

Town Council/School Committee/ State Legislators Meeting
February 3, 2014

Present: President Gary Cote, Vice-President Kerry McGee, Karen Carlson,
Gregory Laboissonniere, Town Manager Thomas Hoover, Town Solicitor
Frederick Tobin

Absent: Councilman Jendzejec

School Committee members present: Chairwoman Kathy Patenaude, David Florio, Ann
Dickson, Superintendent Michael Almeida, Finance Director Robyn Pelletier

Absent: Frank Hyde and Judith Liner

A motion was made by Vice-President McGee seconded by Councilwoman Carlson to
open meeting. All voted aye. School Committee Chairwoman Patenaude called meeting to
order for the School Committee.

Review of Emergency Evacuation Plan.

President Cote welcomed members of the School Committee, the State delegation, town
department heads and taxpayers.

1. Fiscal Year 2014-15 Budget Preparation – Town and Schools

Finance Director Bob Thibeault discussed the town's three year budget forecasting
process, which involves a decrease in values for FY 15 and a corresponding increase in tax
rate, which zero each other out. President Cote asked for clarification, that in most cases, with
the decrease in property value and the increase in tax rate, the same check I wrote last year
should pay my taxes this year. Mr. Thibeault agreed.

Representative Tomasso asked why, with property values going up in Rhode Island,
Coventry has dropped 10%. Finance Director Thibeault understands that the state requests
municipalities to do statistical revaluations on different cycles, at different times, and that may
make the difference. What is being done in Coventry is not being done statewide.

Superintendent Almeida advised that he is still in the process of fine tuning school
budget requests, but right now we stand the same as in December of 2013, with a preliminary
\$ 1.6 million increase. We are showing increases for next year in salary for certified personnel
at \$503,000; step increases for certified staff at \$220,000; school related personnel salary
increase at \$240,000; step increases of \$28,000; certified staff pension increase from 14.86% to
16.01% equaling \$525,000; an increase in special education out of district tuition of \$350,000;
increase in transportation costs of \$180,000 with a loss in state aid of \$230,504. We are still in
the process of seeing what staffing needs will be next year.

Further discussion took place on Coventry schools' underfunding along with the funding
formula. Representative Tomasso asked that if the schools were given all the money in an
acceleration of the funding formula, would all-day Kindergarten be possible? Superintendent
Almeida remarked that one additional issue would be the expense of having to reopen Oak
Haven, and we would probably need \$700,000 to \$800,000 to open Oak Haven. That figure

would include a nurse and administrator. It is a very high priority of ours to have all day kindergarten, but would need a 3-5 year period to accomplish this, or would have to renegotiate contracts and get big concessions.

Representative Tomasso is concerned that Coventry will be one of only a few communities that does not offer all day- K and believes that by continuing to not address this, it will become a problem for Coventry and its students.

Representative Guthrie asked the projection of student population and Superintendent Almeida responded that at this point it looks flat.

President Cote added that the schools are projecting a need for \$1.6 million, and if you add that to the expenses of all day K, you could be looking at about \$3 million. The problem is that with Senate Bill 3050 in place, the town doesn't even have the opportunity to raise that kind of money and it just becomes a vicious circle.

Superintendent Almeida again stressed the importance of all day kindergarten. The challenge is that we can't do everything at once and added that he is about to go into negotiations with both labor unions.

2. Senior Services funding

Director Pat Shurtleff advised that last year a couple of bills were introduced for elder funding in this community. In Coventry we have about 4300 residents over the age of 65. We used to receive \$32,000, but currently we receive an \$8,000 community service grant through the Department of Elderly Affairs, and do not receive anything directly from DOE. Even at \$5.00 a person it would take us from the \$8,000 we receive now and bring us to over \$20,000, which would allow us to reach out to more folks in need. Ms. Shurtleff asked if that would be discussed again this year.

Representative Guthrie stated that there is an article, but he is not sure when it will come up for hearing. He will find out and will accompany Ms. Shurtleff at that time to testify at the State Finance Committee. In addition, Ms. Shurtleff explained that Coventry has been grouped into Washington County (even though we are in Kent County) in order to build up statistics. She feels that we need to get back into Kent County as it affects our grants, etc.

