

October 23, 2017

A Special Meeting of the Bladen County Board of Commissioners regarding Bladen County Public School's proposed Capital Project was held on Monday, October 23, 2017 at 5:00 pm in Commissioners Room on the lower level of the Bladen County Courthouse, Elizabethtown.

Members present were:

Charles R. Peterson, Chairman

Ray Britt, Vice Chairman

Michael Cogdell

Daniel Dowless

Arthur Bullock

Russell Priest

Ashley Trivette

Ophelia Munn-Goins

Excused: David Gooden

ITEM 1. Call to Order:

Chairman Peterson called the meeting to order and provided an invocation. County Manager Greg Martin led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Prior to recognizing Dr. Taylor to address the Board, Chairman Peterson read a prepared statement regarding the County Commissioners' role regarding Public Schools, and suggestions made by various Board members during small group meetings. A summary of the suggestions regarding closures, renovations and grade modifications was shared with Dr. Taylor. Chairman Peterson expressed his understanding that the recent proposal may have been revised, which initiated scheduling this special meeting for clarification.

ITEM 2. Bladen County Public Schools: (Dr. Robert Taylor, Superintendent)

A. Dr. Taylor and Board of Education Chairman Winston Rozier expressed appreciation to the Board.

Dr. Taylor stated that the proposal had not changed and welcomed questions or comments from the Board of Commissioners. He indicated that the \$15 million grant opportunity was revised to only include new construction. Originally, the grant application also included renovations of existing facilities. He also stated that grade modifications and realignment are still a part of a proposal.

Dr. Taylor stated that at a recent Board of Education meeting, the proposal to consider a construction project for a K-8 facility in the Tar Heel area had been approved by the Board of Education since there is a grant opportunity up to \$15 million is a possibility.

Dr. Taylor provided an overview of the grant application process for a new school facility. He stated that a commitment and a plan for funding sources, including availability and intent to complete the project, are part of the grant application. The application could be submitted at any time during the planning of a project.

Mr. Rozier stated that estimates for the project are important to be able to go forward with a grant application as well. At this point, only preliminary figures are available.

Commissioner Cogdell inquired about specific information regarding the location and cost of a proposed facility. Dr. Taylor indicated that the Board is hopeful that the current site would support a new facility. Soil testing would have to be completed in order to make that determination. Commissioner Cogdell asked for an update from the Board of Education when most of the details are available.

Dr. Taylor indicated that the project would be broken down into phases. The construction piece of the project would be bid out and would be straight forward. He indicated that contingency costs, site prep, furnishings, and possible land acquisition, would be a general estimate. He stated that a date to further discuss specifics would be January 2018.

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Commissioner Bullock inquired about the grant application deadline. Dr. Taylor stated that the deadline to submit the application is August 31, 2018, with the award date of September 30, 2018. Commissioner Bullock asked for clarification regarding a potential date to receive details and specifics of cost for a construction project. Dr. Taylor indicated that January 1, 2018 would be a possible date.

Commissioner Munn-Goins inquired regarding consolidation. Dr. Taylor stated that Booker T. Washington School would not be utilized in the 2018-19 school year. Fifth grade students would attend Clarkton School of Discovery; K-4 students would attend either East Arcadia or Elizabethtown Primary, dependent upon their home location. East Arcadia middle school students would relocate to either Elizabethtown Middle School or Clarkton School of Discovery.

Commissioner Munn-Goins inquired regarding other smaller projects such as field houses, and multi-purpose buildings. She reminded Dr. Taylor that she had asked for those smaller projects to be removed from the larger capital project in order to reduce potential debt service on those types of projects. Dr. Taylor indicated that he would remove those projects from the construction estimates for a new facility, which he anticipates to be able to present in January 2018. He also stated that since a \$15 million grant is possible, construction of a K-8 building could be accelerated to take advantage of a grant cycle. He stated that at a prior meeting, the grant had not yet been announced in its current form. The application indicates that a potential project could be considered from the time of pre-planning to a shovel-ready project.

Commissioner Britt requested clarification for plans for the Clarkton community. Dr. Taylor stated that the Clarkton School of Discovery would remain as a 5th – 8th grade school. It is currently a 6-8 grade facility. He stated that Project Challenge would also remain at the Clarkton School of Discovery.

Commissioner Trivette inquired regarding the estimated cost of a K-8 building. Dr. Taylor indicated his anticipation of spending approximately \$25 million to complete a K-8 facility, which includes land acquisition, furniture and technology. For purposes of a project budget, Dr. Taylor indicated that approximately \$20,000 per acre is an estimate. Contingency items could increase the project cost. Dr. Taylor stated that if the project is constructed for a total of \$25 million with a successful grant application, the County's investment would be \$10 million.

Commissioner Dowless inquired regarding plans for closed school facilities. Dr. Taylor stated that they would be repurposed; such as a preschool center and an educational resource center to be used for training or meeting space. Citizens adjacent to Booker T. Washington School have requested a portion of the facility to be donated for community use. Commissioner Dowless inquired regarding Plain View and Tar Heel schools. Dr. Taylor indicated that the community has shown interest in the Plain View facility.

