

MUSCOGEE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT
COLUMBUS, GEORGIA

CALLED BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING
BRADLEY LIBRARY CONFERENCE ROOM
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2007, 5:00 P.M.

MINUTES

A called meeting of the Muscogee County Board of Education was held on Monday, September 24, 2007, 5:00 p.m. in the conference room at the Bradley Library.

The following Board Members were present: James Walker, Chairman, Philip T. Schley, Vice Chairman, Joseph Roberson, Naomi Buckner, John Wells, Patricia Hugley Green, Brenda P. Storey, Fife M. Whiteside and Cathy Williams.

Others present: John A. Phillips, Jr., Superintendent of Education, Jorge Vega, Legal Counsel, Robin Pennock, Deputy Superintendent of Education, Karen P. Jones, Executive Assistant for the Board and Superintendent, Del Parker, Chief Financial Officer, Myles Caggins, Chief Operations Officer, Richard Hyatt from the Ledger Enquirer and other media.

Mr. Walker stated that the purpose of the called meeting was for the Board to discuss and take action on the proposed lease financing of an Educational Services Center. Mr. Walker called on Dr. Schley.

Dr. Schley, "It was passed by the populace recognizing the efficiency that a new administration building could accomplish for us. We are here to decide how to finance it because we've already decided to do it and it desperately needs to be done. I think it's important to recognize that the Board established a footprint for this administration building the same night that we passed a vote to do Rigdon Road School. We went on record that it should be at the old Columbus Mall site. In that spot it makes a statement and my feeling is that the statement is this, Public Education is not for South Columbus, it's not for North Columbus. Public Education is for all of Columbus. There on the edge of Macon Road, it clearly makes that statement. I believe that if we are able to proceed and build a dignified, scholarly, good looking building there that our populace, our students everybody that rides by can say, that's public education in Muscogee County. I hope that when the vote is in that we will have enough people to vote that way."

Mr. Walker called on Dr. Phillips.

Dr. Phillips, "Dr. Schley is right. This comes about every 50, 60 or more years that we have this opportunity to do something efficiently and effectively. We're spread out all over the City. It's not cost effective to do so nor is it good organizationally. We need to be in once centralized place as much as we possibly can. We have put children first. When we first passed this SPLOST we had the administration building in Phase I and we had it budgeted for approximately \$20 million. Before the vote, we moved it to Phase III making sure that all of our classroom needs, those things that directly affect students were done first. That was our priority. We took \$7 million out of the \$20 million and reduced the administration building to \$12.6 million. This was almost 5 years ago and \$20 million was a good figure with inflation. We built 12 new schools, 41 renovations and additions, \$251 million on those things that affect children directly. This is the end of the SPLOST and into the Phase III operation in which we committed to the public that we would build a new administration building. The public voted on that. We've said many, many times that when you make a promise, if you don't keep your promise, you'll never have the trust of the community in the future. I say the public voted and affirmed this new educational services center. I'd ask us to be bold and keep our promise to the community. In Cobb County when they didn't keep their promise to the public, they went to court. We're keeping our promise of what was in the SPLOST, keeping our students first has been accomplished and we've spent more than what was actually in the projects including a new Rigdon Road. A good bit of that \$7 million that was put in critical needs was deferred to making sure that we had our children taken care of first throughout this school district."

Mrs. Williams, "I'd like a point of order. What is the process to get an item to be considered by this board for a vote?"

Dr. Phillips, "The Board can have called meetings at anytime on any specific reasons that they deem necessary according to Board policy."

Dr. Schley, "I believe that Mr. Walker and I felt that at our work sessions and at our board meetings, there is a great deal of material being dealt with and we felt that this subject was important enough to bring as a separate item at a called board meeting."

Ms. Buckner, "The fact that we need an administration building that the public voted on. My question is, how are we going to get it financed? Did we send out an RFP for different people who can do this type of financing? Why this particular company and what was some of the background for this? Did we just consider one source?"

