

Minutes for the Tuesday, June 14, 2016 South Hero School Board Special Meeting  
At Folsom Education & Community Center

**5:05p.m.** Meeting called to order by Kris Bowser, Board Chair

**In attendance:** Kris Bowser, Dave Cain (until 6:15 due to other commitments), RJ Sweeney, Bernie Toth, Bentley Vaughan, Board members; Barbara Burrington, Superintendent; Emily Bowser, Board Secretary; Kari Banas, Bill Banas, Melanie Hendersen, Jen Lyon-Horne, Fred Heslop

**Adjustment of Agenda:**

- Moved Board Action above Board Discussion to allow RJ Sweeney time to arrive and participate.
- Public Comments moved to the end of the meeting to streamline process so Board Members who needed to go to the 6:00p.m. Act 46 Meeting could do so.

**Board Action:**

- Ratification of Teacher Master Agreement. Dave Cain moved to ratify, Bernie Toth seconded, motion passed.
- Motion to approve minutes for June 2nd. Dave Cain moved to accept, Bernie Toth seconded, motion passed unanimously.
- Contracts signed by Board for new hires Cecile Gove (returning, contracted hours adjusted), Megan Bessette, and Samantha Cantell.
- Motion to adjourn made by Bernie Toth, Kris Bowser seconded at 6:59p.m., motion passed unanimously.

**Board Discussion:**

- Discuss and Finalize Plans to Form the K-8 Exploratory Sub-Committee
  - Size of Sub-Committee: Five people
  - Public call for participants: Invitations to be placed on Front Porch Forum, in The Islander, at the Town Clerk's office, with other locations to be determined should the Board deem them necessary.
  - Deadline for responses will be by the 6/30/16 Board meeting.
  - Creation of a Code of Conduct for the Sub-Committee; the Board expresses reservation about being officially represented by the sub-committee without their knowledge. Opted to table further discussion until sub-committee is created.
  - Bentley Vaughan expressed interest in being the Board representative on the sub-committee.
- Revisit the Plan for Moving Forward with the August 9, 2016 Referendum
  - According to the Town Clerk the language needs to be presented for the ballot by June 15th to meet the deadline so the referendum can move forward
    - Language for the ballot: *Shall the South Hero School Board place before the voters of the South Hero School District a proposal seeking to comply with Act 46 by merging with other Grand Isle County School Districts in a*

*new school district offering grades Pre-Kindergarten through 6 and school choice for grades 7 through 12? This merger model is one of the possible state-approved structures which qualifies for both tax incentives and the retention of the small schools grant and the 3.5% hold harmless provision.*

- Kris Bowser made a move to approve the language for the vote, Dave Cain seconded. The motion passed with Kris Bowser, Bernie Toth, and Dave Cain voting in favor, RJ Sweeney abstaining, and Bentley Vaughan against.
- Bentley expressed reservations about the language and inclusion of the tax incentives being “leading”
- A petition to keep the 7th and 8th grades at Folsom was circulated throughout the community by Kari and Bill Banas. This petition was also circulated to students at school. A survey was circulated to community members and teachers. Kris brought up concerns about the survey’s language.
  - While the survey mentions an agenda for the informational sessions, this is incorrect, there is no set agenda.
  - The language about the Board rearranging the school’s specials programs and monetary implications is misleading; should those changes be made, they will be made by the new district Board: the School Board, as it currently exists, will no longer exist.
  - Bill Banas indicated that the survey was necessary, as he felt that the Board is rigid and isn’t listening to the community.
  - While the Board welcomes all community feedback, Kris Bowser expressed reservations about the leading and misleading language in the survey.
  - The board expressed concern about students being included in this complex and emotionally charged topic.
- Use of the Folsom space by the VFW
  - Members of the VFW had approached RJ Sweeney about reduced fees/waiving of fees due to the fact that it is a nonprofit community group made up of South Hero taxpayers
  - Kris Bowser will follow-up with Sue McNayr to see what the past precedent has been in similar circumstances
  - Barbara Burrington will find the Folsom building policy and have that available for consultation as well.
  - This issue will be revisited at the next meeting.
- Reorganization of the South Hero delegation to the Island Act 46 Committee
  - RJ Sweeney is stepping down (please see Public Comments for more on this)
  - Dave Cain volunteered to step in
  - A call will be put out for another alternate to take Dave Cain’s place as alternate when the subcommittee call goes out. The Board will also reach out to people who express interest.

