

**SOUTHERN COLUMBIA AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT  
800 SOUTHERN DRIVE  
CATAWISSA, PA 17820**

The August 25, 2008, Special Board Meeting of the Southern Columbia Area School District Board of Directors convened in the High School Library at 7:05 p.m. with President Michael Yeager in charge of the meeting.

The Pledge of Allegiance was said by all.

President Yeager welcomed everyone, followed by a roll call of Board Members.

**BOARD MEMBERS**

Timothy Benner

Charles Porter

Thomas Slusser (*Absent*)

Paul Starr

Richard Steele (*Departed 9:22 pm*)

David Stellfox

Timothy Vought (*Absent*)

Michael Yeager

John Yocum

**OTHERS PRESENT**

Charles Reh, Superintendent; Daniel Rodgers, Business Manager; Tresa Britch, Board Secretary; Joseph Shirvinski, Roger Nunkester, James Becker and Robert Mehalick, Administrators; district residents and members of the media.

**AGENDA HEARING PERIOD**

President Yeager announced that all items on the agenda would be action items.

**SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT**

Mr. Reh's report included the following topics:

1.) The Mobile Ag Lab will be on campus from May 26 through May 29, 2009. Students in 4<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade will participate. Teachers will go through in-service training on one of the Act 80 days.

2.) Foreign exchange students that are accepted in the district have been through the Rotary organization. There have been other organizations that have placed foreign exchange students, but there have been some issues with those students. Some of the students had already graduated in their home country and came to the United States for an additional year of school. Mr. Reh also stated that agencies should apply well in advance of the beginning of the school year to allow time to research the agency. There was some discussion as to whether or not the district is required to accept a foreign exchange student if they are living in the district. Mr. Becker agreed to research the issue and provide an answer at the next board meeting.

3.) Mr. Reh reported that he received letters from several of the bus drivers that were present at the meeting. Joanne B. Stine, John Cronrath, Peggy Mattivi and Kathleen Grassley have written letters stating that there was a gentlemen's agreement that several drivers were allowed to take their buses to their homes and that arrangement would remain in effect until the drivers resigned or retired. Mr. Rodgers was given a directive from the Board to have the drivers return the buses to the district. Mr. Rodgers contacted the insurance carrier and he was informed that the buses would be covered in the event of an accident, but the insurance carrier strongly recommends that the practice not continue. They also noted that if the district continues to allow drivers to take the buses to their homes, it would have an adverse effect on the district's insurance premium. Mr. Rodgers noted that there was more than one directive given to the Business Office to cease this practice; one directive was given at the Finance/Facilities Committee meeting on September 6, 2007, and one was given at the November 8, 2007, meeting.

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At that time he spoke to Mrs. Pheasant regarding the feasibility of making the change effective January 1, 2008. They felt that it would be difficult to make the change mid-year due to changing bus runs and scheduled pick-up and drop-off times. That is why the change was made effective the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year. Mr. Stellfox asked when the bus drivers were notified of the change. Mr. Rodgers stated that the drivers were notified about two weeks ago. The drivers stated that Mrs. Pheasant did not inform the drivers. They said that they had to ask about it at the drivers meeting. Several of the drivers stated that their runs were set up to save mileage and now they have been changed. They stated that they have been doing it for twenty-five years and did not understand why it was being changed now. President Yeager stated that he was under the impression that the practice had been discontinued in the spring. He was not aware that drivers were still taking the buses to their homes.

Mr. Stellfox stated that since it was a directive from the Board, it had to be carried out, however it could be revisited if necessary. The drivers were instructed to attend the next Facilities/Finance Committee meeting on Thursday, August 4<sup>th</sup>. They agreed to begin the meeting at 6:00 p.m. because of the lengthy agenda. The meeting location would be changed from the District Office to the High School Library.

### ITEMS – FISCAL

On a motion by Starr and second by Benner, the following items were presented for approval:

- A. To contract with Pioneer Pole Buildings, Schuylkill Haven, PA; in the amount of \$9,840.00 for the construction of a shelter for the lower athletic fields.
- B. To contract with G. S. Edwards, Inc., Orangeville, PA; in the amount of \$7,370.00 for the construction of a practice athletic field.

