

(Approved by the Portsmouth School Board on May 8, 2007.)

**Portsmouth School Board
Portsmouth, New Hampshire**

Minutes of the April 11, 2007 Meeting

A Public Hearing with the Portsmouth School Board on the Portsmouth Middle School was held on Wednesday, April 11, 2007 in the Eileen Dondero Foley Council Chambers, City Hall, Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Attendance

PRESENT: Mr. Kent LaPage (Chair), Mrs. Nancy Novelline Clayburgh, (Vice Chair), Ms. Sheri Ham Garrity, Mr. Clay Hayward, Mr. John Lyons, Jr., Mr. Brendan Ristaino, Mr. Mitchell Shuldman, Mr. Carson Smith and Ms. Ann Walker.

PARTICIPATING: Dr. Robert J. Lister (Superintendent), Mr. Stephen Zadravec (Assistant Superintendent), Mr. Stephen Bartlett (Business Manager), and Ms. Ann Mayer (SAU #50)

Call To Order

At 7:00 p.m. Mr. LaPage, Chair, called the meeting to order. The Chair thanked everyone for coming. He explained that the public was welcome to come to the podium, state their name and address, and speak for 3 minutes the first time, 2 minutes the second time and 1 minute the 3rd time. The Board would not be responding to or commenting on any questions at this time. The Public Hearing was a time for the Board to just listen. If anyone was not able to or would rather not speak at the podium, index cards were available for comments or questions to be submitted to the board. If needed, experts could be consulted for a response.

Mr. Lyons apologized to the public that he would need to leave at 8:10.

There will be a kickoff of the Study Circles on April 30, 2007 followed by 4 future sessions.

Bob Shouse, Dennett Street, felt both choices were poor with the current middle school limited in space, not a good choice to renovate. His concern with the Jones Avenue site is a mystery illness that could affect our students if the school were built on that site. He does not want to lose the open space. He suggested a 3rd choice which would be to build the new school at Leary Field and build new fields at Jones Avenue. The current middle school could be made into elderly housing. He wants the Peirce property left alone.

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Heather Heard, New Castle Avenue, would like to see the middle school kept downtown where children can walk and bike to school and be able to go to town and the library. With childhood obesity rate at 45% the need to walk and bike to school is important.

Thinks looking at more sites and multiple bids should be done. Peirce property should not be used. Also looking at moving one of the grades might be necessary.

Ralph DiBernardino, Islington Street, thanked the School Board for serving in public office and allowing the public a chance to speak. He would not want to see eminent domain used. He hopes that this process will not go as long as the Library.

He feels the public needs more information on why the configuration of 1 – 5 and 6 – 8 and 9 – 12. He thinks 6th grade might be moved to the elementary school.

Whether a new building or renovations, new fields are needed.

Cliff Horrigan, Elwyn Avenue, has watched the televised meetings, is in favor of keeping the school at Parrott Avenue where it is close to everything including the library, downtown, the mill pond, city hall and the senior center. With Jones/Lafayette isolated students would not be able to walk or bike to school. Feels more crossing guards in the Parrott Avenue area will help with traffic. Jones Avenue is not good for playing fields due to ledge, runoff into Sagamore Creek. Would rather see Jones Avenue left for the birds and wildlife.

Bill St. Laurent, Colonial Drive, wants to see the middle school stay where it is. One big issue on building the library where it is was so the middle school students could use it.

He recommended that one grade be moved to keep the costs down. Putting the school back to 2 grades would allow the Peirce property to be left alone.

He wants more study done since only one company was selected during this process.

Harold Ecker, Banfield Road, feels that this issue should be put to vote by the taxpayers, not the City Council. Also, projected prices for Jones Avenue and Parrott Avenue should be determined. If the present building is renovated he does not want encroaching on athletic fields. He feels the public should have the vote. He does not know which way he would vote.

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Rebecca Emerson, Woodbury Avenue, the National Trust put neighborhood schools on the most endangered list now thought of as an important civic landmark where students have pride in and participate in public life. Neighborhoods are akin to proverbial village that it takes to raise a child. She is against putting a middle school in a remote area. Schools serve as the anchor to the community. These giant facilities being built are being built in the middle of no where ruling out the ability for students to walk to school. We need to create small supportive learning environments which will give the students a sense of connection without isolation. It is hard to have a community centered school if not in the center of town or near it. These buildings are irreplaceable landmarks.

Lisa Sweet, Miller Avenue, attended other informational meetings and feels this will go out to bid. Feels the middle school is outdated for today's educational needs. The committee must make a well documented decision. Without that, the community will become more and more divided. Keep the best interest of the students in the short and long term as the priority in making this decision.

