MINUTES OF THE TEACHER/STAFF INPUT SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE CHESHIRE TOWN COUNCIL SCHOOL MODERNIZATION COMMITTEE (SMC) MEETING HELD ON MONDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2020, AT 3:00 TO 3:45 P.M. IN DODD MIDDLE SCHOOL LIBRARY, CHESHIRE CT 06410.

Present
Jen Bates, Rich Gusenburg, Anne Marie Kemp
Staff: Dept. of Education Asst. Supt. of Schools Marlene Silano

1. ROLLCALL
The Clerk called the roll and a quorum was determined to be present.

2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE
The group Pledged Allegiance to the Flag.

3. INTRODUCTION OF PURPOSE OF INPUT SESSION
Supt. Silano explained that the School Modernization Committee (SMC) was formed between the Town Council and Board of Education. There are a number of subcommittees within the SMC, and the Teacher/Staff Input Committee is one of them. Members of this committee are Rich Gusenburg, Chairman, Jennifer Bates and Ann Marie Kemp (SMC Chair). The goal is to gather information and hear from the people who work in the school buildings on how to improve the school facilities and have the instructional means to meet the needs of the students. All meetings will be videotaped.

Mr. Gusenburg gave a short introduction of the SMC and its mission to look at what should be done with Cheshire schools. The SMC membership includes three (3) Town Council and three (3) BOE members and seven (7) members of the community. He noted the Council deemed it important for full and open visibility for all meetings, so they are being videotaped. Over the next few weeks, the SMC will hold one of its regular meetings at each of the Cheshire Schools, with a tour of the school building, followed by discussion on pros and cons of each facility. The Dodd Middle School tour was recently held followed by a regular meeting of the SMC. Mr. Gusenburg explained the goal of the SMC is to have a full plan for modernization of the schools by September time line for November referendum. The subcommittee is looking for input on the Dodd facility itself and what it requires, program needs, expansion to grades 6 to 8, or keep the middle school at grades 7-8. The most advantageous plan will be looked at along with the cost to the community.

Ms. Kemp is a three-time Dodd parent. She advised SMC has an “Out of District” subcommittee which will tour and visit towns which have undergone a similar process of school modernization and/or new construction. The SMC will tour all the Cheshire school buildings. There will be short videos of each of the schools for the public to have an overview of the facilities and their issues. During the process, the SMC wants to be open…meetings, school tours, and video of each school will provide opportunity for public viewing.
Ms. Bates said she is a Dodd parent and CHS parent, and member of the SMC.

4. COMMENTS FROM CHESHIRE PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS AND STAFF REGARDING SCHOOL FACILITIES

Lisa Raczka, Guidance Counselor, stated the 60 year old Dodd building had renovations in 1970 and 1996, and the maintenance staff does a very good job keeping the building clean. She has visited many school buildings across the State; many towns have cutting edge security systems in place; Dodd has 18 doors and there are security concerns. Ms. Raczka said that band-aids to the buildings cannot continue as they do not work anymore. There are concerns about the health of staff and students; she has gotten ill working in the Dodd building; and there is dampness in the rear of the facility. There is Guidance Office space; the conference room is used for many things; and she wants to develop a “zen den” for the students.

Nate O'Day, Engineering Teacher, agreed with the statements made by Ms. Raczka. He commented on declining student population, and with less students, staff being able to handle more. He noted many changes based on the law, the impact on Dodd in the last 11 years due to space issues. There have been teachers floating from classroom to classroom, working out of closets and corners. The staff and administration want to bring in more programs for the students, but there is no physical space available…and each year there are program changes which affect physical space needs.

**Studio** – The staff has done an awesome job with the available space, and Mr. O'Day said more physical space is needed for after school programs. The drama and cheerleading programs use the same space (café/auditorium) and practice schedules are affected. With 21st Century Learning, Mr. O'Day talked about bringing back basic skill studies…sewing, culinary, different types of engineering. But, there is no space available due to changing these rooms into special needs areas, and no space to store all the things for these programs. There has been discussion about expansion of non-core biology/agriculture programs, different engineering programs, better studio…but there is no space.

**Engineering Technology Needs** – Mr. O'Day talked about the incredible support of the Dodd Principals(over the years) for these needs, but having to get rid of programs to fit new programs, and technology sharing space with a wood shop. The Dodd staff makes do with what they have, and does a good job. In visiting other area middle schools, he noted they are redesigned to fit the needs of the students. At Dodd, the computers are moved around due to leaking ceilings and damage to computers.

