

## SCHOOL BUILDING COMMITTEE

**Date: February 1, 2023, 6:30PM**

### **Regular Meeting Minutes**

**In person TOB Common Room & Public Online Video Conference (Zoom): Recording**

\*Minutes are not official until approved at the next regular meeting

Member	Position	Present via Zoom	Present in person	Absent
Katherine Viveiros	Construction Industry Experience	X		
Phil Stevens	Superintendent of Schools (non-voting)		X	
Mike Makuch	Board of Selectmen Representative (Chairman)		X	
James Marshall	Board of Finance representative		X	
Ann Grosjean	Board of Education Member (Secretary)	X		
Gary Anderson	Member at large	X		
Ralph Tulis	Member at large (Vice-Chairman)		X	
Peter Latincsics	Member at large		X	
Justin Niderno	Member at large		X	
Briana Ross	Member at large	X		
Christopher Tillona	Board of Education employee	X		
Erika Wiczenski	Member Ex Officio (non-voting)		X	

Also present: Residents in-person and online

### **1. CALL TO ORDER**

Chairperson Makuch called the meeting to order at 6:33 PM.

### **2. PRESENT TO SPEAK- Comments may be limited in time to allow all present to speak**

John Blessington, 29 Mason Road, explained how he had spoken at a previous meeting and emailed what he had said so it could be added to the meeting minutes. What he had emailed was never put into the minutes and he thought it was ridiculous and was very frustrated. He felt the summary did not cover half of what he spoke about, especially regarding the conflict of interest. He offered for anyone on or off the committee a copy of the email if they were interested. He still felt strongly that the committee was not following their charge. He also expressed his concern that the surveys were just collected two days ago and the committee only had a short time to review them before making a project decision tonight. He suggested tabling the vote for the project selection for at least one meeting.

Nick Tella, 49 Mirtl Road, began explaining that the beginning of the meeting should not be muted as it's unfair to those that are online. He thought the way R. Tulis and the committee ran the January 26th meeting very well and allowed many people to speak. He also discussed the finding from that meeting that seemed very clear and that the town is not ready for either of these projects. He suggested having the committee step back and send the changes to the town to vote so they may change the charge of the committee.

Charles Kearns, 248 Tolland Turnpike, discussed the meeting on January 26th and still felt they should not take on either project because the town cannot afford it. He suggested postponing the referendum.

Elena Testa, 11 Meadow Lane, expressed her concern with these projects with what is happening around the country, with unemployment and inflation. She discussed how these projects are going to affect the retired and older community members and it could affect the younger generation too. She stated that the committee's ideas are wonderful but not right for this town. She was very compassionate about her concern for the townspeople.

Steph Summers, 4 Y road, discussed how looking at the short-term economic picture right now is not pertinent. She felt this project will start slow and amp up over many years, which could happen during a potential recovery. She explained that this might be the right time for a project like this in the lifetime of a 20-year bond. She stated she understood everyone's fears of the unknown, but Willington has never had to go through a process such as this, since the town was given the gift of Hall School many years ago. She expressed how she had been impressed with the steps and depth the SBC had taken.

Elaine Newcombe, 28 Fermier Road, reminded the committee of the issue she discussed at the January 26th meeting. This was regarding the total "hope to do" list that the town has. She explained that she felt the Board of Selectmen, the Board of Finance and the SBC needed to look at the total price tag of the CIP list that has been put off year after year. She explained that looking at the school project as an isolated budget item is unrealistic. She recommended looking at each budget item. She also expressed her concern with people having to move out of Willington because they cannot afford to live here.

David Krivanec, 22 Willington Hill Road, explained that according to his calculations it would cost him \$2,000.00 more a year to live in Willington if this project goes forward. He discussed how poor the economy is currently and felt it was not worth it.

Nick Tella, 49 Mirtl Road, expressed his concern regarding the fire department trying to get on the school bond. He does not like to hear other town projects trying to get on the school bond.

Lisa Eaton, 38 Timber Lane, wanted to encourage the committee to move forward with the opportunity for the townspeople to vote. She felt these meetings seemed to always have the same people making the same arguments. There are some people that are busy with their kids and jobs that cannot attend all these meetings. She stated that the same arguments and derailment at every meeting needs to stop and just have a vote.

Jeff Gordon, State Senator representing Willington, introduced himself and wanted the town to know he was not there to tell them what to do but has been following the issue. He explained that no matter what the town decides he will be there to help in any way possible.