Prior to voting, Mr. Stellfox asked for the completion date of the projects. Mr. Rodgers replied that Pioneer Pole Buildings stated that they are could have it completed two to three weeks after the permit is approved. Mr. Stellfox asked to be informed via the Friday Letter when the permit is received. Mr. Porter asked the amounts of the other quotes for the building. Mr. Rodgers replied that for the pavilion, Randall Barns and Garages was \$9,950.00 and Robert Winn Construction was \$14,400.00. The motion carried by unanimous affirmative voice vote.

### PROPOSED BUILDING PROJECT DISCUSSION

Mr. Reh reported that the architects met with the building principals on Thursday. They discussed each building and set priorities. Mr. Shirvinski stated that his main priority was the health suite. He felt that if 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades would be moved to the middle school, the majority of the problems pertaining to available space would be solved. The current cafeteria/ gymnasium would suffice.

Mr. Nunkester felt by looking at the floor plan of the draft feasibility study, at least two of the rooms could be eliminated. Mr. Mehalick pointed out that because of inclusion, one of the rooms could be divided in half. There is a definite need for a correction to the Middle School administration and guidance office.

Mr. Becker felt that the addition to the science lab could be eliminated and the band and music area being renovated could be used for storage instead of a classroom. Mr. Becker stated that the band classroom renovation would be very costly and the cost seemed to outweigh the

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benefits. A recommendation of the architects was to move the gymnasium over near the existing gymnasium and share the locker rooms. The gym would also be reduced to 1,000 seats in lieu of 1,500 seats. The weight room and athletic director's office would also be eliminated.

Mr. Reh noted that it would be most beneficial to the district to bring the special education students back to the district. Having a true middle school with grades 5 through 8 in one building would not only make a sound education facility for a middle school, but would also solve the space issues in the elementary. He noted that there are a lot of tough decisions to be made. Mr. Stellfox stated that the only way to make the project fit budget is by eliminating programs. Eliminating a few rooms or reducing the number of seats in a gymnasium is not going to make a huge difference. Mr. Porter stated that the genesis of the project was that the Board had figures put before them for special education classes. It was presented that if the district brings its special education students back, it could break even, however only variable costs were presented. The fixed costs were not included. Another reason given was potential law suits, so why not bring all special education students back; not just a particular group. Mr. Mehalick explained that IDEA, which is the federal law that oversees special education, requires that students be taught in the least restrictive environment. Life Skills and Emotionally Disturbed students are being taught outside of the district for no other reason than space. Mr. Porter stated that he would hope that students are placed out of the district because they receive better services than can be provided within the district. Mr. Mehalick stated that he could not say that other districts have better teachers than Southern Columbia. He also added that the district has a very small percentage of multi-handicapped students and it would not be feasible to have a classroom for two students. He would hope that a parent would recognize that a child would benefit from being in a classroom with several other students. Mr. Porter asked him how many special education classrooms would be needed. Mr. Mehalick replied that they have already brought back one Life Skills classroom. He pointed out that it was a wonderful experience to see those students back in the district. At some point, an additional Life Skills class and two Emotional Support classrooms would be needed. Mr. Porter asked if four additional classrooms could alleviate some of the problems they saw in the elementary school. Mr. Mehalick replied negatively. He stated that it would be an initiative to bring those students back into the district. He stated that they did not see overcrowding because of those classrooms. What they may have seen or heard was that the district has some very confidential services being provided in wide open areas. Mr. Yocum stated that our special education rate is higher than the state average. He asked if Mr. Mehalick foresees those numbers coming down. Mr. Mehalick stated that the state average is 12 percent and the district is at 19 percent special needs. He is cautious because they have not seen the spike in the Autistic population that is being seen elsewhere. They are watching very carefully how they are identifying students. Mr. Steele stated that the district has an obligation to child find. Mr. Shirvinski stated that they exhaust every possibility before a student is sent on for testing.

Mr. Porter asked if the board and administration is getting caught up in nomenclature by trying to make a middle school. Mr. Nunkester addressed the question by stating that the bell schedules and teacher conferences are just some of the issues. Mr. Porter asked if the parameters could be changed from K-5 and 6-8. President Yeager stated that they would not be gaining much because three of the classrooms are not handicapped accessible and should not be used. Mr. Shirvinski stated that when the Middle School addition was built, he was a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and it was quite difficult to develop a middle school concept with the grades divided.

Mr. Stellfox is not convinced that just by moving 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades to the other building that it is going to solve all of the problems in the elementary. Mr. Nunkester stated that he spent

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a significant amount of time with the Life Skills students and he said he was so proud of how the other students treated the Life Skills students. He stated that he could only imagine what could be done if all of the middle school students could be under one roof. He said that the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers teach totally different than the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers because of the division. He noted that middle school students are so different because they are transitioning between elementary and high school.

