

WILLOW RUN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
Ypsilanti, Michigan

SPECIAL MEETING

November 14, 2006

The special meeting opened at 5:30 p.m. at Willow Run High School, 235 Spencer Lane.

Those present were:

Claudette Braxton, President
Andreas Blakita, Vice President
Travis Greer, Student Representative
Lisa Lewis, Superior Township, Trustee
Clifford Smith, Trustee
Bill McFarlane, Superior Township, Supervisor
Brenda McKinney, Superior Township, Treasurer
Dorothy Stewart, Treasurer
Sheri Washington, Trustee
Kay Williams, Superior Township, Clerk

Absent: Brenda Clay, Secretary
Scott Wilson, Trustee

Members of the Administrative Council Present Included:

Ron Ciranna, J.D., Superintendent
David Houle, J.D., Controller
Dr. Walter Jenkins, Principal, Willow Run High School
Katie Smith, Director, Technology and Community Services
Lana Tatom, Director, Elementary Education, State and Federal Programs

Dr. Ciranna began the meeting by explaining this is the second joint meeting of the Superior Township and Willow Run Boards. At the last meeting Superior Township requested updates on the District's activities and pointed out that perception becomes reality. Dr. Ciranna said in the spirit of updating the activities of the District the areas of finance, curriculum and technology would be highlighted. He then introduced Dr. David Houle who gave a synopsis of the District's finances.

Dr. Houle explained that 55¢ of every dollar the District receives is spent on salaries, with another 29¢ going for benefits, for a total of 84¢ of every dollar going to labor costs. He said education is by nature, labor intensive. Dr. Houle said the District is now faced with finding new revenues or cutting expenses in order to bolster the budget.

Dr. Houle shared that the District's fund balance went negative, which is the equivalent of bankruptcy in the private sector. As a result of the negative fund balance, the District has to file a Debt Elimination Plan (DEP) with the State of Michigan. The preliminary DEP has been filed and the District now has two-years to correct and create a positive fund balance. We are in a \$1.8 million dollar deficit as of now, due largely to an enrollment decrease.

Mr. McFarlane questioned if the significant growth in Superior Township would make a difference in the revenue and bond payments. Dr. Houle said the current levy is 10.3 mills, due to the District being in the early years (first 15 years) of the millage, with \$20 million borrowed from the State School Bond Loan Fund. Hopefully the District can cover the payments next year, then after 15 years the bond will earn money.

Mr. McFarlane questioned if there will be no relief in the future even with the additional growth. He said the debt millage will bring in additional revenues and the threshold should come sooner, rather than later. Dr. Houle said certainly, the 10.3 up to this point is not enough to cover the District's debt. He added if the rate of growth exceeded projections and \$20 million was liquidated, we could lower the debt millage. Mr. McFarlane said this is a concern for Superior Township and he has to address the residents' concerns.

Ms. McKinney asked once the 7.4 mills expires, how that will affect the millage. Mr. McFarlane then requested a copy of the high school millage, which should expire in 2013 and the middle school millage, due to expire in 2031. He said at least by 2013, there should be the ability to levy less debt millage.

Mr. Smith asked once the threshold is reached and considering Superior Township's growth, what happens. Dr. Houle responded that those dollars are restricted to debt only. Dr. Ciranna asked if Mr. McFarlane is looking for the anticipated date of relief. Mr. Smith said Oppenheimer could look into this and answer that question.

Mr. McFarlane said residents notice their millage rate is higher than other communities. Dr. Houle said the money has all gone into infrastructure improvements. Mr. Smith said Superior Township is a bedroom community and is mostly country and with very little community members individual tax rates are higher than Ypsilanti Township.

Mr. McFarlane said he and Superior Township want to help Willow Run be successful and are concerned with the loss of students and the clearly negative impact on the budget. Mr. McFarlane said if Willow Run is successful, Superior Township is successful and said he would be interested in hearing about potential charter schools, as there are lots of home-schooled students in Superior Township who the District should go after. He asked if debt millage and bond payment information is on the District's web-site. Dr. Ciranna told him he will send this information to him.

Dr. Houle said as far as head count declines go, from 2000-2006 the District lost 533 students, with 115 being lost from last fall to this fall, which exceeded the projected decline. Mr. McFarlane said there is a lot of concern about losing additional students and some of his citizens have shared specific concerns with him. He said he has invited these citizens to share their concerns with the school board and that he is here to support his citizens. He also asked if there has been discussion about consolidating school districts to save money and that he is not suggesting this begin immediately, but would like exploration of consolidation or

Dr. Ciranna said all three local school districts are either in a deficit, or a deficit spending mode. He said the vast majority of Michigan's districts are operating this way at this time. He said we have consolidated some of our services, but we are not looking at consolidation of districts at this time, because this is something that would have to come back to the board for discussion. Dr. Ciranna said the District is looking at creating a charter school, another academy and/or a virtual school, as well as at different school hours. He said the buildings are not being used to full capacity, and with the exception of Cheney and Kaiser, all buildings are down. He said we are going to have a Saturday workshop to look at saving money.

