the course of his career. An important part of any curriculum is learning how to write a coherent paragraph, which Economics Departments generally do not teach.

Mrs. Ellis recalled that when she was a student at CUNY Law School, the policy there was that there would be no teaching to the test. As a result, CUNY had the lowest pass rate for the Bar Exam of any law school in the country. Eventually, that policy changed, the curriculum changed, and the pass rate has improved. She asked for a comment from Mr. Gerwitz about teaching to the test vs. experiential learning and children enjoying more emotional, social learning, having a good time in school, versus testing.

His response was that the teacher is part of the story. Sometimes teachers see tests as an adversary and a device to evaluate them. But testing can be a tool for a teacher such as the midterm exam which can show the teacher what the student is getting and what he or she is not getting. That can be a tool for adjusting the way the teacher does the job and finding a way to do it better. He would love to see a situation where the teachers view testing more as a tool to help them do their jobs better rather than as a stick to punish them for lower grades achieved this year over last year.

A member of the Committee asked what experience Mr. Gerwitz had in leading a budgeting process or participating hands-on in a budget process. In some of his jobs, Mr. Gerwitz had a payroll to meet just for salaries and compensation, so the answer is very little. He does, however, spend a good part of his day staring at spreadsheets and creating them in Excel in which he is proficient. Ms. Benner also said she was proficient in Excel.

Mr. Pilson asked if Mr. Gerwitz would be generally available for meetings and he would be available in the evenings with some occasional exceptions. Mr. Gerwitz also has consulting clients for which he manages his time personally, which gives him flexibility. Mr. Gerwitz is also familiar with the Massachusetts Open Meeting Law.

In response to a question about contract negotiation experience, Mr. Gerwitz responded that he has both hired and fired people in the course of his career, but the details about compensation was taken care of elsewhere. He had a staff of about 30 people at his last job both in the local office and stationed in Japan and San Francisco.

There was a short discussion of whether the Committee could be extended to include both Ms. Benner and Mr. Gerwitz, but that would require a bylaw change. Mr. Gerwitz asked if there were some other way he could be of use to the community and he was advised by Mr. Pilson

that the Long-Range Planning Committee could use someone with Mr. Gerwitz's skill set and there are also vacancies on the Zoning Board.

Mr. Wyatt and Mr. Manzolini both noted that, although both candidates were extremely well qualified, Ms. Susan Benner was a better fit to this particular opening. Mr. Hanson agreed that Ms. Benner is a closer fit for this position. There was a discussion of the future possibility of expanding the membership of the School Committee.

Mr. Pilson noted his respect for Mr. Gerwitz background and capabilities and his hope that he will bring that ability to another board or committee in Richmond. He did, however, agree that Ms. Benner's experience better suited her to the position open on the School Committee.

Mr. Gerwitz asked that he be advised as to how he can be of help to the community. He was assured that his phone would ring.

Mr. Wyatt moved that the School Committee recommend the appointment of Ms. Susan Benner to the interim position on the School Committee. The motion was seconded and adopted by unanimous consent of the School Committee. Mr. Pilson moved that the Select Board adopt that recommendation and name Ms. Susan Benner as the interim member of the School Committee until the next Town Election. The motion was seconded by Mr. Manzolini and passed by unanimous vote.

There being no further business before the Board and the Committee, a motion to adjourn was made, seconded and adopted by unanimous vote.

The combined meeting of the School Committee and the Board of Selectmen was adjourned at 5:03 PM

Signed:

Mr. Neal Pilson, Chair

Richmond Board of Selectmen



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