

CITY COUNCIL & SCHOOL COMMITTEE JOINT MEETING AGENDA - VERSION 1

REMOTE
AUGUST 17, 2020

6:30PM

1. Call to Order

- Late Files: None

2. Communications

- COMM256_08_17_2020 Ltr re: School Reopening – Councillor Zeid

3. Orders

- ORDR203_08_10_2020 FY21 Budget Order

Motion to refer to B&F by Councillor Tontar, seconded by Councillor Khan.

Motion to continue the motion to refer to the August 17th meeting by Councillor Tontar, seconded by Councillor Khan. Roll call vote. 6 yes, 4 no, 1 absent (Devlin). Motion passed.

4. Good of the Order

5. Adjournment

Zoom Details:

Please click the link below to join the webinar:

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Webinar ID: 896 7685 9569

August 13th, 2020

Mayor Donna Holaday, Chair
Bruce Menin, Vice-Chair
Brian Callahan, Member
David Hocheiser, Member
Sheila Spaulding, Member
Sean Reardon, Member
Sean Gallagher, Superintendent

Dear Members of the School Committee and Superintendent Gallagher,

I am writing to you today on the topic of school reopening. I recognize that this is a challenging period in largely uncharted territory. I also respect that you are working in a difficult context where guidance from the state is coming in at difficult times with an expectation that you will digest and work with that information in short order. I appreciate that a written reopening plan was published for all to see. That was a huge step forward in this process. The plan does contain important information.

This letter identifies issues and concerns that I have but please accept it in the spirit in which it was written, which is one of collaboration and suggestion. It doesn't imply anything about the performance or efforts of the district or of the School Committee. I respect and thank you for all of the work that you have done and are doing.

Time is very short and I am very concerned that Monday's School Committee will bring forward a vote (no agenda yet posted). I don't believe that such a vote should occur in just one meeting but I am writing as though it will. As such, I have to respond to this written plan and the direction that we seem to be heading in.

While I respect and understand that this can be considered attractive because it is the compromise plan, I believe much more needs to be done before discarding the full in-person option. I also want to voice my strong opposition to a full remote model for any grade in the district as well as any hybrid plan that doesn't make a serious effort towards including as much in-person time as possible.

If the hybrid model is selected then it should only be used as a temporary solution while a plan is brought forward to bring the students back into the classroom as soon as possible. If that requires investment, I fully support that investment. I make suggestions in point #6 as to how to solve the space issues we face.

In addition, there are areas that need serious consideration in my opinion. They are material to the level that I ask you to vote no on any plan that doesn't fully address these points. This plan is going to govern the outcome of this school year – we cannot afford to have a bad outcome. The plan cannot be finalized other than being 100% in-writing for all to see and consider.

Here are the points that I would like to bring forward:

1) **Overarching goal**

This plan does not appear to make it clear that the unequivocal goal is in-person learning. I think it's important to make it clear that in-person learning is the preferred method for all grade levels and for all students. There is always room for technology and growth in the future as education evolves

but the in-person learning model is the best. It should also be made clear that every effort will be made in furtherance of this goal, including allocating the necessary funds to do so.

By association and extension, the document should also recognize the inherent problems with remote learning. No matter how well planned or executed, it simply is not a manner by which students, at any grade level though particularly those who are younger, can learn in any way that is equivalent to in-person instruction with a live teacher. There is also no way that one can expect teachers to perform to the same level in a remote environment. Any remote learning automatically requires a lowering of all expectations.

Finally, there needs to be a recognition that this plan is put forward in an effort to mitigate risk and to create a safe environment. Risk mitigation and risk elimination are not the same thing. A competent risk mitigation plan brings together key elements to create safety and comfort while understanding that we cannot create a zero-risk environment. To that same end, we are not going to be able to employ all 100% of the plan, 100% of the time, for 100% of the people. We recognize the risk and we respect it but we take it in a measured and calculated fashion in furtherance of our stated goals.

2) In-Person model now or as soon as possible

Given the current state of cases in Massachusetts and specifically here in Newburyport, the data supports a full in-person model. It is unclear how the data could improve in any substantial way beyond where it is now in terms of case counts or other metrics that one could look at.

It needs to be recognized that if the data we have today doesn't support in-person learning then the decision is, at least, tacitly being made that there will likely not be a full in-person learning model until COVID-19 is somehow a thing of the past.

I understand that one of the main impediments to full in-person learning are physical constraints on the amount of space available in the district combined with other factors such as scheduling, etc.

The other models all make concessions in our kids' education that should only be made if absolutely necessary.

3) Triggers for model reconsideration

In conjunction with #2, when a plan is selected, what will govern reconsideration. For example, if the hybrid model is selected – when and how will reconsideration take place? Reconsideration should be built into the plan.

I believe that reconsideration should take place every 4 weeks, at minimum for at least the first 3 months of the school year. At that point, reconsideration could perhaps be slowed down to once every 6 or 8 weeks.