### Public Comments:

- Kari Banas reported that the survey is still being circulated, and that results are roughly 60-40 in favor of keeping Folsom K-8
- Bill Banas took issue with the language the Board agreed on for the referendum, accusing Board members of using leading, and biased information. The board responded that the financial information being included is factual and the board feels that the voters have a right to it.
- Kari Banas suggested informational meetings include data and numbers, which Board Members had intended to include, and agreed with.
- Jen Lyon-Horne asked why the Board is not actively pursuing options apart from the Island option.
  - Dave Cain explained that South Hero voted to participate in the Grand Isle County Act 46 committee in August of 2015. This merger model is the route that the Island towns have decided to pursue. South Hero voters have the opportunity to express their opinion in regards to this merger in the August 9th non-binding referendum. It's an information-seeking vote, it doesn't make any final decisions.
- The Board took a moment to express how the Act 46 issue and tension is affecting and impacting them, personally.
  - RJ Sweeney:
    - Has resigned from the Act 46 committee because of the way this is impacting not only himself, but his family. He's been a member of this community for 36 years, and he knows that the children of this community are taught to be safe, kind, and responsible. He does not feel that the adults are following that creed, and neither are they setting that example for the children.
    - His son came home, deeply upset, because of the petition he was presented with, which he was told he was "supposed" to sign, and that if he didn't, Folsom would lose Grades 7-8.
    - He was put in the position, as a parent, of having another parent disseminating information to his child, which was inaccurate, and having to deal with the fall-out of it.
    - He has been approached by teachers who were presented with the survey and felt incredibly uncomfortable participating in it, as they felt it pit them between the school and the parents.
    - He has also seen posts on Front Porch Forum which contain inaccurate information and are never corrected.
    - Has spoken with community members who are interested in alternate options, or even in K-6, and feel that they aren't allowed to speak if they don't hold the "popular" opinion because they will be attacked if they do.
    - RJ expressed that he has, above everything else, attempted to be neutral; and yet feels hounded to reveal his personal opinion, which is irrelevant.

- He wants to move to a higher level of discourse, where everyone can be civil and information can be shared, but currently feels that a lot of the conversations being had are simply destructive.
  - Bernie Toth:
    - Her daughter is getting asked why her mother is against kids staying in Folsom and is avoiding going to her places in the community
    - Wants to remind everyone that the August vote is *nonbinding*, and that it is for the Board to find out how the community feels.
    - Community members talk about their passion on behalf of the community and the children and Folsom, but what gets lost is that the Board members are members of the community, and that many of them have children in Folsom, and they are not being respected as such.
    - For her part, she wants to also consider the social aspects of the transition to high school: it's a nuanced issue, and she would love to be able to have conversations about it without feeling personally attacked.
    - Is personally opting to stay out of town as much as possible, because she does feel attacked.
  - Kris Bowser:
    - Also had her daughter come home having had the petition presented to her.
    - Definitely feels that there are community members who now don't want to speak to her because they don't want to be targeted by the vocal members of the community.
    - Has had community members express that they don't want to be part of any committee related to Act 46, including the sub-committee to be created, because the situation is toxic
    - Feels as a Board Member, their responsibility is to make sure that the students receive the best education: bottom line
    - There are community members who are on fixed incomes, and we need to consider those members, and saying K-8 at all costs isn't realistic for those members
    - Agreed that the tone is out of control. At the last town forum about Act 46, which Dave Cain led, he was incredibly disrespected by members of the community, and there were community members who stayed silent for fear of becoming targets themselves.
  - Bentley Vaughan expressed that he has not felt any of this.
  - Dave Cain had already left the meeting when this conversation occurred.
- Jen Lyon-Horne expressed her distress at the level of toxicity that the Act 46 issue has created in the community, and offered to act as a check-in person for people who are reluctant to come forward themselves for fear of being attacked.
- Kari Banas expressed that she had only allowed the petition to go to the school because she was excited her children were excited by the democratic process.

- Fred Heslop expressed his apologies that the Board has been made to feel attacked, and that their children have been brought into this issue. Defines himself as a K-8 “at all costs”, but loves South Hero and wants to work hard to keep things civil; at the end of the road things will be okay.
- Fred Heslop expressed that there is a sense that the Board is predisposed to a K-6 solution. However, it’s his sense after this meeting that that’s wrong, and encouraged the Board to share that with the community at large.
  - Kris Bowser expressed her reservations about being that open, as she had been told by another Board member that educating people made them feel they were not being heard. This put her in a difficult position, because she does not want to contribute to a disrespectful dialogue but also does want to educate the community. Is still trying to find a balance, but admits that in doing so she has opted for silence.
  - Kris Bowser also said that she feels like she’s being portrayed as pro-K-6, and while she likes that for her own child (who will be a 9th grader when these changes go into effect), her personal feelings will not sway how she votes, because she’s representing the people who voted for her and the community at large, not herself as a parent. In the November straw poll taken at the Act 46 committee meeting, she spoke for South Hero expressing that the town preferred the K-8 model. She feels strongly that she needs to represent the entire community, not just the vocal group of parents who have come to meetings.
- Melanie Henderson expressed her gratitude for the Board creating a sub-committee. She too expressed her concerns about the tone of the discussion, and suggested the committee be created after the vote.


**Executive Session:** none

**Board Correspondence/Sharing:** none

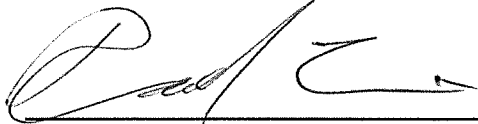
**Follow-up/Old Business:** none

Meeting officially adjourned at 6:59p.m.

Next meeting will be June 30, 2016 at 6:00p.m., Folsom Education and Community Center

  
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Kristina Bowser

RJ Sweeney

  
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Dave Cain

  
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Bernadette Toth

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Bentley Vaughan