Senator Raptakis indicated that this would need to be corrected through the Dept. of Elderly Affairs, the maybe we can begin increasing what Coventry receives.

President Cote asked how many residents Ms. Shurtleff services and she replied 2,300, with an increase of 15% to 20% yearly. These citizens are not only given assistance for financial problems, but for all kinds of issues. For example, no one is turned away who needs lunch because they can't afford to buy it. There have also been major increases in food bank families and stated that there has not been a significant budget increase in years.

3. Current Education Legislation

Superintendent Almeida wanted to address penalties under State Law regarding the possession of marijuana on school property. The school is working diligently, but it is more and more difficult to address the issue at the high school because possession of marijuana has been decriminalized to some degree. He would like to see a law that would make possession

or marijuana and other drugs illegal on school property. Representative Tomasso agrees and will look into this.

Dr. Almeida also has concerns about the protection of school property and states that additionally the law should cover 18, 19 and 20 year olds. Representative Guthrie believes there is already a statute on the books, but will research and pull up any statute that has to do with this subject. Senator Raptakis added that Chapter 426 addresses children using tobacco in schools and maybe we could try to tie marijuana use into this chapter.

Police Officer John Shields explained how the marijuana law works, as it has been decriminalized to a point where it is treated more like a speeding ticket, requiring an appearance at Traffic Tribunal. From there the appropriate penalty is assessed along with court costs, community service and/or an online education course. You are then assigned a review date.

Coventry Teachers Alliance School Related Personnel Pension Plan

Manager Hoover explained where we stand with regard to the School Related Personnel Pension Plan. Essentially we disagree as to who is responsible for the pension liability, which has become a secondary issue to the most recent problem. The legislature had approved a bill for 2014, 2015 and 2016 to distribute incentive aid on a population basis throughout RI. Coventry is the only town of the 39 municipalities where it has been withheld per Rosemary Booth Gallogly of the Department of Revenue, and it is being withheld because we will not take responsibility for the \$24 million unfunded pension liability. We have maintained that same standing for a couple of years. It is quite amusing that Senator Raptakis has given me a memo from the Senate Fiscal Office, where the Department of Revenue states that the town has not met the requirements of the law because it submitted a financial improvement plan that was not approved by the governing body.

As far as the town is concerned we are in total compliance with the state statutes and should not be penalized by being the only town in the state that is having money withheld. Coventry is responsible for the police and municipal workers pensions and in many cases Coventry is not in as bad of shape as other communities. It is clearly a matter of being penalized and we need some help on this. We have done everything asked of us and have followed all recommendations. Withholding this money is wrong, needs to be corrected and I am asking the delegation for help.

President Cote added that requests were made from Department of Revenue as well as the pension committee of RI, and we have complied with all requests. We submitted the pension improvement plan on the uniformed as well as non-uniformed plans, and they gladly accepted. We did not submit on the school related personnel and it is my understanding that their Board of Trustees did that. I think that the state is punishing us for doing what they asked us to do. I asked Rosemary Booth Gallogly that if the town had accepted responsibility for the SRP pension, if we would receive the incentive aid check and she replied "absolutely". Well, the town is not going to accept responsibility for that unfunded pension liability and neither is the school department. We continue to talk with the SRP employees. The town and school have put some ideas on the table as to how to move forward. We have met our obligations to the plan since its inception in 1977, therefore I think the taxpayers have already paid their share to that pension plan and it is not fair to ask them to pay again. We are at odds with the State of RI and are requesting our delegation to work on behalf of the taxpayers of the town.

Just for conversation sake, lets just say that the state is convinced that the town has not met its obligation on the pension plan, then the state should at least give the town credit for the two plans for which we have been successful. Split the \$166,000 proportionately and hold the SRP amount in escrow until a decision is made by the courts. But the money for the uniformed and non-uniformed should be split and put toward that unfunded liability, for the benefit of the taxpayers and the people who are affected by these pensions.