Commissioner Cogdell inquired regarding renovations to existing facilities, instead of building a new facility; and from where the capital outlay funds may come. Dr. Taylor indicated that renovations would be more expensive than constructing a new facility. Dr. Taylor indicated that within the next 4-5 years, roofing projects for several existing schools would be a priority.

Commissioner Bullock inquired regarding the retirement of debt on the existing high schools. Mr. Martin stated that it would be retired in 2021.

Chairman Peterson inquired regarding funds to renovate Clarkton School of Discovery facility. Dr. Taylor indicated that there are no funds proposed to renovate the facility in Clarkton. However, there are capital outlay funds available for a renovation project through the NC Education Lottery Fund proceeds (approximately \$1.3 million) and appropriated County capital outlay funds (approximately \$1.4 million of which \$900,000 is used to for debt service on the existing high schools).

Commissioner Cogdell asked for clarification regarding the \$15 million grant opportunity. He stated that his understanding is that the program would allow for grant funds to be utilized for renovations of existing facilities. Dr. Taylor

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indicated that terminology had changed to include new construction only. Commissioner Cogdell asked about a multi-purpose building project at Elizabethtown Primary. Dr. Taylor indicated that a project such as that could be considered new construction and could be a grant project.

Chairman Peterson stated that a grant application would not guarantee an award of \$15 million.

Commissioner Munn-Goins inquired regarding other schools in the county which may require renovations. Dr. Taylor stated that it would be critical to prioritize renovation projects and to perform proper maintenance. He stated that funding would be needed to properly maintain school facilities.

Chairman Peterson addressed concern regarding declining enrollment in Bladen County public schools. Dr. Taylor indicated that the Tar Heel and Plain View schools' enrollment has increased. He indicated that with the introduction of a new charter school in the area, reduction in enrollment estimates were consistent. However, an unknown was the number of kindergarten students who may enroll at a charter school. He indicated that a construction project in the Tar Heel area would serve Bladen County schools for a number of years, providing options for realignment and possible redistricting. Dr. Taylor also provided information regarding a possible realignment of staff if enrollment declines beyond what is expected. He stated that he had discussed this possibility with principals during a summer conference.

Chairman Peterson asked for clarification regarding the closing of schools. Dr. Taylor stated that two consolidation plans were presented; Plan A and Plan B. Plan B included the cost of two new school facilities.

Commissioner Cogdell again inquired regarding the best plan to consolidate in order to reduce the number of facilities to maintain, and what's the most feasible plan to consolidate. Dr. Taylor stated that it is a multilayered issue. He stated that reduction of personnel would be a cost-cutting measure if consolidation was accomplished. He stated that it would not be an easy process, with communities not wanting to lose community schools.

Commissioner Britt stated that enrollment deterioration is a major concern, especially with a high number of facilities to maintain throughout the County. He stated that he personally would not consider a tax increase to continue to maintain numerous facilities. Dr. Taylor indicated his agreement and understanding of Commissioner Britt's sentiments as well.

Commissioner Bullock shared his perspective of all of this conversation was all conjecture. He asked if it would be prudent to address these issues when more details are available, with valid estimates of consolidation and new construction budgets and updated enrollment projections.

Commissioner Munn-Goins stated that she would like to have a plan presented which would address all of the county schools, whether it be renovation of current facilities, new construction and how the plan would all work together to benefit the children of the county.

Commissioner Trivette stated that she sees that this is a very personal situation for a number of people. She shared her opinion to hold community forums in communities to allow for discussion.

Commissioner Britt stated that he would not want to miss out on a chance of a \$15 million grant opportunity.

Commissioner Cogdell shared his understanding that the Board of Education has voted to approve a consolidation plan. He stated that the Board of County Commissioners does not have the responsibility of deciding where to build a new school. The responsibility of the Board of County Commissioners is to provide funding for a project. The Board of Education's responsibility is to work within the budget provided.

Chairman Peterson reiterated Commissioner Munn-Goins statement earlier regarding an overall plan for the entire county, and how it would work together to provide the best situation for Bladen County students. He again stated that the grant application is not guaranteed. He asked for a prioritized list of needs within the school system.

Dr. Taylor indicated that the Tar Heel area has plenty of school age children to support a new facility in the community.

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Dr. Taylor reviewed the Board of Education approved proposal, which includes a new facility K-8 facility in Tar Heel, realignment of grades throughout the county, and closure of Booker T. Washington School. The Board of Education met during a summer workshop and determined to revise the current plan to include a second new K-8 facility as an option.

Chairman Peterson asked Dr. Taylor to provide a prioritized listing as quickly as possible to provide adequate consideration of plans.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Bullock, seconded by Commissioner Dowless, the meeting was adjourned at 5:35pm.

ATTEST:

Maria C. Edwards, Clerk to the Board

Charles R. Peterson, Chairman