Amy Heffernan, Computer Lab Teacher, informed the committee she has electrical cords running from the ceiling into the middle of desks, and collective of cords
everywhere. If a student steps wrong, computers are unplugged and off. Desks cannot be moved away from the leak because then they cannot be plugged in…it is an electrical hazard.

John Runte, Science Teacher and Drama Coach, said Dodd needs an auditorium and larger stage. 120 students came out for drama this year, but only 45 can participate because of the physical space; 50 students came out for stage crew, and only 15 could participate. The school has the original lighting with a new lighting control system…but to turn 50 to 70 kids away from a program due to physical space is a problem. Everything is about the kids who are losing out on many opportunities.

In that regard, Mr. Gusenburg commented on middle age students and this time is when they should be out there…exploring, finding out their likes and dislikes.

**Athletic Fields** – Mr. Runte commented on the poor condition of the athletic fields. He also coaches sports programs, and noted the lower field is a swamp, can barely be used, is shared by multiple sports on small fields. It is an accident waiting to happen. Mr. Runte said other schools do not like coming to the Dodd facility because of the poor field conditions…and Dodd’s facilities are the worst of any schools in the area.

Mr. Runte stated it is not all about the students. Dodd has teachers who teach in old closets and back rooms…and this is not acceptable.

John Fusari, Social Studies Teacher, also talked about the café/auditorium, it not being in a good location for student accessibility, with many 7th grade students moving from class to lunch without supervision.

Mary Cabrera, Math Teacher, explained there are four (4) lunch waves at Dodd, starting at 10:50 a.m. to 1:04 p.m. for two (2) grade levels. This is very limiting on teacher schedules and flexibility as only half of a grade level can go to lunch at one time. Students have a 25 minute lunch period, no recess period; assemblies are held in the cafeteria as kitchen staff is preparing for lunch; band and concert programs use the gym for several days without a presentation area; there is no school community area to meet and hold school/student activities.

Lynn LeClaire, Band Director, has a band room without windows; storage is impossible; instruments are stored in small lockers in an unsafe environment; the entire band cannot rehearse at one time; smaller outside rooms must be used with limited teacher supervision. Air quality in the band room is very poor, and she has had health problems. Ms. LeClaire said windows would change the environment of the band room. The music program is learning focused and students work well with each other.
Kathy Carlucci, English Teacher, has taught for many years in other school districts (Greenwich CT) in grade 6-8 middle schools. The Dodd 8th grade teaching team believes a 6-8 grade middle school would be more appropriate for the students, with many benefits. There is so much more to do with 6th grade specialized education versus the elementary model, and students are offered more experience, independence; now is the appropriate time to bring 6th graders to the middle school.

Space – Ms. Carlucci talked about having 26 students in 8th grade in her small classroom. This makes personalized learning, individual instruction almost impossible...there cannot be a conference with one student without disruption to the other students in the room. She mentioned the model where there is a team cluster, common spaces for teams to meet and do projects, larger classrooms with furniture which can be moved around. Ms. Carlucci said this is a perfect setup for student learning and teaching and privacy with a student or group of students. Some schools are designed for teams, are beautiful, and solve the problems with 6-8 grade level situations.

Brian Lopez, Science Division Department Leader, town resident and parent of three children on the elementary, middle school and high school levels. Mr. Lopez has been a coach for 15+ years for the town and schools, and said the Dodd athletic fields cannot compare to other town fields. It is embarrassing to have other middle school teams come to the Dodd fields. The facilities can be dramatically improved, and everyone wants the best and safest fields for the kids.

Science Division Leader – Mr. Lopez supports the 6-8 grade middle school program, especially for the Science curriculum. The next generation Science standards are broken down for grades 6 through 8. The 6th grade teachers should be certified in Science for 60 minutes of instruction every day of the school year. Dodd Science Department would like lab space different from general class space, as seen in more modern schools. The current Science space at Dodd has kids working on top of each other on small lab tables, without a designated lab area separate from the instructional area.

Mr. Lopez commented on the skelton/bones of the school falling apart. Weather elements come into the school building; there is no sealant on the windows with outside air being inside. As a town resident he supports increase in taxes to support the new buildings; schools are what Cheshire is all about; and he hopes the Town Council and BOE come up with a good plan for the school system.

Joe Panela came from Massachusetts 23 years ago to Connecticut, and has been teaching at Dodd for 23 years. At that time, every home magazine and advertisement talked about the good Cheshire CT school system. You don’t see this anymore. Cheshire has good test scores. Other towns have better facilities, new or renovated schools. The school system is the lifeblood of the town. Today, people are not looking
at test scores...they are looking at the updated school facilities. He cited Colchester, Portland, Southington, Meriden, North Haven, West Haven...all with upgraded schools...and Cheshire is still living in the past. With the current situation with the schools, people will move out of Cheshire, and fewer will move into town.