Representative Guthrie suggested that the town have Ms. Gallogly come to the Town Hall and meet in the same forum as we have tonight, ask her questions and have a discussion with her. Representative Tomasso agreed that a conversation is necessary.

Senator Raptakis will send a letter asking her to hold that money in escrow until after litigation. He remarked that this is the first he has heard of this and wondered why Ms. Gallogly did not inform the delegation, yet sent the Town Manager a letter which was not copied to any members of the Coventry delegation.

Vice-President McGee agreed that there is a good possibility that this will go through the court system; the money should be held in escrow until a resolution is reached.

Superintendent Almeida asked Council to return to one of the school items, as he wanted to take a moment to discuss and review some current proposed legislation regarding education.

Dr. Almeida believes that proposed bills 7096 and 2184 concerning teacher evaluation legislation, should be left a local decision for the School Committee and superintendent. Passage of this legislation would trump our current system as to when a teacher is evaluated.

In reference to bill #7218 requiring a social worker for every 400 students, while that may be an ideal situation, it would require us to add a number of social workers to our schools. I am concerned that this would become an unfunded mandate, and all day K remains a top priority.

Dr. Almeida expressed concerns pertaining to the language in Bill 7255 with regard to grade point average for graduation and Bill 2181 concerning teacher training requirements. Senate Bill 7012 is also concerning as it relates to the distance students would have to walk to school, especially kindergarten students (1.99 miles).

He would welcome the passage of Bills 2014 and 7026 as they relate to layoff notices, by backing up the day to May 1 and in addition would endorse Bill 7182 as that speaks to the acceleration of the funding formula.

He added that Bill 7144 speaks to the time a student would have to be in school to become eligible for an IEP. A student should be eligible for an IEP no matter how many days in school. He also has serious concerns about backing off on issues having to do with Common Core, PARCC and state assessments. Representative Tomasso commended Dr. Almeida for wanting to move forward with Common Core and Parcc.

Kent County Mayoral Academy

President Cote advised that we are currently in talks about bringing a mayoral academy to Coventry. The Town Hall Annex is being considered and a preliminary plan has been submitted to RIDE, the final plan to be submitted in April. After touring the Blackstone Valley

Mayoral School, I think it would be good to bring something like this to Coventry and in addition it could be a revenue generator for the town. We intend to hold public meetings, hearings and get public input as this process moves forward. This is not carved in stone, but is something that I have been looking at to try to diversify the education system in Coventry and offer some options, such as a Mayoral Academy. I believe it would have a limited impact on the Coventry School Budget.

Manager Hoover added that the goal is that the first class begins in September of 2015. The school would not encompass elementary school grades and there are no immediate plans for displacement of anyone currently in that building.

Ann Dickson, School Committee member, said much more information is needed, for example how will students be selected, what will Coventry's responsibility be, what is the plan for governance of that academy, the education plan, who will assess the plan, how will the funding formula be affected. There is a lot of work to do in the next two months and I am sure that members of the School Committee would be interested to look at this plan and give their input. In addition, other communities will be involved, so there would need to be a common understanding. There is a lot to be worked out and understood.

Dr. Almeida remarked that he previously expressed his concerns as to the loss of funding to the Coventry Public Schools. If the mayoral school is not well subscribed to by other communities, with the highest percentage of students from Coventry, and with the money following the student, we will lose.

President Cote agreed that many things need to be looked at and many decisions made before a final plan is submitted. Tonight is really not the place and time to debate this, however, there will be plenty of time for meetings and comments.

Rhode Island Cities and Towns Legislative Goals

Manager Hoover advised that the RI League of Cities and Towns put together a set of legislative goals for 2014. It was requested that these goals be distributed to our legislative delegation and Town Council, and has been provided to you in your packets tonight.

Proposed Special Legislation Reservoir Road Sidewalks

Manager Hoover asked that items 8 and 9 be looked at together, as Item 8 is an explanation and Item 9 is an action item. This has to do with a new municipal road and bridge revolving fund, which is a RIDOT program of funding through low cost loans, administered by RI Clean Water Finance Agency. There is about \$7.5 million statewide, approved by the General Assembly, for this year on road and bridge construction.