Ms. McKinney said she was impressed with the visit Superior Township made to the middle school. She said there is a need to get the information about the school, technology, computers and swimming pool out to the community, so people know.

Dr. Ciranna informed everyone that Liz Cobbs is working on a story about the history and perspective of Willow Run and that Sheri Washington is working on a marketing plan with the board president. He said we did lose more students than was anticipated, but we can turn this around if we work as a team. He said Central Office was sold, rather than closing a building at this time. He encouraged the board, administration and the community to come together as a team and added there are ways to get out of this mess.

Ms. Stewart said we have not even been meeting on these issues and we need to meet and look at detailed financial information, so we all know exactly where we are, so we can make a difference. She said we need to create programs to attract students to the middle school and that Ron is right, we can work our way out of this.

Ms. Braxton said at the next work session we will be looking at our budget and there will be opportunities to share ideas and suggestions about what to keep and what to cut. Mr. Smith said we need the auditors to come in and look at our budget with us and bring ideas from other districts who have been in this situation. He said we have to look at putting a plan together of how to get there and we need to have people with us that understand what we are going to do, we cannot work in isolation to get this done. He then asked everyone in attendance to sign in so we can contact them.

Ms. Washington asked what our goal will be at the budget meeting. She said we have things we have to do and need the communities' input and buy-in to get them done. She said this will take teamwork as a board, administration, and community stakeholders, as well as commitment. Ms. Stewart said the object of the meeting is we are bankrupt and we have to deal with that very carefully, so we don't ruin things, by closing things and end up in a worse state. She said we need to get out of bankruptcy.

Mr. Smith said before closing anything should be entertained, we need to look at reductions, because we may be over-staffed in some areas. He said we are using more independent contractors than we have ever used and that our infrastructure is not strong enough right now and even if costs held steady we could not support our infrastructure right now. Mr. Smith continued that when spending At-Risk money there is some leeway there. He said we have a 14:1 student to teacher ratio. He said if we have too many secretaries or whatever right now, we've got to look at that as well as at people who took the buy-out and came back.

Next, Ms. Tatom shared the following information about the District's curriculum and website:

- All schools are NCA and Department of Education accredited.
- All elementaries and the middle school made AYP last year, and we are working toward the high school making AYP.
- The District's website address is www.wrcs.k12.mi.us
- 140 people have completed the District's community relations survey on the website.
- Every building has a website, with lots of information including PTO contacts.
- Financial information and the District Annual Report, including MEAP scores, goals and points of pride are available online.

Ms. Tatom highlighted the Curriculum Department's area on the website, which features a link to the District's curriculum, which is aligned with the Michigan Department of Education's grade-level expectations; instructional calendars for each grade; and the School, Family, and Community Partnership information.

She also shared that 11th grade students will be given the ACT and Michigan Merit tests, rather than the MEAP test for the first time this year.

Ms. Tatom said this year the quarterly newsletter, requested by parents, will be sent out as part of the high school newspaper, *The Paradigm*, to 42,000 residents. This will serve to highlight our schools and to help the paper generate advertising revenues.

Ms. Tatom concluded her remarks by saying she wants to see a positive image of our District and that it is our job to share and educate the community about our District.

Ms. Smith then shared some of what the District has in terms of technology, including resources that support our residents. She shared the District's Technology Plan that was approved by both the Washtenaw Intermediate School District and the State of Michigan. Ms. Smith said we have many web-based programs available to our students, including some that are accessible at home, such as education websites, dictionaries, encyclopedias and Accelerated Reader, which is also available at the Ypsilanti District Library.

Ms. Smith shared that each K-12 building has a computer lab and computers in every classroom and media center with internet access, each building also has digital and video camera, scanners, color laser printers and LCD projectors.

Ms. Smith said the District has a very fast network, due to the gigabite Ethernet backbone throughout the District. In addition to the rapid network the infrastructure includes virus scan, ISD Barricuda Spam Filter, 2,605 workstations and printers as of June 2006, both MacIntosh and Windows platforms, IPS security cameras in all buildings, Flyer Productions Television Studio and four Technology staff members. Additionally, both the middle school and Cheney have interactive whiteboards. Whiteboards are currently being installed at the other buildings and the staff is being trained on their use.

Ms. Smith said the website is updated as information is received and that she would like to do more P.R. on it.

Ms. Smith discussed the requirement that all students and staff sign a Technology Use Agreement and said this is done to protect the students, the staff and our system. At this time Ms. Smith is currently investigating the addition of student e-mail accounts.

Mr. Greer said student e-mail accounts would be good, because it is hard to work on homework at home without e-mail access and added the students would like to see this quickly.

Ms. Braxton asked how Washtenaw Wireless will impact us. Ms. Smith said she doesn't think this will affect schools, because we are already wireless. Ms. Washington expressed her concern that if the county does not have the same level of security as we do, students will be able to go to the county site and access sites that could potentially infect our system.

