Virtual Building and Grounds Sub-Committee Report

Tuesday, October 12, 2021

Broadcast from the Media Arts Studio

454 Broadway, Cambridge, MA

Called for the purpose of discussing the special state senate primary and election, the scope of the RFP for long-range building study whose costs were approved by the city this summer and how the safety protocols have been working since the start of the school year.

Members Present: Chair José Luis Rojas, Member Fantini, Vice Chair Bowman ~~(ABSENT)~~

Also Present: Member Weinstein; Mr. James Maloney, Chief Operating Officer; Ms. Mary Elizabeth Cranton, CEA Member of the Working Group; Dr. Alisa Khan, member of the Health and Safety Committee; Ms. Tanya Ford Crump, Executive Director of the Cambridge Election Commission; Commissioner Larry Ward of the Election Commission; Commissioner Victoria Harris of the Election Commission; Mr. Rowan Marcus, ICTS; Ms. Ena Valenzuela, parent and member of CPAC; Ms. Elinor Actipis; Ms. Amatul Mahmud, Coordinator of Sisters for a Dream, an after-school program and parent; Mr. Dan Monahan, CEA President; Mr. Matt Larue, parent; Ms. Catherine Reilly, parent.

Chair Rojas called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m. and gave a synopsis and context around the meeting:

* to discuss the Cambridge Election Commission request related to a special election
* discuss requests for proposal (RFP) for a long-range building study
* discuss how the safety policies have been working since the start of the year
* provide an opportunity for community members to ask questions and ideas on these topics

**Chair Rojas** turned the floor to Mr. Maloney.

* Mr. Maloney spoke about the request to hold special elections (not the municipal elections), in a few CPSD schools. There have been at least two or three prolonged discussions on this matter in the past. This request is not generally welcomed by the principals, but they also recognize that there may be no other recourse. The administration also recognizes the intrusion to the normal flow of a school day.

**Chair Rojas** asked Ms. Ford-Crump if there are any restrictions related to this request and what are the safety protocols for this election.

* Ms. Crump explained that this election has not been planned for, as it is due to the resignation of Senator Boncore. The primary is December 14th and the election is January 11th; the voting effects seven wards and precincts. The only two schools that would be needed are the Martin Luther King, Jr. School and the Morse School. There are no other schools requested. The same safety and security used in the past and this November, will be used for the special December and January elections. There will be a security officer and two police officers on the sites.

Ms. Bowman entered the meeting at 6:15 p.m.

**Member Fantini** asked if there would be any early voting at this special election and will there be any private sites used?

* Ms. Ford-Crump answered that they do not know yet for early voting, they are waiting to hear from the state, and, for private sites, they are using MIT at Kresge Auditorium, the Cambridge Community Center, and the LBJ apartments.

**Vice Chair Bowman** apologized, explained a conflict due to the double booking of duties, for the beginning of this meeting. The Vice Chair asked if there have been any conversations with the principals at the two schools in question.

* Ms. Ford-Crump explained that the Election Commission was in conversation with Mr. Maloney and was informed that they needed to come before the School Committee which lead to this meeting today.
* Mr. Maloney answered that he has only had a conversation with Principal Leith at the Morse so far. The Martin Luther King Jr. School houses two campuses, two Principals and about 750 students. Principal Yung has had issues in the past, with opening his building for voting and would prefer that an alternate site be sought. It has been pointed out that the December election will be the second time in thirty days that a school has been asked to change the normal function of a school day to accommodate voting. That being said, Principal Yung is prepared to make his school safe and accessible for all (which includes administration, faculty, students, and voters), if need be, for the day of voting.

**Vice Chair Bowman** asked how would indoor eating, during the winter, be impacted.

* Mr. Maloney answered that there will be a challenge, since we no longer have the option of outdoor dining. The schools will need to try to meet the challenge, as they have in the past, of arranging safe indoor dining within the guidelines, *without* the option of using the gym. The gyms, having high quality ventilation for air and outdoor doors access, are currently being used for indoor physical education.