Reconsideration obviously means that the model can shift in one direction or another as conditions warrant. This is crucial to set proper expectations. Reconsideration should be undertaken by the School Committee, publicly for all to view. Further, assurances are needed on how fast we can pivot between models for everyone's benefit and predictability.

Given that we may have to make changes immediately, models should be interchangeable. This requires the ability to broadcast in-classroom teaching live with an ability to interact remotely. If circumstances dictate that we need to be able to transition in real time without changes to the curriculum. Those that choose a fully remote pathway initially but wish to return to the class later, need to transition seamlessly. Days out of school in the hybrid model should allow for continuous learning as if they were in school. This can only be done with proper investment in classroom technology and teacher training.

4) Remote Learning

a. Technology

2 out of 3 models in this plan have substantial dependence on remote learning either in whole or in part. In the hybrid plan, most students in the district would spend more time outside of the school buildings than in. For example, at the Bresnahan students would spend 2 days in school and 3 days out.

Respectfully, the overwhelming feedback that I have heard is that remote learning in the spring was not successful. This doesn't mean that effort wasn't expended and the effort wasn't appreciated but we've got to acknowledge areas that are in need of improvement. I think a fair amount of patience is due here because the spring was really an emergency situation. The fall cannot be looked at in the same way.

There is no possible way that this level of remote learning can be achieved with a technology stack that enables this fully. I appreciate that the plan makes mention of technology in certain sections but I do not see a section dedicated to the school side setup and the procurement of technology to support every classroom in the district, especially for synchronous learning in a hybrid environment where some students are present and others are remote.

b. Remote Learning Planning (deficiency in synchronous learning)

I think there is an appreciation that remote learning is really very new. Typically, you would expect to see big shifts take years to formulate and take a place. Sadly, we don't have that time.

The creation of more structure as indicated in the plan is a welcome development. With that said, consider the following 1-3 grade students schedule: 3 days a week are hybrid. On two of those days students only get a promised 30 minutes of synchronous time (morning meeting and closing meeting). All other blocks will include both synchronous and asynchronous learning. It's not clear what this really means and the time students will get

with their teacher. This could contribute more time with the teacher but it is unclear the extent to which it will.

c. Remote learning is inferior to in-person

Without rehashing above, there should be a recognition that remote learning simply doesn't measure up to instruction. Every minute of remote instruction represents a loss for students and should be regarded as such.

d. Younger students gain the least from remote instruction

While remote learning should be disfavored as an overall goal, there should be additional recognition that the younger a student is, the less they get out of remote learning. Kindergartners, 1st graders, 2nd graders simply can't absorb information over a television or computer screen in the same way they can in-person.

5) High School Plan

It is understandable that the cohort plan is difficult to implement at the High School given that students take diverse course loads. That said, this should be offset by the fact that these students are as a body older and better able to understand restrictions and requirements such as mask wearing. It is also crucial to recognize that some of these students are undertaking coursework and preparation for things that are, in larger part, going to play a huge role in setting up future plans such as standardized testing and college. That is part of setting a lifetime trajectory.

This portion of the plan must be reworked to allow for substantially more in-person instruction. From a practical perspective, the plan is essentially fully remote. The advisory blocks are very slim. Obviously, the buildings are not going to be able to change shape or size so other ideas must be considered. Please suggest in #6 below.

6) Here are some ideas for consideration to solve our challenges:

- 1) Expand the hours the schools are open. High School students have the capability to perform classwork into the afternoon and even into the evening. This can reduce the number of individuals who need to be in the building at any one time. My understanding is that there was already some effort to do some courses in the evening pre-COVID.
- 2) Utilize gym space to create even more classroom space that is spaced out. This space is right within each school's walls and offers more space instantly.
- 3) Commit to outdoor spaces in a serious way. The plan briefly mentions outdoor spaces but with some investment (such as tents), it would be possible to really count on this space at least for a few months. It is worth it to take what we can to move our students forward. If the weather only holds out for 2 months or so then that's 2 months that we can have, and we should value

that.

- 4) Consideration should be given to reactivating the Brown School Space for use by High School students. This would immediately create additional square footage.
- 5) Other spaces in the City such as the City Hall Auditorium and Senior Community Center other rooms could be used to the extent that they are not going to be used otherwise. We need to leverage every building and every room in the City in support of our schools.
- 6) We must leverage the full capability of contact tracing. While there are challenges around different course loads making it difficult to implement cohorts, we have a situation that is tailor-made for contact tracing. We have the names of all students and exactly what courses they are taking. By extension, it becomes very simple to determine who may have been around a student or teacher who ultimately gets COVID-19.
- 7) Consideration for testing, if and when it becomes available to a wider community. Antigen based, point-of-care tests are available and others are being developed that might allow weekly or even daily testing.
- 8) If truly the high school is truly going to be utilized in the way described in the plan, then the space should be available to other grades so that the building space does not go utilized while others are forced into more time out of the school than in.

None of these ideas are offered with any implication that they are easy or cheap but that is not the intent either.

