



City of Richmond

900 East Broad Street
Richmond, VA 23219
www.rva.gov/office-city-clerk

Minutes

Education and Human Services Standing Committee Special Meeting

Thursday, April 22, 2021

2:00 PM

Council Chamber, 2nd Floor – Virtual Meeting

Committee Members and Staff in Attendance

The Honorable Stephanie Lynch – Chair
The Honorable Ellen Robertson – Vice Chair
The Honorable Katherine Jordan – Committee Member
The Honorable Cynthia Newbille – Alternate Member (late arrival and early departure)
The Honorable Ann-Frances Lambert – Councilmember (early departure)

Haskell Brown, Interim City Attorney
Joyce Davis, Interim Council Chief of Staff
Candice Reid, City Clerk
Dominique J. Thaxton, Assistant City Clerk

Call to Order

Chair Stephanie Lynch called the meeting to order at 2:01 p.m., and presided.

Electronic Meeting Announcement

Assistant City Clerk Dominique J. Thaxton, in accordance with Ordinance No. 2020-093, adopted April 9, 2020, as most recently amended by Ordinance No. 2020-232, adopted December 14, 2020, announced the meeting would be held through electronic communication means. Assistant City Clerk Thaxton stated notice of the meeting was provided to the public through a public information advisory issued on April 20, 2021, and through Legistar on the city website in accordance with usual practice. She also stated there would be no opportunities for public comment and no public hearings during the meeting.

Alternate Member Cynthia Newbille joined the meeting at 2:02 p.m.

Discussion Items

Richmond Public School Board's Resolution to Oversee the Construction of New Schools and Next Steps for the Construction of the New George Wythe High School

Chair Stephanie Lynch led the committee in a discussion regarding the impact of the Richmond Public School Board's resolution to oversee the construction of new schools.

Jason Kamras, Superintendent of Richmond Public Schools (RPS), provided an overview of the next steps for the construction of the new George Wythe High School and plans for a grand opening in the fall of 2024. Mr. Kamras also shared information on how the School Board resolution to oversee the construction of new schools, adopted April 12, 2021, will significantly impact the timeline for the opening of the new George Wythe High School.

Chair Lynch expressed concern that the School Board resolution, adopted April 12, 2021, did not allow for community input or a thorough examination of how current construction projects would be impacted. Chair Lynch inquired if there is any way that the construction of the new George Wythe High School could maintain the grand opening timeline of fall of 2024 under the School Board's oversight.

Superintendent Kamras advised that due to a lack of operational capacity, the School Board cannot meet the administration's timeline for opening the new George Wythe High School by fall of 2024. Mr. Kamras stated that the School Board rejected the option for the city to maintain oversight of the George Wythe High School construction project and for the School Board to take over any future projects.

Vice Chair Ellen Robertson stated the importance of continued collaboration between the School Board and the city. Vice Chair Robertson asked for further information on the School Board's rationale for removing city oversight on the construction of new schools.

Cheryl Burke, Chair of the Richmond Public School Board, shared that the School Board has not expressly stated the reason for the resolution to remove city oversight of new school construction. Ms. Burke provided information on the collaborative weekly meetings of the Joint Construction Team, comprised of the administration, School Board and the RPS superintendent.

Vice Chair Robertson expressed that the decision to delay the timeline for the development of the new George Wythe High School is not in the best interest of the city or the resources already expended on the project thus far. Vice Chair Robertson asked for an analysis of the additional burden of cost that the delay of new construction will bring to tax payers. Ms. Robertson also asked if the School Board has a plan that would minimize the financial burden of transferring new construction oversight to the School Board.

Ms. Burke suggested a meeting between the School Board, the administration and Council to discuss a path forward with continued collaboration.

Member Katherine Jordan stated that ORD. 2018-140, adopted May 14, 2018, raised the percentage of the meals tax to provide allocated funds to RPS for the purpose of school renovation and construction. Member Jordan expressed concern for changing the oversight of the construction of the new George Wythe High School so far into the construction process.