Mr. Stellfox stated that the principals are not asking for one thing they shouldn't have, but the district can't afford it. Mr. Reh stated that he is making recommendations to make corrections and improvements to alleviate major problems in the future. Mr. Becker stated that he was Middle School Principal when they discussed the last middle school project and he went around the school and made a video of students being taught in the hallways. Title I students who are struggling with reading are being taught in the hallways and are distracted when classes are walking through the halls. He stated that in his opinion, the district has not done things right for many years. He emphasized that they really need to do this project the right way.

Mr. Yeager asked if renovating the current elementary gymnasium would suffice. Mr. Stellfox stated that it would not be cost effective because of having to tear out walls. Mr. Reh stated that the elementary gym is okay for K-4 use, but it is not designed for high school competition.

Mr. Yocum stated that in the feasibility study, it states that in the next several years the mechanical systems are going to cost the district about \$8 million and that needs to be taken into consideration. Mr. Rodgers explained that he was almost positive that the cost of the total project does include the mechanical systems improvements. Mr. Stellfox agreed.

President Yeager stated that he has only been on the board for about four years and they have been changing things that had been done within the last ten years. Mr. Stellfox stated that the Board needs to decide if they want the project to go to referendum. Mr. Steele asked what the maximum amount would be before going to referendum. Mr. Rodgers stated that there is one wildcard to the entire financial analysis and that is the percentage of the project that would be special education related and that would qualify for any exception under referendum. The district's current debt outstanding is almost \$4.2 million. The gross annual debt service that is budgeted every year is \$700,000 to pay off that \$4.2 million. The net annual debt service total is \$630,000 after reimbursement from the state. The mills that are allocated to fund the current debt are approximately 3.5 mills. The district's debt structure is very good. The district is aggressively paying down its debt. The district is in a very good position for borrowing power. If the district were to do a \$15.3 million total project, it would take the debt outstanding to \$19.5 million. The gross annual debt service to pay off that \$19.5 million over 30 years at a fixed rate would be \$1.2 million. The net annual debt service would be a little over \$1 million. The mills allocated would be 5.7, which is a difference of 2.2 mills from the current 3.5. Based on historical data under Act 1, this \$15.3 million project would not need to go to referendum. All of the money raised from the tax increase would go toward paying off the debt. If the district went with a \$20.4 million project, it would take the total outstanding debt to \$24.5 million; gross annual debt service to \$1.5 million; net annual debt service to approximately \$1.3 million, which equates to 7.4 mills for a difference of 3.9 mills. This project would require referendum if no special education exceptions would be applied for. A \$28.5 million project would result in total outstanding debt of \$32 million; net annual debt service of \$1.8 million, which results in 9.9 mills allocated to pay off the \$1.8 million debt, which is an increase of 6.4 mills from the current 3.5. Special Education exceptions under Act 1 are based solely on square footage in terms of a building project. Any square footage of a building project designated for special education

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would qualify under an Act 1 special education exception. The district would still need to raise taxes to pay off the debt, however referendum would not be required if a large enough portion of the entire project would be for special education purposes.

Mr. Rodgers stated that he invited Brian Bradley of RBC Capital Markets to attend the September 4<sup>th</sup> Facilities/Finance Committee meeting. The Pennsylvania Department of Education will reimburse for up to 10 percent of growth. Mr. Rodgers stated that the mill increase could be phased in over several years. He noted that there are a lot of options available.

Mr. Stellfox stated that he is not sure that he wants to give up on the gymnasium by the auditorium with the dual purpose lobby. He feels it would be money well spent. He would like the architects to take another look at that option.

Mr. Rodgers thanked the Board for their support with the bus issue. He noted that they have been strongly advised by Sue Middelswarth of the Insurance Shoppe against continuing the practice of allowing drivers to take the buses to their homes. Mr. Stellfox stated that if the decision was made several months ago regarding the bus drivers, it should have been announced at a public Board meeting.

**BOARD COMMENTS**

**RECOGNITION OF THE PUBLIC**

**ADJOURNMENT**

On a motion by Stellfox and second by Benner, the meeting was adjourned at 9:30 p.m. The motion carried by unanimous affirmative voice vote.

Respectfully Submitted,

Tresa J. Britch  
Board Secretary