**Chair Rojas** asked to re-confirm that voters will be using different entrances than the general school population.

* Commissioner Ward, in relation to the special election, answered in the affirmative, depending on the configuration of the school. As it relates to the Morse School, everyone enters the same way and then separates.
* Ms. Ford Crump answered for the Martin Luther King, Jr. school. There is a playground/gym entrance, therefore the voters do not have to come in contact with the students. She admits to being between a rock and a hard place. If anyone knows of any other buildings within the vicinity, please let her know. They are already using vote by mail and early voting. Ms. Ford Crump welcomes all suggestions.
* Mr. Maloney reiterated for at least the third time that safety and security is under control; the largest issue is the disruption to the learning day, the staff will, as always, do their best to minimize the disruption.

**Chair Rojas** stated that they have enough information to bring a recommendation forward to the Committee of the Whole.

**Member Fantini** suggested a favorable recommendation to the Committee of the Whole to support this request adding that this can be a learning day for civic engagement to involve students with the voting process.

**Vice Chair Bowman** suggested an Ad-Hoc Sub-Committee using the City Council, Election Commission and School Committee for pro-active ideas for polling locations going forward.

**Chair Rojas** suggested a Roundtable.

* Commissioner Ward volunteered to organize bringing the three bodies together.

Motion from the Buildings and Grounds Sub-Committee

WHEREAS: The Cambridge Election Commission needs to hold special elections in December and January around a vacated state senate seat, in addition to the already scheduled municipal elections, and  
WHEREAS The Cambridge Election Commission continues to face challenges securing election-compliant polling places, now therefore be it  
RESOLVED: That the Cambridge School Committee allow the Cambridge Election Commission to use the Martin Luther King and the Morse school for the special election, following the same health & safety protocols used in the municipal elections, and be it further  
RESOLVED: That the School Committee will request a roundtable discussion with the City Council and the Cambridge Election Commission to discuss the challenges of using school buildings as polling sites and what other options are available for the Election Commission

The meeting proceeded to the next topic on the Agenda, the RFP.

Mr. Maloney provided an update stating that the RFP process has been ongoing for quite some time. There is an active construction site building a new Tobin/Vassal Lane school building. There was a general consensus that the firm look at schools in need, consider renovations and in some cases, build new schools. CPSD is trying to identify a firm that will prepare a complete review of all aspects of our buildings, ranking them, improving, and, in some cases, expanding these buildings. Parking is a big issue. He would like the RFP to develop some online drawings that will show growth potential. There is a meeting scheduled with Councillor Nolan tomorrow to continue these conversations.

**Vice Chair Bowman** stated she is excited to know this is moving forward. Since there are many inequities in our school facilities, there is a strong need for this study.

**Member Fantini** spoke about the process to get the city to prioritize new schools and renovations. Zoning is an important part of this. He would like for CPS to pay some attention to where futuristic schools are headed nationally. Member Fantini asked what the state does in relation to this topic.

* Mr. Maloney responded that the state has an aggressive school capital funding program, ranking buildings across the state. Most of our buildings don’t fall in the required categories when put up against poor communities. By contrast we have award winning buildings.

The meeting progressed to the third item on the Agenda, The Health and Safety Working Group update.

Mr. Maloney gave an update on the start of this new academic year, stating that they are off to a good start with our protocols. They are looking at expanding opportunities for attendance in athletics, and performing arts.

There have been twenty confirmed cases of COVID-19 in our schools; fifteen were students and five were staff. None were identified by Cambridge Public Health as in school transmissions. The steps that have been taken have shown value.

Today was the first day of mandated testing for unvaccinated CEA members, Mr. Maloney does not have any numbers on this right now. It is a pretty massive undertaking, we are still waiting to know what the numbers are on those vaccinated and the exemptions.

Dr. Dobberteen agreed that the twenty cases have been shown to be out of school transmissions.

**Mr. Fantini** asked what will CPS do differently as we approach winter.

* Mr. Maloney responded that the challenges will become larger. Tents will come down on November 15, 2021, per our contract, and will go back up April 1, 2022. We are going to try to get through the winter with a mix of indoor and outdoor dining.

