

VINELAND BOARD OF EDUCATION
APRIL 29, 2019 - PUBLIC HEARING ON BUDGET MEETING

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The special meeting for the Public Hearing on the 2019-2020 school budget meeting of the Board of Education of the City of Vineland was held in the Landis Administration Building, 61 W. Landis Avenue, Vineland, New Jersey, Monday, April 29, 2019, at 6:00 p.m., pursuant to notice with Mr. English presiding and the following members present: Mr. Fiocchi, Mr. Holmes, Mr. Medio, Mr. Sbrana, Mr. Silva, Ms. Spinelli and Mr. Ulrich. Absent: Ms. Acosta.

Also present: Dr. Gruccio, Superintendent, Mr. Frangipani and Mr. Frey, Assistant Superintendents, Mr. Mercoli, Board Secretary, Dr. Rossi, Executive Director of Personnel, Mr. DeSanto, Solicitor, press and public. Absent: None.

Mr. English announced that in compliance with the New Jersey meeting law commonly referred to as "The Sunshine Law," the Vineland Board of Education has caused notice of this meeting to be sent to the following, announcing time and place thereof, agenda, etc.: The Daily Journal, SNJ Today, the Press of Atlantic City, Nuestra Comunidad, Visto Bueno, the Clerk - City of Vineland, and Administrative Office Public Bulletin Board.

Flag Salute:

Mr. Gene Mercoli, School Business Administrator, presented the Proposed 2019-2020 School Budget. He explained that this was a slimmed down version of the proposed budget that was submitted to the Board and tentatively approved on March 13, 2019; then forwarded for County approval on approximately April 18, 2019. The purpose of this meeting and presentation was for the public. Mr. Mercoli completed his presentation and then asked for any comments or questions from the Board Members; there was one by Mr. Ulrich.

Mr. Ulrich asked about the three (3) properties that the district has for sale and how this affects the budget if we do not sell each of the properties.

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Mr. Mercoli replied and stated that we have until June 30, 2020, for the sale of the Coney Avenue property and the Oak & Main property we have not had any bidders. He is looking into an option on the Oak & Main property to demolish the building and just have the sale of the land. The Leuchter School property sale has been finalized. Mr. Mercoli agrees that for the two remaining properties if they do not sell, could affect the budget.

Public Hearing
Comments:

Cindy Weber

Ms. Weber expressed her concerns about the proposals for staff cuts for the Child Study Team. Her son is a special education student and has been without an in-class resource teacher for Language Arts since November. She feels that this would be a tremendous loss for the special education students; these staff members are the ones that support these children.

Nicole McBride

Ms. McBride shared that she is a divorced single mother of four children. Three of them attend the district schools and the budget cuts would affect each of them differently. She has one student in AMSA, one is a special education student, and the third plays the flute. She (the parents) would like a seat at the table to help come up with solutions so that these programs will not be cut.

Ronald Walker

Mr. Walker stated that he had questions the last time when the proposed budget was discussed. He would like clarity about the programs. He questioned why the "52" administrators did not see any cuts. He also mentioned the update on Health Benefits and why are we just accepting what the state says; why are we not questioning/standing up to the state?

Public Comments:

Susan Morello

Ms. Morello stated that goals should be declared and the Superintendent should be evaluated. Board Members should be making sure that the money is spent properly and clearly defined. She claims that the public does not know what is going on. Why are more students going to the Charter schools?

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Also shared that the Board should be more involved; not just shaking their head yes or no and that is all their involvement is.

Mr. English asks Mr. DeSanto if the Board can exchange in dialogue at this particular meeting and Mr. DeSanto answered, “yes.”

Mr. English responds to Ms. Morello and shares that the Board President is the person responsible and that is why he has come back to the Board. He has inherited a Board that did not do self-evaluations and superintendent evaluations. It is his goal for these items to take place.

Vickie Miller

Ms. Miller discussed the Charter Schools; why are kids going back and forth from Charter to the public school? Also discussed the AMSA program and the building capacity; why couldn't the VoTech students utilize the Johnstone building space?