Dr. Phillips, "This Company came to us during the time that Jim Humes was living and he brought them to us. We met in the law firms' office. We talked about this when we anticipated no federal funding for BRAC. This particular company has provided the same service for Gwinnett County. We were also introduced to this company from King and Spaulding. We asked them to provide us with information on how this can be done because they have experience with it going through lease purchase with a development authority or GSBA as well. They have been recommended highly from all those sources."

Mr. Roberson, "I want you to detail the \$7 million besides Rigdon Road for the public."

Dr. Phillips, "The \$7 million was taken out of the \$20 million before the SPLOST was voted on. I think it went to a great cause in building a new Rigdon Road. We moved money around from NPR, money out of the general fund, out of technology to make things happen for our community."

Mr. Walker called on Jamie Wilson of Merchant Capital to present a plan to the Board on lease financing an administration building. The Board had questions and comments regarding this information.

Mr. Walker then called on Ed Burdeshaw, the architect that was approved by the Board on July 18, 2005 to prepare the design work for an educational services center. After the Board discussed and asked questions of Mr. Burdeshaw, Mr. Walker called for a motion.

Dr. Phillips stated, "In order for us not to lose site of the vision to consolidate buildings such as Columbus Roberts Center, the 96,000 square feet is needed. The only building and department that will be off site will be Lorenzo Road and Technology.

Mr. Roberson, "In the best interest of the public, we need to do what is best in terms of education as well as dollar consumption. We need to give options. The public may say they agree that the Baker High School property is close to Fort Benning and this is an option. I offer this as a motion." Mrs. Williams, "I'll second that motion. There are other surplus properties the 45th Street Daniel, Claflin and Baker." Mr. Whiteside, "In the 2003 SPLOST the public did vote on the location and it is the mall site." Mrs. Storey, "One of the things that we're losing site of is that this information has to be done in a public nature. Rather than attacking the information and the source, we should look at it as an opportunity to say, we have another avenue just like we did with the HVAC system. We know that it is going to cost us more to consolidate but, we cannot lose sight of where we said we were going to put this building."

Mr. Walker, "We have a motion and second." Mr. Wells, I'd like to speak to the motion. I had made some recommendations way back that we put the building off the J.R. Allen By-pass. This is a major thoroughfare, easy to get to from all parts of the City. I even made a proposal that we could buy Bibb Mill or put it at Bibb School. There's a lot of property that we could put it at but, we narrowed it down whenever we purchased the Sears property and basically we did it to build this building there. The people already voted on a referendum. All we have to do is go forward to build it."

Mr. Roberson, "To clarify the motion. I made the motion to look at the feasibility, which would implicate cost analysis and other factors to look at the old Baker High School site as an option and possibility for the central administration building." Mr. Wells, "I'd like to amend the motion that we also consider the J.R. Allen area and get a feasibility study, looking for land, access to it and bring this back." Mr. Wells amended motion was seconded by, Mrs. Green. Mr. Whiteside, "We're not talking about the right issue here. There's only one issue on the table here tonight and that's the proper relationship between the public and the Board, the Board and Administration and among Board members. We keep tap dancing around that. To what extent are we bound by the commitments we made? What is our compact with the citizens? To what extent do we have to go to the citizens and how do we do it if we bury that compact. If we move what was promised from one place to another? If we increase the scope of the building beyond what was promised in 2003. The Board is supposed to be about the business of making choices. That's what we're paid to do. We ought to create a format of including the public."

Mr. Walker, "We have the amended motion to include J.R. Allen." The vote was (6) opposing and (3) affirming, (Roberson, Williams, Green). The motion failed.

Mrs. Green, "What's important to me is to let the main thing be the main thing and that's educating our children and promises made should be promises kept. I need to know if there are any outstanding projects on our SPLOST list? Also how much debt do we have?"

Dr. Phillips, "We have no debt, whatsoever. The only projects that would be remaining is the Technology piece where there is about \$38 million left. In terms of additional classrooms, renovations, building new schools, all of this has been done."