Chair Lynch shared that the change of construction oversight will result in a delayed opening of the new George Wythe High School until fall of 2027, rather than the initial opening goal of fall of 2024. Chair Lynch provided information on the various factors of procurement and necessary Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) approval that will cause the delay in opening. Chair Lynch discussed that the request for proposals (RFP) and community input on the design of the new George Wythe High School were slated to be released in late spring of 2021.

Councilor Ann-Frances Lambert inquired if the School Board and the VDOE have a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in place regarding operations, and if the School Board needs VDOE approval before proceeding with oversight of new school construction.

Ms. Burke shared that there is an existing MoU between the School Board and the VDOE, and that the VDOE must approve any new staff positions for the School Board.

Vice Chair Robertson inquired if the city is legally required to ask permission from the School Board to build new schools moving forward.

Michelle Hudacsko, Richmond Public School Board Chief of Staff, provided information on instances of Virginia school divisions overseeing the construction and design of new schools. Ms. Hudacsko shared that the building of a new construction team for the School Board would require the reallocation of limited RPS resources. Ms. Hudacsko expanded that in surrounding localities, the

school systems do not handle general procurement and also leave the procurement for new school construction under the authority of the county.

Ms. Burke expressed concern for the impact that the policy shift will have on reallocating resources away from program initiatives aimed at assisting students during the transition back to in-person learning.

Member Katherine Jordan asked if City Council is required to accept the school construction policy change being that the RPS budget proposal has been submitted.

Haskell Brown, Interim City Attorney, shared that per Virginia Code § 22.1-79, the School Board has control over school properties, even if the city holds the deeds of said school properties. Mr. Brown advised that the School Board has autonomy on how they spend their budget and that Council has a very limited scope of regulatory power.

Ms. Hudacsko provided clarification that the VDOE does not approve the creation of positions within the School Board but only approves job descriptions and the candidates for certain levels of positions.

Betty Burrell, Department of Procurement Services Director, provided an overview of the professional design services RFP prepared for the new George Wythe High School. Ms. Burrell shared that the School Board cannot simply transfer the existing city RFP for use in their own procurement process.

Nicole Jones, 9th District Richmond Public School Board Representative, shared information on the next steps that the School Board would have to take for procuring new school construction.

Chair Lynch stated the importance of the procurement and operations expertise needed for the successful transfer of construction oversight to the School Board. Chair Lynch inquired if there are subject matter experts on staff with the School Board that are able to undertake procurement and operation of new school construction.

Alternate Member Cynthia Newbille departed the meeting at 2:57 p.m.

Ms. Hudacsko stated that presently, the School Board does not have the organizational structure or positions for procurement and building operations of new school construction in place.

Member Jordan inquired if the School Board would consider passing a resolution to proceed with the RFP and construction for George Wythe High School under the city, and then transfer the oversight of any subsequent new school construction under the School Board.

Ms. Burke stated that the approach to proceed with the city oversight of the new George Wythe High School was rejected by the School Board.

Vice Chair Ellen Robertson stated that the next step is to determine the most meaningful methods for collaboration between the city and the School Board. Vice Chair Robertson suggested that Council meet with the VDOE to protect the city's revenue investments in the construction and operation of new schools. Vice Chair Robertson asked that Council send a letter to the School Board, outlining the tax payer investments made thus far toward new school construction and expectations for a collaborative path forward.

Chair Lynch requested that the administration schedule an Education Compact meeting to further discuss a collaborative path forward.

Bob Steidel, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer of Operations, provided information on the status of the current RFP and operational progress for the construction of the new George Wythe High School.

Chair Lynch shared the desire to address concerns that led up to the School Board's decision to oversee new school construction.

Mr. Steidel stated that the City Auditor's report on capital improvement projects released in December 2020, included a review of the school construction projects.

Chair Lynch expressed concern for the lack of community input in the policy decision made by the School Board and the students of George Wythe High School who face another delay in the delivery of a new school.

Councilor Ann-Frances Lambert departed the meeting at 3:27 p.m.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 3:31 p.m.