Kim Codispotti

Ms. Codispotti congratulated everyone that was a part of the Pilla renaming ceremony; she felt humbled and honored to be a part of that event. She shared that she realizes the Budget process is involved as she was a Board Member three years ago. She was saddened to hear about the Basic Skill Teacher cuts. She feels (and agrees with a previous statement from present Board Member, Mr. Ulrich) that AMSA students will thrive no matter where they are, but these students that need additional help (Basic Skills) should not lose these services. Also, shared that she is not a “combined” meeting supporter; feels that there should be additional meetings for more discussion. She also stated that when she was on the Board, she voted for the Turf field; a vote that she wishes she could take back. She felt she was not given all the information, i.e. that the field was going to be used by many different organizations, not just football.

Mr. Medio commented and stated that the Turf was being utilized by other sports teams; not only football and shared that he wished they could have installed more turf.

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Mr. English commented about how he feels the turf could be a revenue making idea.

Mr. Ulrich commented on the Special Needs/Basic Skills cuts and the problem with the budget is that is targeting specific groups that are in the biggest need; he opposes this with the budget. He feels there is some flexibility and that the district should find some creativity with the challenges. His goal is that these cuts should not affect the classroom function; the focus should be classroom centered. It is to determine the wants versus the needs, to find the absolute goal to keep the children as the focus; to bring them up and keep them up.

Additional Public
Comment:

Vickie Miller

Shared that she does not feel that substitutes are babysitters. That we can not classify all substitutes as babysitters; she has been working in the district for ten years and she cares about her students.

Bonnie Henderson Martin

Grandson is in the AMSA program and yes, the kids are worried about the AMSA program being dismantled; there is a concern about the AMSA program. She also shared that the Finance Committee Meeting minutes on the district website are very vague; that there is only maybe three words and/or brief sentences stated. This does not inform the public of what is actually going on. Mentioned curriculum changes, what discussions are happening? No one is really updating information online; there is no transparency. Also, she could not decipher what Budget numbers mean to the taxpayers; not clear. Asked the Board to please review at the Board Retreat.

Mr. English asks Mr. DeSanto, Board Solicitor, to clarify the “structure of minutes.”

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Mr. DeSanto states that the Sunshine Law requires that the minutes of the Board meeting is by the majority, committee meeting minutes, however, are not subject to OPRA. There are various members in each committee meeting and no members have the power/authority to act. He further explains that the committee process is not intended to frustrate anyone on the transparency of matters; it is a work in progress. It is intended so that when it is brought to the Board there will be transparency.

Mr. English discusses the combined meeting format and how it is understood that this format is to streamline the process. He comes from the work session style where you come from these work session committees which allows for a thorough discussion that next Wednesday of the month. He shared that Mr. Sbrana had mentioned about going back to the work session format at the January meeting but the majority was to follow the combined meeting format. Adds that there could be months in the year where the combined meetings could work, but certain months, as these present ones, the old meeting format with the work sessions would be an option to revisit. He asks Mr. Sbarana to comment.

Mr. Sbrana proposes to go to the old meeting format with work sessions. He feels that with only the one meeting and how the agenda is shared that the dialogue is hard to make happen between individuals; felt out of the loop. Not sure if he will get the support, but is definitely going to bring it up again.

Mr. English brings the conversation back to the Public Budget and asks if there is anyone else that would like to comment (and that has not commented prior)

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Cindy Weber

Ms. Weber returns to the podium to discuss the challenges of the Substitute vacancies. It is her understanding that the Special Education Teacher is being pulled to cover the Regular Education Teacher when there is no substitute available, leaving the special education students without services. Please abandon this process and reconsider removing the services in the proposed cuts.

Lee Burke

Addresses the Board - we have new members, but the returning members have the same attitude. We need to move forward; the past is the past. He stated that having Mr. Mercoli on board has given him some hope with the budget; feels this is transparent. Thank you.

Mr. English confirms there is no other public comment.
Now open for Board Member comment.

Mr. Fiocchi

Shares that no one wants to make these cuts, but we do have a 14 million dollar shortfall and drastic cuts have to be made. Appreciates and welcomes all public comment. Also says that we are extremely lucky to have Mr. Mercoli. Thank you for your support this past month.

Mr. Holmes

No Comment

Ms. Spinelli

Shares that she knows we are in a tough situation and over the next 2 days they will be working hard with focusing on keeping the Basic Skills Teachers.