### **3. CHAIRPERSON REPORT**

Chairperson Makuch thanked R. Tulis for running the forum on January 26th and doing such a great job on short notice. He then discussed his thoughts and feelings regarding this project. He explained how the backlash on social media weighs on him a lot but he uses it as motivation. He explained how it makes him take a step back to see if they are missing something or trying to see if there is another

side to an issue. He explained his own thought process and what the committee has done throughout this process. He felt they all have taken this job/position very seriously and tried their very best to reach all community members for their opinion. He then discussed how everyone has their own opinion regarding this project and they will not all agree. Lastly, he wanted to make it very clear that the committee is not making the decision or forcing the taxpayers to spend any money. The committee is making recommendations on what they think the right option is if the taxpayers want to spend the money. The taxpayer will decide with their vote. He also explained that S. Pellman was delayed all day at various airports because of the weather so he will not be able to be at this meeting.

R. Tulis discussed the meeting from January 26th. He explained his concern for tonight's meeting was that they had just received the town's feedback and he did not feel comfortable voting on any project this evening. He suggested giving the committee another week to review the information that was collected. He discussed his list of concerns he had. He then explained how he personally had gone through what the committee's charge is and what they still need to achieve.

#### **4. APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES**

##### **a. SBC regular meeting minutes of 1-18-23**

***Motion by Chairperson Makuch to APPROVE the minutes from the SBC regular meeting of January 18, 2023. Ann Grosjean SECONDED the motion.***

##### ***Discussion:***

P. Latinesics inquired if the email from John Blessington will be attached to the meeting minutes. Chairperson Makuch stated they would attach the email with comments from John Blessington to tonight's meeting minutes.

G. Anderson inquired for a clarification as to why they are doing this for only one person that speaks and not everyone? Chairperson Makuch explained that John Blessington felt his comments were not fully expressed in the minutes and they are taking the extra steps to be sure he felt heard.

R. Tulis suggested not officially approving the minutes until they are voted on at the meeting. This would help if there were any adjustments needed. Chairperson Makuch explained he would look into this process.

The committee discussed how important it is to have the community members comments and the process.

***Roll Call Vote: 8 YES 1 NO 1 Abstain***

##### ***Motion Passes***

Member	Vote
Katherine Viveiros	Y
Christopher Tillona	Y
Ann Grosjean	Y
Justin Niderno	Y
Ralph Tulis	Y

Peter Latincsics	N
Mike Makuch	Y
Briana Ross	Y
Gary Anderson	Y
James Marshall	A

**b. Finance subcommittee minutes of 1-18-23**

*Motion by First Selectwoman Wiecenski to APPROVE the minutes from the SBC finance committee meeting of January 18, 2023. Ralph Tulis SECONDED the motion.*

*Roll Call Vote: 9 YES 0 NO 1 Abstain*

*Motion Passes*

Member	Vote
Katherine Viveiros	Y
Christopher Tillona	Y
Ann Grosjean	Y
Justin Niderno	Y
Ralph Tulis	Y
Peter Latincsics	Y
Mike Makuch	Y
Briana Ross	Y
Gary Anderson	Y
James Marshall	A

## **5. COMMUNICATIONS**

Chairperson Makuch explained everything had been shared with the committee including all emails. The committee discussed the emails received, how to address their concerns and that most of them will be or are in FAQ's.

## **6. OLD BUSINESS**

**a. Owner's Project Manager update- Colliers**

Tabled as S. Pellman was unavailable due to travel issues.

## **7. NEW BUSINESS**

**a. Community Feedback (forum, survey, emails)**

Superintendent Steven presented a summary of the community feedback that was received. He shared different slides explaining; the attendance at presentations, community forums: feedback themes, community forum of January 26th, SBC survey results, comment trends and SBC survey and community feedback combined. He explained the process that took place when going through and collecting the data.

The committee discussed the findings, the comments on the survey and the town's concerns. They discussed how this tax increase will affect business and homeowners. There was some confusion because some townspeople felt that having a new school would encourage people to move into Willington. Some worried that having a new school would increase taxes and actually do the opposite. They discussed comparing their mill rate to Tolland and Mansfield, who both have new schools and possibly a lower mill rate. They looked at a chart that showed mill rates. They also discussed the difference in cost with having an auditorium, the issue with swing space and options with the ed specs. Unfortunately, the state formula does not work in the small town of Willington's favor. The committee discussed how successful the January 26th forum was and felt it was very important to gather community input. Everyone did feel that the town all can agree that they care about Willington and love living here. They wanted to remind each other there are not two groups or two sides, there are many opinions and that's ok. They were appreciative of the community coming out to the presentations and forums, including a 7th grader. Having the courage to speak in front of the public is not always easy but the committee was glad so many did. They also explained how the community's feedback does not end tonight. They stated they wanted to continue to have the community's input going forward. A few committee members felt rushed and needed more time to process and read through the community's emails and surveys. They discussed how to share Superintendent Stevens' presentation with the summary of the community's feedback with the townspeople.

#### **b. Project selection**

***Motion by Chairperson Makuch to recommend moving forward with a new school without the auditorium. Briana Ross SECONDED the motion.***

#### ***Discussion:***

Chairperson Makuch explained why he made this motion and how it lines up with the committee's charge of choosing a project.