Harold Whitehouse, Humphreys Court, talked about the 1975 addition to the middle school and how terrible it was to tear down the auditorium. Mentioned all the activities that happen at the Jones Avenue site including hiking, skating, cross country skiing. But his main concern is the Jones Dump and the drums of oil from gas stations that were dumped there as well as asbestos and turpentine and paint cans with lead. He said there is no liner or membrane. The site is toxic. He is mostly concerned with the runoff into Sagamore Creek when disturbing the land. He feels we need to move along with this decision. He would like this voted on by the public. He also suggests a second opinion on renovating Parrott Avenue building to try to meet the state standards.

Patrick Ellis, McKinley Road, mentioned how the fields would be built on the landfill and experts say it is ok. The building would not be built on the dump. Team Design has lots of experience and that renovating actually costs more than building new. Renovating would not meet the Educational Narrative. Does not want to see 8th graders moved to the high school. There is not enough room for 25 additional classes at the high school. Also, most kids don't walk to school. If there is a concern about Jones Avenue and cars, have a crossing guard there to keep cars from using that as a drop off or pick up spot, although this would require the students to walk a good distance to the school since it is a long road from Jones Avenue to the middle school site. He suggested that the school board have a web site for everything to do with this issue so there is one place to gather all this information to eliminate the

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misinformation out in the public. He would also like to see an engineer who has no interest in this project do studies and examine the property and give the public the information necessary to help make a good decision.

Leslie Stevens, Park Street, reminded everyone that the need so the students is the most important. Educators need to be listened to. Would like to see 6 – 8 configuration so the students have ownership in their school.

Martin Cameron, Ocean Road, was involved in saving the Great Bog. Felt good about that accomplishment. He was involved in the environmental work done in the city. It is well known that a big problem in Great Bay and the river is the run off from chemicals used on new lawns at new developments. He is concerned with the phosphate and nitrogen that may run off into the creek if the site were built a Jones Avenue.

He reminded everyone that the old high school, now the Keefe House, which is one of the most beautiful buildings in the city, was supposed to be demolished.

Avery Turner, Dennett Street, is a 7th grader at Portsmouth Middle School. He wants to see the current middle school renovated. He sees the school deteriorating including the cracks in the halls and the sagging stairs. He loves the architect and has learned in class about the building, the domes and the columns. He wants to preserve the great architecture.

Bill Sullivan, Union Street, feels that since 6th grade is kept separate anyway why not move them to the elementary schools and keep them separate there? He wants the Peirce Trust preserved. Portsmouth Listens wants students to walk. He sees students going to the library as a huge success. We need to teach our students how to treat our buildings and the history of the buildings and community. On Jones Avenue, the students would not be able to do that. Sees two strong camps at this meeting. He sees those in favor of Jones Avenue as staff and those in favor of Parrott Avenue are parents. The community should sacrifice for a short time for a long term benefit. Think about the priorities and what we want to teach our kids. History can be taught at the current school with visits to downtown a part of that with the 100 – 400 year old buildings.

Kathy Pearce, Woodbury Avenue, an 11 year teacher at the middle school, wants the 6th grade to remain with the 7th and 8th graders where parents get involved and likes the ability for students to learn the history of Portsmouth by taking tours, walking to

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Strawberry Banke, the South Mill Pond, Peirce Island,
Architectural tours of the old library.

Rebecca Boutinelli, New Castle Avenue, would like to see the middle school stay at Parrott Avenue where it is a part of the community. Jones Avenue and the land fill is not appealing to her.

Shaula Levenson, Curriers Cove, stated that Mr. Stokel and the staff at the middle school have the best interest of students, there is a sense of community at the middle school with 6th – 8th grades and meeting the Comprehensive Education Concept. Does not feel that having the middle school building in downtown makes it a community school and that 90% of the students do not walk to school. She hopes a decision is not based on being downtown or not downtown. It should be what is best for the kids and financially for the community and the flexibility of the school. If the 6th graders were sent back to the elementary levels, these 3 elementary schools would need to be renovated. She feels the Jones Avenue site will accommodate the needs of middle school and be flexible; the high school recreational facility next to the middle school would be an advantage.

John Anderson - Jones Avenue, stated that Jones Avenue has 30 acres of wetlands for the deer and owls and birds, water fowl and plants. Blasting at this site would disturb all this. He encouraged everyone to walk and see this site, a site that would be gone forever. The high school is too big and so is expensive to run but does not want the middle school students moved there. Doesn't see where more fields are needed. Feel if teachers want to keep the grade 6-8 configuration, then keep it that way. But feel they do need a new facility. He wants the history of the city respected as well as the woods and nature.