Mr. Wells, This lease financing is an avenue provided by the Legislature approved by the Courts where we can do things like this. The growth in our digest has been significant. A new SPLOST is definitely needed because the school mentioned to me is needed. We still have kids throughout the system in portables and there will be growth. We have a legal option to build this facility. It's on the end of the SPLOST because that is what we promised the people." Ms. Buckner, "This whole process has been problematic for me. The first I heard of this was last Thursday." Dr. Phillips, "We did not have this information to give to you. We discussed it months ago but, we did not have any real numbers. It was only preliminary. We wanted to share with you correct information."

Dr. Schley made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Storey to approve the building of an Educational Services Center as presented with a strong charge to Mr. Burdeshaw to do value engineering and other economies as can be accomplished and utilize the financing as described by Merchant Capital.

Mr. Walker allowed comments on the motion.

Mrs. Williams, "I'm not going to support this motion tonight. I'm not comfortable with this process. It seems like we're trying to get something over on the public by calling this board meeting and not letting it get to the board members in time for us to really digest it. I'm not voting against an administration building. I know that we need to get our staff out of the Roberts Center. I don't want another registration to go on there and I happen to know the central administration building is sliding down a hill. This process circumvents."

Mrs. Green, “I want to reiterate that my first and foremost commitment is to the needs of students, parents and our school district employees and without question I stand firm on putting the education of our children first. I have received phone calls as early as today and I’ve had many conversations about the matter that is before us tonight. Today a parent called and commented asking that I support this education services center because she does not want another parent to experience what she experienced when she moved to Columbus a few years ago. She went on to let me know that she was frustrated that she had to go to three different places to enroll her son in Pre-K and that she enrolled her son and that she paid for private school until she had time to get acclimated to this new city and her job schedule. Another phone call just moments before our meeting wanted to know if we, this Board was going to do as it campaigned for the SPLOST that the education services center would be built on Macon Road because he’s looking for improvement in the area where he lives. The question before us tonight is one of commitment, one of trust and one of transparency and as a policy maker; I’m staying focused on the policy question. We asked the voters for their trust and in their last referendum they are counting on us to do as we promised. This education service center should be the last project that should be completed from that promise. Just as I’m committed to the education of our students, I’m also committed to the working conditions for our employees and I’m also committed to the desperate need for parents to have a centralized location to enroll their children in our school system as well as take advantage of all the educational services that we offer to students. The public deserves to see an open process. I believe that promises made must be promises kept. I’m ready to vote to take the next step in authorizing the funding that is needed to make up the difference because all of the projects have had an overrun and we are going to have to deal with the funding. My vote is to keep the promise.”

The vote on Dr. Schley’s motion was (5) affirming, (Schley, Storey, Green, Wells, Walker) and (4) opposing, (Roberson, Buckner, Williams, Whiteside). The motion passed.

Mrs. Green, “I challenge this Board that we’re going to come up in January for our new budget process to make sure that the Superintendent expands our alternative schools to help those young people who are sixteen and who don’t have enough credits to continue and to look at funding for smaller class sizes when we need those additional teachers. We have some resources that have to be taken care of in our regular budget process that aren’t related to capital needs. We need to be as thought provoking about these needs.”

Mr. Walker, “Are there any other comments on Item B?”

Mrs. Williams, “Are there just comments now?”

Mr. Walker, “We have not gotten a motion. We’re just listening to people talk about item B.”

Mrs. Storey, “I think that one of things like it says here to look at including a new Carver High School, air conditioning the gyms at all middle and high schools and I would hope we do all purpose rooms in the elementary schools.”

Mr. Wells, “This is just a commitment to start and we will make a list. It is not a call for the vote.”

Mr. Whiteside, “This is a vote to call for a sales tax. I cannot believe that we’re going to vote to call for a sales tax without even having talked about a project list.”

Mr. Wells, “We’re going to get the project list up. This is just a commitment from the Board to move forward to commit to do one.”

Mrs. Storey, “I move that we begin the process and especially have a work session that is totally dedicated to this. I’m sorry did you want to say something?”

Mrs. Williams, “We’re in a called board meeting for this purpose. We just cut the public out of one process, let’s cut them out of this process to.”

Mr. Wells, “The public has never been cut out of the process.”