Coventry, as well as other communities, has submitted projects. We submitted a project to install sidewalks along Reservoir Road from Club House Road to Route 3. Legislation would authorize the town to issue not more than \$350,000 in general obligation bonds and notes from the road and bridge revolving loan fund administered by the RI Clean Water Finance Agency to finance the construction and reconstruction of sidewalks in the Town of Coventry.

Time is of the essence on this project, but our Charter requires a referendum. We believe this is an important project, so we spoke with our bond counsel. She suggested a few different ways to accomplish approval for borrowing without a referendum. If approved by

Council, special legislation can be submitted to the General Assembly for consideration in order to participate in this funding. In speaking to RIDOT, the \$7 million may be all divided up this year. We do not want to miss out on the available money, so bond counsel has suggested a methodology to accomplish this.

A resolution has been prepared for the Town Council to consider with a proposed bill attached which was prepared by our bond counsel. I am asking for Town Council approval tonight and hopefully the delegation can move forward with the legislation. It needs to be submitted to Clean Water by February 14. President Cote added that this topic has been brought before the Town Council before and there are safety issues there with the children and with the proximity of the high school to all the trucks and traffic up and down that road.

Although Town Council does not feel comfortable with not having a referendum, time is of the essence and we will lose our opportunity to get a portion of the \$7.5 million. Representative Guthrie suggested letting legislative counsel write the language, and he will get a bill drawn tomorrow.

Representative Tomasso said although the proposed sidewalk is in her district, she indicated that she is not comfortable bypassing the voters.

School Committee Chairperson Kathy Patenaude questioned whether there are other projects that people may want to spend \$350,000 on other than sidewalks for the high school. Maybe our taxpayers would prefer to see sidewalks in the Hopkins Hill area. There are many places where our children are at risk with no sidewalks. I question the motive of not going to the voters.

President Cote agreed that it does bother him to bypass the voters on this, but in order not to lose out on the money, this is the only way to do it without going to referendum. Representative Guthrie stated that he will have accompanying legislation submitted to the town by the 20th of February so that we can pass a resolution to make the voters comfortable.

A motion was made by Vice-President McGee seconded by Councilwoman Carlson to table this resolution. All voted aye.

Discussion and resulting action appointing Arthur G. Capaldi as Municipal Court Judge and appointing Jean Boulanger as Probate Court Judge.

Councilman Laboissonniere doesn't feel it is appropriate to place these items on tonight's agenda as we are here to discuss legislation. President Cote advised that these appointments are on the agenda because both terms expired in January, so for legal reasons, he felt it appropriate to put on tonight's agenda. Councilman Laboissonniere disagreed, commenting that both judges serve until their successor is appointed.

A motion was made by Councilman Laboissonniere seconded by Councilwoman Carlson to table court appointments. Vote taken: Aye (2), Nay (2) Motion to table fails.

A motion was made by Vice-President McGee to approve appointments. No second to motion. Motion fails.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Keith Taylor, 1 Haywood Road, commented that if there are no problems with the performance levels of these judges, it only make sense to reappoint them.

Tammy Duxbury, 2 Orchid Trail, commended the Council for making the right decision with regard to the sidewalks on Reservoir Road, and the voters need to be heard.

Ken Jackson, 4799 Harkney Hill Road, commented that he doesn't know why the town hasn't filed a court suit with regard to the SRP pension; disagrees with bypassing voters on the sidewalk issue; would like to know where Coventry stands on the number of special needs children we educate as compared to the other 38 cities and towns.

Ron Gizarelli, 50 Harrington Road, thinks public comment should be allowed when issues are discussed and before they are voted on. Any type of innovative school is important and is favor of a mayoral academ as anything we can do to help education is important. Additionally, the SRP pension plan needs to be looked at individually and we need to figure out if we can pay each retiree and how long it will take to be fully fund the plan.

A motion was made by Councilwoman Carlson seconded by Vice-President McGee to adjourn meeting. All voted aye.

School Committee Chairperson Kathy Patenaude adjourned School Committee portion of the meeting.

Town Clerk