Monica Celler – Union Street, loves walking her children to Little Harbour and wants to walk her children to the middle school. While walking they see things you cannot see in a car. Wants the students to be able to walk to the library from the middle school. Preserving Jones Avenue would teach kids that we value this property. Show kids that we value what we have and must take care of it rather than get something new. She is not in favor of kids being in the woods. Would rather see them in neighborhoods and downtown. She herself went to a 6th grade only school where the students came from various towns and got to know each other. She is ok with the kids being in trailers during renovations. She feels there are lessons to be taught about the community.

Carol Chelman, Richards Avenue, is in favor of renovating the existing school. She reminded the members that the proposed site is the Route 1 site, not Jones Avenue or Lafayette Road. She

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wants the community, teachers and students listened to. Loves the beauty and open areas of Jones Avenue. Was concerned with the garbage still out there.

Beth Crowell, Jones Avenue, huge concern about the planned access road at Jones Avenue, narrow and winding, construction vehicles, and delivery trucks. Concerned with more traffic due to the number of small children living in the area. This entrance is not clearly identified on plans. Had an issue when Tidewatch wanted an access road that was supposed to be for safety and emergency but really wanted it to avoid the other entrance. Is concerned with parents picking and dropping kids off there. Other issues of concern are the demographic study, the environmental and air quality studies at Jones Avenue, and the budget costs for increase of buses, employees to drive the buses, gas, and a light at the Route 1 entrance. She requests no Jones Avenue access road. Jones Avenue land is priceless.

Marion Ellis, McKinley Road, 7th grade teacher, stating this age group is a difficult time where it is important for staff to get to know the students. These three grades need to stay together. The school is a happy place despite the building. Does not want to see the students displaced while renovations are done. There has to be a bigger issue to keep the middle school on Parrott Avenue rather than being able to walk to school.

Rebecca Blain, Baycliff Road, urges everyone to go to the site and bring others there to see it because once it is gone, it is gone. Even though 90% of the students are bused in and not walking they are still members of the community and get to see the history of Portsmouth when they come into the city. Worried about venting the landfill and wants to pursue finding out what is there.

Diane Misusawa, F.W. Hartford Drive, stated that her children's experience at the middle school has been phenomenal. Would like to see 6th – 8th grade configuration continue. With her experience of teaching a program 1 day per year at the middle school she has difficulty understanding how these teachers and students work with their space now. She had to climb over cords and students. The rooms are too small for the way teaching is done today. She loves the building but feels the members need to talk to the teachers who have to teach in these rooms everyday.

Sue Christmas, Ridge Road, York, Maine, is retiring after 39 years as an educator and has been at the Portsmouth Middle School since 1991. Stated that 3 grades at the middle school level gives the students a sense of ownership and belonging, gets parents connected. If only 7th and 8th grade, the 7th graders are transitioning in and 8th graders are transitioning out so they never

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feel settled. 10 to 13 years olds is an exciting age group but fragile. The students are nurtured and challenged with all that middle school has to offer. Wants the committee to make a good educationally sound decision. Building a new site is better than patchwork. Not sure if population will increase or decrease so expandable space is necessary. More playing fields are needed and an auditorium and more parking is necessary and will allow for cultural events.

It is important for students to be safe and supervised coming and going to school.

David Witham, Walker Bungalow Road, attended meetings with PTA and heard about Educational Narrative. Mr. Stokel stated this could be achieved at either site. He also heard that the land fill at Jones Avenue is all ash but heard differently also. Said there is a lot of work to do to calm the fears of the community. He is also concerned with the middle school students being near the high school students. Feels moving school to Jones Avenue would take kids out of the community.

Gary Smith, South Street, wants school kept downtown. Feels because of limitations, Team Design was the only company used. Would like another company to look at entire area and refigure middle school.

Also, 80% of current building would have to be demolished and renovated. Would like to see some streets around Parrott Avenue dead ended and refigured for building.

Guthrie Schwartz, Johnson Court, loves the downtown school near the mill pond. There is a tremendous educational opportunities with school on Parrott Avenue with the historic buildings.

Carol Hollis, Union Street, suggested the members look at middle schools in other areas. Said there is a movement to go back to 2 grades. Suggested 6th grade be moved to one of the vacant buildings in town for a very special school year, or put 8th grade at the high school.

Brian Kimball, South Street, spoke about how important walking is and learning to make decisions at each corner you come to, which way to go, a rehearsal for making future decisions. He came back to raise his family here. Wants a good educationally decision made.

Ea Ksander, Dennett Street, wanted to raise her family in Portsmouth where she was from. Loves the history of Portsmouth

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and wants to hold onto this. Educational Narrative can be met in current building.