**Vice Chair Bowman** asked how are we partnering with the CEA and the CPHD.

* Dan Monahan replied that the CEA has been encouraging all staff to get vaccinated and upload their vaccination information to the district. He does not know how many members have uploaded their information yet, once he does have that information, he will target the needed areas of concern, if any.
* Mr. Maloney referred to the MOU which details the importance of vaccinations. All units, A through E, are heavily vaccinated. As of noon today, the number of uploaded vaccination cards has reached 1,266. It is possible this number is a mix of both union and non-union members.

**Chair Rojas** asked when wind instruments will be played indoors, wonders what has been done for educating our teenaged students on the benefits of getting vaccinated, and lastly for vaccinations for children under age 12.

* Mr. Maloney answered that the Health and Safety Taskforce has approved the use of wind and brass instruments indoors. There was a brief explanation of the use of the music-slip masks and bell covers for the masks that fit over instruments. CPS is following what the health and scientific advisors are recommending.
* Dr. Dobberteen responded that vaccinations are the single most important factor in defeating COVID-19. They are looking at a number of venues to ask questions, i.e. forums, outreach on social media, and discussing with CRLS leadership and Dr. Greer for conversations with students on all teen concerns. The recommendation from the Superintendent was focused on children under age 12 and teenagers. They expect something to come through for 5 to 11-year old children. They are hoping for a mandate to mirror the same mandate for the older children. There should be no question as to whether this pandemic is real. Humans of all ages can contact COVID-19 and sadly die from it.

The remainder of the meeting was opened for public comment. The following individuals were heard and responded to.

Ms. Amatul Mahmud asked why CPS afterschool programs are not allowed inside our schools. They are required to pay for space elsewhere.

* Mr. Maloney responded that the prohibitions were made because some of the outside user programs did not meet the protocols set in place. These protocols are in place until the end of January. There seems to be some discrepancy as to whether some of these programs are internal for outside users. The reconsideration for this prohibition in January is not certain. The DHSP put these rules in place and CPSD is following them as best they can. He offered that Ms. Mahmud email him and they can take a closer look at her particular situation.

Ms. Elinor Actipis stated that the vaccination mandate is an overreach of power and has been done illegally and unethically without community involvement. Where does the School Committee get the authority to issue this vaccine mandate? She does not believe that School Committees anywhere have this authority. She wants to know what the proper venue is to have this conversation about coercion in detail.

* Mr. Maloney replied that the mandates are designed to meet legal compliance. It is not looked at as coercion. The risks of not being vaccinated are greater than the risks of being vaccinated. As with all things pandemic related, there will never be 100% agreement on every step that the district and the state take.
* Dr. Dobberteen agrees that the mandate is designed to encourage families to get vaccinated against a serious, life threatening disease that has implications for the children themselves, and to avoid spreading the illness to the community and other vulnerable family members. In order to achieve herd immunity, we are going to need a high rate of vaccination among everyone. The vaccination mandate does not exclude students from school, therefore, parents do have the right to refuse it. There is no coercion.

Mr. Monahan spoke about the ventilation numbers, CO2 monitoring, masking, and was happy to report that there are very few problematic rooms for ventilation and they are still working on the few that exist.

Dr. Khan amplified Dr. Dobberteen’s response to the vaccine. There is a national mandate. Autonomy is not appropriate in a health crisis as it can harm others.

Matthew Nehs stated that over the summer there was a discussion that mask mandates are not effective. This disease is a seasonal respiratory illness. He would like to know what the limiting principle is for when the “emergency” is over? In other words, when can we take off the masks? He also stated that he is pro vaccine, but not for the mandating of a vaccine to a healthy child.

The debate continued, resulting with the following discrepancies:

* Whether or not children spread the disease. Some data shows that they do.
* It was stated that it can appear selfish to categorize heathy children as being punished for looking out for unhealthy children. We should be very cautious when we go in that direction.
* We all hope the state of emergency does not last forever
* CPS was applauded for their hard word on this once in a lifetime pandemic
* The reason people die of COVID-19 is because of poor metabolic health – it is not killing everyone
* We can all do a better job of communicating with students and parents

Adjourned 7:30 p.m.

Attest: 

Dosha E. Beard

Cambridge School Committee