A. Grosjean gave her opinion and process regarding this project. She explained that she would like to see a new school built on a new parcel of land ideally with an auditorium but understood to reduce cost, the auditorium might have to wait. She discussed possible other creative ways to raise funds for an auditorium. She explained in great detail why this was her choice.

G. Anderson explained he understood the town of Willington is in a difficult position with being such a small town and trying to split the costs of such a large project. He still wants the best successful learning space for their students. He discussed the committee's process and their options. He stated he felt a new school on a new site was the best option. He explained in detail why he felt this was the best option.

*9:02 pm meeting continued after some technological issues.*

B. Ross started by explaining from her own teaching experience how important school is to children, and to some school is their "home." She discussed the students that spoke at the forum on January 26th and what courage and pride they showed. Their comments resonated with her. She explained that their comments assisted with her choice to have a new pre-k-8th grade school on a new site. She also stated she hopes they can build an auditorium sooner than later. She then discussed in detail why she made this choice.

J. Marshall explained that he was unsure how or if he would vote regarding this topic tonight. He gave detailed reasoning for each project and why he felt that way. He thought a new building on a new site was cheaper, less risky, has a shorter time period, and is less disruptive. He briefly discussed how he felt about building a new auditorium too. He shared he would support a second question for an auditorium.

J. Niderno explained how he feels one way as a taxpayer and another as a committee member. He stated that he understood he will eventually have to make a decision one way or another.

K. Viveiros explained that taxes will be increasing whether it's a new firehouse, new building complex, new senior center and so on. She stated for her she would prefer her tax dollars going towards a new school for the future of Willington kids. She stated she supported a new school on a new site. She discussed her opinion towards an auditorium as well. She then explained in detail why she felt this way.

R. Tulis stated he agreed they needed a new educational facility in Willington. He explained his concerns with the financial side of this and that was why he needed to vote no on this. He then discussed his reasoning.

C. Tillona explained how he wanted to stay neutral while listening to the community and hearing different concerns. After being able to process what he had heard he decided to support a new school, new site.

P. Latincsics explained he felt they would be paying more and getting less. He discussed in detail his concern with the cost of this project and the impact it would have on him and townspeople. For all of those reasons he stated he could not support this motion.

***Roll Call Vote: 8 YES 2 NO 0 Abstain***

***Motion Passes***

Member	Vote
Katherine Viveiros	Y
Christopher Tillona	Y
Ann Grosjean	Y
Justin Niderno	Y
Ralph Tulis	N
Peter Latincsics	N
Mike Makuch	Y
Briana Ross	Y
Gary Anderson	Y
James Marshall	Y

The committee discussed in detail the auditorium and the options regarding that subject, such as having it on the referendum as a second question.

**8. PRESENT TO SPEAK- Comments may be limited in time to allow all present to speak**

Nick Tella, 49 Mirtl Rd, discussed his children that attend a private school from 1921 and they are

scoring 2-4 grades above their grade level. He explained that it's not a new school that creates a student's success, it's because of the teachers, parents and the kids. He strongly disagreed with the notion that a brand new 21st century school will make students more successful. He stated that parents need to step up and be more involved in their child's education, students need to want to care about their future and they need the teachers to deliver on their end. He stated that he hoped if a new school passed in the town and the waivers did not pass he hoped there would be a way for this to come back to the voters so they can reconsider their options. He strongly disagreed that a new school, new site was a cheaper option. He also explained that he did feel that some of the committee members were rushing this process to just get it approved. He stated that everyone knew where this vote was going to go tonight and he felt there was manipulation in the data as well. He highly recommended slowing this process down. He discussed why they are not fixing the issues with the current schools and how it made no sense to him. He finished by saying that he wished there was an outside audit of communications around the land selection and an ethics review of the new site if the new school moves to the taxpayers.

Melissa Abercrombie, wanted to thank the committee. She wanted to clarify what someone had mentioned earlier about the regular taxpayer not feeling the effects of the changes in the taxes and she stated they do. She explained they know the cost of everything is going up. She then discussed some issues within the schools that need to be fixed and that taxes within the town will be going up whether it's to fix the ongoing issues or for a new school. She explained that she would want her money to go to the students. She then discussed the timing of this project and explained that the longer they wait the more money this project will cost. She stated that it's about the students and making sure they are growing up in a 21st school building. She explained that she does not want to have to worry about pipes bursting or the heaters not working and her children needing blankets in the classroom. It is about what's best for our students.

## 9. ADJOURNMENT

*Motion by Chairman Makuch to ADJOURN the meeting.*

*First Selectwoman Wiecenski SECONDED the motion.*

*All in favor, motion carried unanimously.*

Meeting adjourned at 10:04 PM

Next regular meeting: February 15, 2023

Nicole Fusco  
School Building Committee Recording Secretary

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WILLINGTON, CT.

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TOWN CLERK