Ms. Tanya Ruiter, community member, stated that it was hard to find information about this meeting and asked if information about future meetings could be made more accessible on the website. She added there was no posting on the doors of the middle school.

Ms. Ruiter said she has pulled her kids from Willow Run and asked why we are not trying to align our curriculum to exceed Michigan State standards. She added passing AYP should be the norm, not something to get excited about. She said we are lacking in curriculum and with the technology and interactive learning we have our students should be way off of the charts.

Ms. Tatom said the curriculum posted on the website does exceed State standards and added one component is rigor. Ms. Ruiter said she has been to other districts and they are teaching more. An audience member disagreed saying parents have to be responsible for providing educational stimulation to and partnering with their children.

One member of the audience asked if the teachers have a contract. Dr. Ciranna said they are still operating under their old contract and pointed out they still have benefits and are receiving step-increases in pay. He explained the teachers filed for fact-finding, and as soon as a date is set by the fact-finder the District is ready to go. Dr. Ciranna said the projected timeline for a contract is March.

Mr. Smith asked if there is any way to pull both teams together with President Braxton and another board member to discuss the contract. Dr. Ciranna said this is something that could be discussed later.

Ms. Washington asked Mr. McFarlane to share the concerns of his citizens. A citizen said in trying to see the District move forward, she feels we are at a standstill and that there is a disconnect between what is happening and what is being said. She added if we had quality teaching, we would not be losing students. She said we need to discuss the quality of what is happening in the classrooms.

Another parent said as a new member of the Superior Township community, she has nothing vested in the community and can go to Ypsilanti Schools or a charter school and that for other new people coming in it is the same thing- they can leave and feel good about leaving nothing behind. She said she has been school shopping and that other districts offer more. She added none of her neighbors send their children to Willow Run and the reason why needs to be addressed. She said losing 100 plus students this year points to a systemic problem in the district.

Ms. Braxton agreed with that and said we need to look at how we educate our kids. She said we have some excellent teachers in the classrooms, but maybe not across the board. She said we have to have a beginning and we need to provide services that educate all of our kids and we need to look inside of our classrooms, because that is where the learning takes place, it is where we need to put our energies and efforts.

Regarding consolidating districts, Ms. Braxton said we can do a lot of things in a small district and that to her, crisis means opportunity. She said we need to figure out what is going on, so we can survive.

Mr. McFarlane said he is here as an advocate for children and taxpayers and Superior Township wants Willow Run to be successful. He said if he asks difficult questions, he is sorry. He said there is a positive- that Superior residents voted to join the Ypsilanti District Library and work is in progress to locate a branch in their community. He said a demo-branch will be located at the fire station on the corner of Harris and MacArthur Roads, where items will be delivered for pick-up and computers will be available. Mr. McFarlane said a permanent branch of the library is also being looked at. He said this would be a good opportunity to collaborate with Willow Run, and would like to see the 10-acres of land Willow Run owns on Harris Road developed into an elementary school and community center.

A gentleman in the audience said it needs to be communicated between the board, superintendent and principals that parents are not getting satisfaction, so they pull their kids out and go where they do get satisfaction. He said this is not a new problem, that it has been 20 years in the making.

Ms. Anita Smith, Willow Run resident and teacher, said it has become hard for her to live in Superior Township, with the last two-months being especially hard, as people come to talk to her and ask questions that are hard to answer. She said she invites them to the buildings, the board offices and the board meetings. Ms. Smith said community people tell her they don't ever see goals being reached, so they take their kids where goals are being reached. She said to please tell people they need to talk and keep communication open and that she is not willing to give up.

Dr. Ciranna said the District is like a car- you have to test drive it. He said there is not a building or a classroom in the District he is embarrassed about. Dr. Ciranna said this is a tough road and there are a lot of issues, but that we cannot have in-fighting and encouraged everyone to stand as a team. He also encouraged anyone with any issues, to come and see us. Dr. Ciranna said we have the best type of curriculum and are growing into a state-of-the-art facility.

Mr. Greer said Willow Run teachers are very dedicated and teach their students to set goals and to reach them. He said he is not seeing this at the board level and asked what are we going to get accomplished and how are we going to get it done. Mr. Greer also requested a timeline for the proposed student e-mail accounts, saying things get talked about, researched and then it comes up again in six-months. He said we are not following-up.

Ms. Braxton said we have kind of raked over the issues at this meeting and there are a lot of people who want to be pleased and that we all need to agree that not everyone is going to be happy with some of the decisions that have to be made. She said we will all have to agree to disagree.

Ms. Braxton said she appreciates those who are here tonight. She said when she leaves this room; she will be just as transparent out on the street as she is in here. She encouraged everyone that has questions to go to administration and ask them. She said we need to get back to basics and follow procedure.

Ms. Braxton said the next meeting will be this Thursday at Holmes Elementary at 6:30 p.m.

President Braxton declared the meeting adjourned at 7:25 p.m.