Mr. Medio

States that it is hard to address the 14 million shortfall without causing a lot of hard feelings. He felt he made a recommendation two years ago and it was not followed; if it was we would not be anywhere near what we are now. He is going to recommend it again on the June Board Agenda about a hiring freeze. Feels this is why we went from a 9 million dollar surplus to a 14 million dollar deficit. He would like to be a part of the Superintendent Evaluation even if he is brought to the ethics commission. He does not feel like it is a conflict and should be no reason why he can not be involved.

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Mr. Sbrana

He expressed he is beyond deep concern on the financial situation, how we got here, and the impact it will have on the staff employees. As a former employee of the district, he is deeply concerned, more concerned about the repetitive problems. Looking forward at the financial structure and keeping the programs we have that is sustainable.

Mr. English interjected with a question to Mr. Sbrana about the Budget as a whole? Mr. Sbrana explained that nine members shot it down and that is why the public feels there is transparency.

Mr. Silva

Shares that this is his first board meeting and it is a lot to digest but is looking forward to the process.

Mr. Ulrich

Proposes question to the School Business Administrator (SBA), Mr. Mercoli and asks, "The preliminary budget that has been approved by the Executive County Superintendent which included the tax levy and the budget cuts and the Board was a no vote, by proxy can the EXecutive County Superintendent come back and still stamp approved?"

Mr. Mercoli

Restates the question for clarification with Mr. Ulrich and then answers that he has not been through this process prior, but does not feel there is a rubber stamp to "approve"; feels that there would be questions asked and imagines that there would be dialogue that would need to take place as to why it was preliminarily approved and now not getting a final approval.

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Mr. Ulrich

States that he feels that the Board, as a majority, on Combined Meetings that if there were questionable items they would be put off until the next month, but with the old format of meetings, these items would be put off a week. Defer to the majority that combined meetings are conceived as a lack of transparency but feel it is just the way the agenda is set up. Also added that the pressure comes from the rumor mill and that committee meetings are “brainstorming sessions.” Believes the format is good and that minutes cannot be detailed. Also, does not support the budget as a whole. Continued and apologized to Ms. Miller about using the term “babysitter”, was just trying to make a general point about not having certified teachers in to instruct. Struggling with whether to support it or not. Feels we all have goals but we do have a 14 million dollar deficit which has been approved by the county (which he is conflicted about). Appreciates the public coming forward. Thank you.

Mr. English

To Mr. Mercoli: You presented the Budget and heard everyone, is there anything you would like to add?

Mr. Mercoli

As the CFO, I would like to discuss what the process looks like and what we can and can not do. When I look at a budget I look at Operational Costs (OC) and Recurring Revenue (RR). I came late to the Board and the budget was already approved. OC/RR equals a balanced budget. My goal is not to be in this situation next year, but can easily tell you with projections that there will be an eight (8) million dollar deficit. Hopeful, but at least one more year of difficulty. The ultimate goal is to see money in the classroom for academic achievement. Acutely aware of the situation now and will provide the necessary information to the Board. Thank you for giving him the opportunity to comment.

Dr. Gruccio

Thank you to everyone who took the time to give input this evening, Central Office staff and all the department heads for the many hours put into the budget. Tough decisions being made and we do work as a team in Central Office. Glad to have Mr. Mercoli on board and they will continue to have conversations as we move forward to make decisions for the best of our children. Also, welcome to Mr. Silva to the Board and I wish you the very best.

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Mr. English

Thank you to the Board Members and Central Administration. The budget as a whole is an interesting concept and feels that this has been the best discussion tonight. Added that the county pushes "thorough & efficient. In reference to Basic Skills and AMSA, feels that Mrs. Arena had presented some numbers and facts at a previous meeting and making changes. There is a shortfall, we have to "share the load." We have to look at the Teacher to student ratio; does not feel there is flexibility. Tough decisions to be made. Proposes a question about the budget process clarification.

Dr. Gruccio

Replies to Mr. English and states that the budget is a fluid document, we have a new county superintendent, but in the past, there was no rubber stamp and questions were asked.

Mr. English

Continues that we are working hard to make changes. Asks Mr. Mercoli about the last official date to make any changes to the budget.

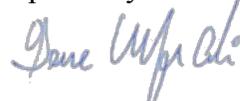
Mr. Mercoli responds with May 14th for the final date.

Mr. English

Asks Board members to take a hard look and make the right decision.

Adjournment: A motion was made by Mr. Holmes, seconded by Mr. Fiocchi, to adjourn the meeting at 7:55 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted



Gene Mercoli
Board Secretary