7) Accounting for families making the choice to stay remote

The plan does discuss the opportunity for families to keep their children home and that is an important part of the plan. With that being said, it is not clear the timeline for making this decision. The timeline is extremely important because the number of students who will not attend could have an impact on the amount of physical space available within the buildings.

Based on the survey that was done, my understanding is that 70% of respondents stated "Yes" to question number 2 which relates to sending students back 5 days a week if guidelines are met. If there are some 30% who ultimately opt out of in-person then this should be further taken into account in the decision making.

8) COVID Testing and Positive Plan

I have concerns about the COVID-19 Positive/Suspected Exposure portion of the plan. This is obviously an important aspect of the discussion. What is not clear is whether or not a suspected or positive case is expected to have an impact on the plan. For example, if a student or teacher

receives a COVID-positive test result will that result in the entire cohort being sent remote? Will it result in the entire building being closed? Where do HIPAA regulations fall into this?

It is very difficult to believe that the year will pass without a positive case in or related to the schools. We have to be ready to deal with it and having it be a game time decision. Students will be harmed by inconsistency and to the extent possible, parents need an expectation in order to go back to work.

9) Sports, Extracurriculars, Before/after school

This document doesn't address sports or clubs so it is unclear the extent to which this topic has been discussed. It goes without saying but these sports and activities are crucial for students for a variety of reasons and play a role in the overall education that students receive. Hopefully this can be discussed and incorporated into the plan.

10) Additional resources that are needed

From a budgeting perspective, it is not entirely clear the impacts that this plan will have on financial needs in the district. There certainly are a number of new requirements that have an operational, and by extension, financial impact. For a basic example, the document calls for a transportation plan (bussing) that will limit the number of students per bus. Does this mean that more busses will be needed and at what cost? Technology needs may also have a budget impact, how will that be handled? Additional materials? It is hard to discuss this further since the budget isn't addressed in the document. In addition, I think additional air filtration could also help but adding more filtration is not discussed in the document. Utilizing more space, etc?

11) District Assessment

Lastly, it is imperative that this plan be updated to include some assessment measures and parameters for the district as a whole. Once a plan is settled upon, the next step will be execution. There must be some method of assessing the efficacy of the model being employed as well as the execution of that model. Such assessments should be conducted by the school committee on a regular and ongoing basis through the year and the results made public. This can be a combination of teacher, student, and parent surveys in conjunction with objective measures. If either the model or if execution needs improvement, then we need to know that and make that determination and changes as quickly as possible.

In closing, I am willing to do anything and everything I can to help the district. I am more than happy to volunteer to work on the plan, to help with technology, and so forth. I believe many others in the community would like to help as well.

There is strong recognition of the challenges we face in the community. Let's face them together.

Respectfully Submitted,
Sharif Zeid
Ward 1 City Councillor

CITY OF NEWBURYPORT



IN CITY COUNCIL

ORDERED:

August 10, 2020

WHEREAS, Section 11 of Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2020 (An Act Relative to Municipal Governance During the COVID-19 Emergency) allowed for the Mayor to submit to the City Council a continuing appropriation budget for the City of Newburyport for a period not to exceed three months in order to allow for additional time to submit an annual budget for Fiscal Year 2021 in accordance with Section 32 of Chapter 44 of the Massachusetts General Laws; and

WHEREAS, a continuing appropriation budget was submitted by the Mayor to the City Council in the amount of \$24,696,801 for the first three months of Fiscal Year 2021; and

WHEREAS, an annual budget for Fiscal Year 2021 must be adopted for the period of July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021; and

WHEREAS, an annual budget supersedes and replaces the spending authority granted under a continuing appropriation budget in accordance with Section 32 of Chapter 44 of the Massachusetts General Laws;

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT ORDERED, THAT, the General Fund budget for the City of Newburyport for Fiscal Year 2021 be approved in the amount of \$ _____, of which \$ _____ is established as a School Department Budget for Fiscal Year 2021.

FURTHER THAT, the following Enterprise Fund budgets for Fiscal Year 2021 are approved as follows:

Water Enterprise Fund	\$ _____
Sewer Enterprise Fund	\$ _____
Harbormaster Enterprise Fund	\$ _____

FURTHER THAT, the following sources are reserved to fund the annual budget:

Paid Parking Fund	\$ 1,033,552.18	(General Fund)
Water Retained Earnings	\$ 171,322.49	(Water Enterprise Fund)
Sewer Retained Earnings	\$ 300,034.04	(Sewer Enterprise Fund)

The approved budget represents the annual budget for Fiscal Year 2021 as submitted by Mayor Holaday on August 10, 2020, as amended.

Jared J. Eigerman, Council President

Barry N. Connell, Councillor At-Large

Joseph H. Devlin, Councillor At-Large

Afroz Khan, Councillor At-Large

Charles F. Tontar, Councillor At-Large

Bruce L. Vogel, Councillor At-Large

Sharif I. Zeid, Ward 1 Councillor

Heather L. Shand, Ward 3 Councillor

Christine E. Wallace, Ward 4 Councillor

James J. McCauley, Ward 5 Councillor

Byron J. Lane, Ward 6 Councillor