Allison Hamilton, Woodlands, is a teacher at the Portsmouth Middle School. She is against taking property by eminent domain. She supports the 6th – 8th graders together which has worked fabulously for these 16 years. The students thrive emotionally, socially and educationally. She feels that the school board was elected by the people so they should be able to make the decision. She does not feel it is necessary to put it to a public vote.

Rose Sulley, Sherburne Avenue, was a member of the JSAC committee. There is a field shortage in the city which needs to be looked at more. Does not feel the fields need to be built next to the middle school. Suggests we pursue having fields at Pease. Also stated that either Jones Avenue or Parrott Avenue would be able to meet the requirements for state board aid program. The Parrott Avenue site does not meet the state standards based on 25 students per class which 25 students in a class is more than what our own policy allows. A waiver could be applied for to allow for a 35 square foot per student with a cap on the number of students allowed in each room. Wonders how big is too big, how many classes are needed and cautions not to plan for more than is needed. She thanked the middle school staff for the great work that they do. She also thanked the board and reminded them to keep an open mind and to make a decision quickly.

Tom Bolko, New Castle Avenue, has 42 years with the Portsmouth School Department. He was involved in the Middle School Needs Assessment done in 2003. When looking at the Parrott Avenue site the committee was told to use only the existing footprint to come up with a plan. It's time to review all the information gathered. School Board must provide the best education for the students. Jones Avenue should be the top priority. He feels as elected members, the school board needs to make a decision based on the best educational needs of our students.

Greg Welch, South Street, attended this meeting to get more informed. Feels Portsmouth is the best place to live with its downtown school.

John Bourchard, F.W. Hartford Drive, would like to see the 6th – 8th grade kept together, wants committee to listen to the teachers and make a decision that will not disturb the learning process, take care of the children.

Kevin Rafferty, Summit Avenue, has been a middle school teacher for 36 years. Since 1991 6th – 8th have been at the school. They feel like they have a home. 7th and 8th grades only would not allow

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the students to feel a sense of community or ownership. 7th grade is a difficult time developmentally. With just 7th and 8th, the 7th graders are transitioning in and 8th graders transitioning out. The best educational setting is 6th – 8th.

Hope Martins, Broad Street, is concerned with the health risk, not convinced that we have resolved the health risks we may face. Also concerned about the cost involved in either place. Also wants to know what the costs would be to renovate the middle school once it is vacated if new Jones Avenue site built. Renovation would be an added cost to the city. Also wonders why the site is called Jones Avenue if the access road would not be Jones Avenue.

Cindy Hebert, Thaxter Road, supports the building of a new school adjacent to the high school. Likes the 6th - 8th grade model. Feels Jones Avenue would meet the state standards and would have the ability to build an auditorium and a gym and have the playing fields and a better drop off and pick up area. As a Thaxter Road parent she can walk to both sites.

Mary Mower, Richards Avenue, enjoys watching the students at the pond and classes outside drawing. Suggest middle school move to Little Harbour since Little Harbour needs renovations and has the square footage necessary for a middle school. Mentioned that if building is done on the Jones Avenue site tests would have to be done to check the air quality. If there is a problem the work would have to be shut down. Wondered if we had the money to handle that. She would suggest tax money be used to do all the necessary tests. Many elderly have told her what was put in the dump. She also stated that she heard that the middle school would become town offices which means a cost to the taxpayers to renovate it.

Shawn Rafferty, South Street, would like to know how many students we expect to enter the middle school in the future years. Would like Dr. Lister to gather this information to discuss the need since there was a report out that said elementary schools would only have 100 students in each school in ten years.

Dave Forman, Sagamore Avenue, has written 2 letters to the editor. He feels the boards should use the Mission Statement and the importance of following that. The City's master plan encourages revitalization in the community and supports neighborhood centered community.

Suggests strong look at Master Plan and restore buildings and keep open space. The land at Jones Avenue is beautiful.

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Sue Rafferty, Summit Avenue, PMS Teacher, is concerned with class size where she trips over students in class, has to have them spread out in the hallway to do their work. She also wants to have space for conferences with students to assist them when they may need extra help, the one on one is necessary. There is no place for students to display their work where others can learn from what they have done which raises the standards for other students. The school also needs an auditorium where the entire school can gather. She asked that members of the community come to the middle school and see what it is like with the number of students in the limited space.

Ned Reynolds, reminded everyone of the master plan done every 10 years to make long-term plans required by state law. Wants the public to voice their visions and values. To build at a new site would depart from the master plan.

The Study Group kickoff will be April 30th with more information to be announced.

At 9:40 p.m. Chair LaPage asked for a motion to close the meeting. The motion was made by Mrs. Novelline Clayburgh and seconded by Mrs. Walker.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Robert J. Lister
Executive Secretary

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