Mrs. Storey, “I’m really working real hard. I think that we have a process where we vote. We come for discussion. Each one of us is able to express our opinions and it can all be done without aspersions being cast. There are some things that we know should be on the list like the things listed. I think that we should also start addressing public forums and the whole thing. I don’t think that we should build the list in isolation of ourselves.”

Dr. Phillips, “The agenda item says we’re going to take action for the renewal of a SPLOST letting the citizens know that we are going for a renewal and that there would be capital needs including Carver High, air conditioning the schools, new schools to accommodate growth and other needs as identified by the Board, administration and citizens. We’re putting them on notice that we have committed ourselves to a SPLOST and we’re going to put together a process that they will be involved in, they will have input in developing the list as well as the Board and administration.”

Mrs. Williams, “I’d like to add very specifically that included in the renewal of the SPLOST would be to pay off any debt that we are incurring for this new statement that we’re building.”

Mr. Whiteside, “I cannot believe that we’re about to vote on a renewal of the sales tax, at a called board meeting without having run through the committees and without having given any public notice in advance that we’re going to do it. It’s absolutely astonishing. Excuse me, I have the floor. I plan to vote no on this. Now that’s not to say that I won’t support a sales tax when the time comes to actually develop a project list and put it out in the form of a resolution and go through the huge amount of work before you have to do one of these things. It’s either politics or just bad planning. The notion of doing something like this on the fly, it just absolutely astonishes me. My vote is no, not until we figure exactly what we’re going to do and how we’re going to do it.”

Mr. Walker, “did we get a second?”

Mr. Wells, “I’ll second it.”

Mrs. Storey, “Is what we’re voting on, to begin the process of putting together a list, looking at offering the list for a SPLOST. We’re not saying we’re going to because, if there are only five things on the list that we need to do. Then we may say that we don’t need to go for one.”

Mr. Whiteside, “That wasn’t the motion. The motion was to call for a renewal of a sales tax.”

Mrs. Storey, “I didn’t use this motion here. May I repeat my motion? I didn’t even look at this. My motion was to begin the process.”

Mrs. Green, “She’s amending the motion.”

Mrs. Storey, “My motion is to begin the process of building the list, setting of the whole timeframe and looking at whether or not to do a SPLOST, what should be on the SPLOST, and then the public input for it, and how to go about it, the whole process. It’s not the single vote.”

Mrs. Green, “We’re voting on this amendment. Correct?”

Mr. Walker, “Yes.”

Mrs. Storey, “I never read this motion.”

Mr. Whiteside, "What's on the agenda is a vote to renew the sales tax. That's not what Brenda said. I'll support what Brenda said. That's fine with me. I'm sure not ready tonight to make a vote to renew the sales tax."

Mr. Walker, "Do we understand the motion."

Mr. Roberson, "What we have is a substitute motion."

Mrs. Storey, "I never made the original motion like this."

Mrs. Buckner, "You want to change the agenda to add another action item."

Mrs. Storey, "I never made the original motion from this."

Mrs. Green, "This is a substitute."

Mrs. Buckner, "You want to change the agenda to add another item. This is a whole other item."

Mr. Wells, "No."

Mrs. Storey, "No. I am not making the motion to ask for a SPLOST right now. I do think that we just are absolutely trying to make a whole lot more out of something that's not. I am saying that, I'd like to make a motion."

Mrs. Storey, "To begin the process, to start building a list for a SPLOST and what's going to be included on that list, what the process is going to be and the public forums for public input to lead to a decision whether or not to do a SPLOST."

Ms. Buckner, "I second the motion."

Mrs. Green, "I think it is really critical that we focus in on public input. We're going to have to ask particularly parents and the general public what they would like to see at their school building or any building in the school district."

The vote on Mrs. Storey's motion to begin the process, start building a list for a SPLOST develop what's going to be included on that list, what the process is going to be and hold public forums for public input to lead to a decision whether or not to do a SPLOST was unanimous.

Upon motion of Mr. Wells, seconded by Mrs. Williams, the Board unanimously voted to adjourn the called meeting.

Greg S. Ellington
Legal Counsel