Mr. Lopez stated the grade 6 to 8 model is the best, and would open the door for certified Science teachers in the middle school.

The Dodd staff was informed by Mr. Gusenburg that the Doolittle School staff is unanimously in favor of the 6th to 8th grade middle school, with Kindergarten in the home schools.

Ms. Cabrera stated her support of the 6-8 grade middle school model, having certified Math teachers teaching 6th grade, and this is the continuum being vital to the programs.

Matt Planeta, Multi-Media Teacher, talked about the poor athletic fields at Dodd, the need for a multi-media center and broadcast studio so students can broadcast events. He has set up a studio in a small classroom closet, but it is too small for a broadcast studio, and for student crew members with behind the scenes involvement.

Lockers – Mr. Fusari discussed the “mish mash” of lockers, inability to lock and unlock these lockers that are falling apart, the effect on students getting to class on time, and difficulty of kids putting their things in these lockers.

Mr. Planeta reiterated that space is the issue; there needs to be more adaptable classroom space, more quiet space for staff and students; computers are in areas that leak; it would be beneficial to have desks that go from sitting to standing for staff and students.

Dodd Tour – Mr. Gusenburg talked about the SMC tour of Dodd. Furniture was looked at with special ed classrooms having more flexible furniture, and other rooms having the usual one piece desk/chair.

Mr. Planeta commented on pride in the school, more colors and logos, better aesthetics…not everything colored white. This is important for the school.

Ms. Carlucci mentioned English class grouping in the middle school with students of all levels. To meet the needs of a student working on a 10th grade level or one needing more remedial instruction, this is a crucial piece of the classroom size and flexibility of furniture.

Staff noted that student population is going down; special education population is increasing; and more specialized instruction is needed. This cannot be done with the current facilities.
Mr. Gusenburg reported that the SMC received a presentation on school enrollment from Mr. Masciana (COO of the DOE), which showed the growth of special needs programs, building by building. Although population has dropped, there is no empty space in the schools due to being filled with required programs.

**Dodd Middle School Space** – The staff members highlighted the space issues. There are no bathrooms outside for the sports facilities; port-a-potties are rented; no one can get into the building after hours; there is no storage; there is one shared garage; classrooms store paper and other products; for the drama club play, all sets must be broken down as there is no storage; the middle school is tight on land.

**Parking** – The parking is tight at the school, especially when buses are dropping off students in the morning or picking up in the afternoon. For school activities or events, the parking on surrounding streets is on both sides with cars.

As population goes down, it does not mean fewer kids in the classrooms, and Ms. Carlucci said it will be elimination of staff, with the same number of students (i.e. 26) in a small classroom. She said middle school population will be increasing.

In general, enrollment has dropped, and Mr. Gusenburg said fewer children have been born over a 10 year period, but this has leveled off. For people buying a home, they do make their decision based on the reputation of the school system and what it offers. Cheshire is still a prime place to come and a good school system thanks to its excellent teaching staff, despite the facilities.

Some of the staff members commented on the potential being unbelievable with what teachers and staff have been doing. The kids deserve a return on their investment of getting their success through the school system, working hard, and seeing Cheshire grow and prosper in the future.

**SMC** – Mr. Gusenburg informed the Dodd staff that the full committee meets on the first Monday and third Wednesday of each month. The SMC will hold one meeting at each of the Cheshire schools over the next few weeks. Everyone is welcome to attend these meetings. Information on the SMC is on the Town website…Schmoco@Cheshire.

**Time Line** – Mr. Gusenburg explained the time line for the school modernization plan. Under a perfect scenario he cited the following:

- September 2020 – Modernization Plan to the Town Council and BOE; Council approves a plan; could be a multi-plan with approval of one piece by Council
- November 2020 – Referendum for approval by voters
- State of Connecticut – approval of the project budget by June 30, 2021
Once approved, the Town hires an architect, starts drawings (takes about one year).

Go out to bid, ground breaking, and looking 2 to 2.5 years before we see construction; it could be 2023 for a new school.

The SMC is working hard to get something to the Town Council, and Mr. Gusenburg said they want to insure it is done well. Past referendums did not get approved, and the Town wants a successful plan with the community fully aware and supportive.

Ms. Kemp expressed appreciation to the Dodd staff for attending the meeting and for their input and participation.

5. **ADJOURNMENT**

MOTION by Ms. Bates; seconded by Ms. Kemp.

MOVED to adjourn the meeting at 3:58 p.m.

VOTE The motion passed unanimously by those present.

Attest:

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Marilyn W. Milton, Clerk