

Calais Pre-Town Meeting Forum Minutes - APPROVED

March 4, 2019
Calais School, Gym

In attendance:

- Board members: Katie Reed, Rick Kehne, Chris Cadorette, Dorothy Naylor
- Administration: Cat Fair, Principal
- Guests: Denise Wheeler, John Brabant, Rose Pelchuk, Chris Tuller, Cynthia Gardner-Morse, Barry Bernstein, Heather Scandale, Craig Line

1.0 Call to Order

Meeting was called to order at 6:00pm by Ms. Reed

The school board reviewed Article 7, which is the budget for next year. The budget for next year is \$1,970,738, which is an increase of 3.49% from the previous year. Net impact to taxes is plus 1.35%. We cut a teacher last year, and cut classrooms from 7 to 6. We are also cutting a classroom from 6 to 5 this year. The teachers and principal have decided that the grades should be grouped together for the students' benefit. The budget is not reduced because we need to find money to fund a teacher that was previously funded by Title 1; we no longer qualify for those federal funds. There is a 3-year process to recover the lost \$50,000. There is an increase in preschoolers so there is some increase in teacher coverage. Regarding class configuration, Ms. Fair noted that K-1 will be combined and 2-3 will be combined; 4, 5 and 6 are undecided right now. Each class will also be connected to a math and literacy specialist. The spending per pupil is increasing from \$15,902 to \$16,720; spending change is 5.08% higher than the current year. The budget is based on expenditures not revenue (Ms. Naylor). Ms. Reed compared the current year to the coming year expenditures. There was discussion on the WCSU assessments, which are shared services paid by WCSU Central Office and then reimbursed by Calais.

Major changes to the budget include salary increases, benefit changes and staffing changes. Ms. Reed noted that student enrollment has remained steady and looks to be steady going forward. The student numbers are reported to the state as of October 1. After two small classes, the following classes look bigger.

Comparing the education spending per pupil across the SU, Calais has the smallest amount. The tax rate impact is \$0.42, or \$42 per \$100,000. There was some discussion regarding the tax rates across the SU and how they might be different. Each town is unique.

Ms. Scandale wondered why the library position stayed at 1.0 when the student enrollment numbers have gone down. Ms. Naylor noted that this position also takes care of technology and serves as an interventionist when needed. Ms. Scandale wondered if the tech component can be integrated into the classroom curriculum. Ms. Reed stated that the board discussed this with Ms. Fair to see if this can happen but it is hard with contract positions. Ms. Fair noted that the library/tech person is a highly qualified teacher who can allow greater flexibility in either math or as extra staff. There was some discussion about making sure that girls get experience in the STEM concepts early in their education. There was also some discussion regarding special educators versus para-educators in the school.

Mr. Bernstein wondered why the oil costs have increased; he would like us to try to rely less on fossil fuels. Barry also had a question about the fund balance; he is concerned about what will happen to the balance if the merger goes through. Ms. Wheeler noted that the SB met with the school board on this topic. They came up with some documents to take care of the land and the fund balance; the school is used as the emergency shelter location. There should be a town meeting for the residents to approve these legal documents to make them stronger. The school property will be transferred to the town in the event that the consolidated district decides to close the school at a cost of \$1. For the fund balance is a contingency for the operating budget; if a merger happens, the fund balance will stay with the school if it is earmarked for special projects for this school.

Mr. Line asked a question regarding the fact that the preliminary injunction was denied; how strong is the board behind this issue, are you interested in going forward? Ms. Naylor noted that this group will ask for a one-year delay from the legislature, but will have to continue with whatever is state statute. Mr. Line is interested in fighting the merger, not simply delaying it for one year. Ms. Wheeler noted that residents need to let their school board members know how they feel about the merger. Mr. Line wanted to know what the feeling of the board members are. It is not known right now how to fight the process; the one-year delay might help to figure it out. Mr. Kehne is vehemently against the merger and willing to fight, but is willing to respect the law of the land. Ms. Naylor noted that a bill has been recommended for a state school district. Ms. Reed noted that the vote was 4-1 on the board against the merger. Ms. Reed felt that the proposal that was denied by the state is the basis for a strong legal case.

Ms. Scandale stated that she appreciates the ability to vote by Australian ballot because it is important for those people who can't make it to Town Meeting. Mr. Kehne noted that he feels that Town Meeting is an important forum to exchange ideas. Mr. Line noted that there was a previous discussion about voting by Australian ballot and believes that coming to Town Meeting is a better way to vote on the budget. Mr. Line noted that the original point of Act 46 was to lower property taxes and it doesn't appear to be happening. Ms. Naylor noted that it appears that the districts that have merged are not saving money. There is concern that the state wants to take over all education. There was a discussion on the Maine merger outcomes.

A question was asked about the fund balance and whether it should be earmarked before Town Meeting. Ms. Naylor noted that the board will be deciding at a meeting on March 21st before ceding power to the Transition Board.

It was brought up by Mr. Bernstein that everyone needs to remain civil during this whole process and think about the words that are used. Mr. Line noted that the residents would like the board to be strong but not antagonistic. Respect needs to be maintained. Mr. Cadorette is concerned with what happens after the merger; he wants to make sure we have a plan if we are forced into a merger. He always wants to do what is best for the kids in Calais and the district. He is not pro-merger, but is pro kids. Ms. Scandale is not pro-merger but she is concerned with the enrollment numbers, as well. Ms. Reed noted that the school board needs to work with the SB to help provide affordable housing so that we can keep young families in Calais. Mr. Brabant noted that the school board seems receptive to regular meetings with the SB. Mr. Cadorette is concerned with the loss of music, Spanish and other programs. Ms. Wheeler stated that it is important to talk about how best to use the school building besides education during the school day.

The group viewed an 11-minute video prepared by Ms. Fair, the staff and students. Ms. Wheeler requested that the video be shared with the legislature. Ms. Pelchuk was happy to see that many of the traditions from 30 years ago are still being celebrated today.

Respectfully submitted by Kristi Flynn, Board Recording Secretary