



City of Richmond

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

Special Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, March 22, 2022

6:00 PM

Main Library - 101 East Franklin Street,
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Special Meeting

Councilmembers Present

The Honorable Cynthia Newbille, President
The Honorable Ellen Robertson, Vice President (late arrival)
The Honorable Andreas Addison
The Honorable Katherine Jordan
The Honorable Ann Frances Lambert (early departure)
The Honorable Kristen Nye
The Honorable Stephanie Lynch
The Honorable Reva Trammell (late arrival and early departure)

School Board Members Present

Shonda Harris-Muhammed, Chair
Kenya Gibson, Vice Chair (early departure)
Mariah White
Jonathan Young
Stephanie Rizzi
Cheryl Burke (early departure)
Dawn Page
Nicole Jones

Absent

The Honorable Michael Jones
Elizabeth Doerr

Staff

Haskell Brown, Interim City Attorney
Jason Kamras, Superintendent
Jonnell Lilly, School Board Attorney
Candice Reid, City Clerk
Patrece Richardson, School Board Clerk
RJ Warren, Deputy City Clerk

Call to Order

Council President Cynthia Newbille called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m., and presided.

Emergency Evacuation Plan Announcement

Upon the President's request, City Clerk Candice Reid provided information on the appropriate manner in which the auditorium is to be evacuated in the event of an emergency.

Discussion Item

New George Wythe High School

President Cynthia Newbille welcomed members of Richmond City Council and Richmond School Board, and she provided an overview of the current situation regarding the construction of a new George Wythe High School.

Chair Shonda Harris-Muhammed also welcomed participants to the meeting.

President Newbille addressed the capacity of the proposed George Wythe High School, and stated that the current plans by the School Board directed a capacity of 1,600 students. President Newbille noted that census data indicated that a larger capacity might be necessary.

Member Jonathan Young stated that Richmond Public Schools (RPS) recently provided attendance data to the state that indicated 1,300 students were attending George Wythe High School in September 2021. Mr. Young also stated that during a school rezoning process in 2019, consultant Cropper GIS estimated student growth at George Wythe High School to reach 1,500 students by 2022. Mr. Young further stated that he believed a capacity of 1,600 students was appropriate, and he noted that the construction of a second technical high school should be considered when addressing student location and school capacity.

Councilwoman Reva Trammell arrived at 6:11 p.m. and was seated.

Councilor Kristen Nye inquired if the School Board considered the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic into its consideration of school capacity.

Councilor Stephanie Lynch stated her concerns with the proposed 1,600 student capacity, and she noted that River City Middle School was currently at capacity. Councilor Lynch also stated that she was concerned, because she did not believe that the impact on students was considered when the capacity was decided.

Vice President Ellen Robertson arrived at 6:20 p.m. and was seated.

Member Stephanie Rizzi stated her concerns with the city's ability to staff a high school that could accommodate 2,000 students. Member Rizzi also stated that she believed students received a better education when attending a small school environment.

Member Dawn Page stated that she believed the proposed technical high school should not be considered when addressing the capacity of George Wythe High School, because the two high schools would not be providing the same learning environment.

Member Nicole Jones noted the staffing issues at city schools, and stated that current facilities did not provide enough classrooms for students. Ms. Jones also stated that construction efforts should just be concentrated on one high school. Ms. Jones further stated that future rezoning and relocation of students due to population growth should be avoided.

Vice Chair Kenya Gibson requested that Council adopt ORD. 2021-308, so that RPS could receive the transfer of \$7,310,391 in school construction funding, so that planning and construction of a new George Wythe High School could move forward. Vice Chair Gibson stated that the Richmond School Board passed legislation to take over the process of building new schools due to city administration building recent schools over budget.

Councilwoman Reva Trammell stated her concerns with population growth in the city's Southside. Councilwoman Trammell also stated that the cost of construction materials was continuously rising, and she requested that city leadership come to an understanding to avoid additional costs.

Member Cheryl Burke stated her concerns with the proposed 1,600 capacity. Ms. Burke also stated that the growing population of the Black and Hispanic communities in the city's Southside should be taken into account. Ms. Burke further stated that parents in the city's Southside were worried about their children getting rezoned to different parts of the city to accommodate capacity.

President Cynthia Newbille stated that she supported the idea of schools building schools. President Newbille also stated that City Council had a responsibility to do its due diligence in reviewing the financial aspects of school construction and its impact on residents.

Councilor Kristen Nye stated that the RPS funding transfer request referenced in ORD. 2021-308 was procedural in nature, and that Council should not delay the transfer request. Councilor Nye requested that Council adopt ORD. 2021-308, so that RPS could move forward with construction.

Councilor Andreas Addison stated that Council made the difficult decision to increase the city's meal tax in order to fund future school construction. Councilor Addison also stated that due to that decision, Council had the right to examine the RPS's plans for new construction. Councilor Addison further stated his concerns with the proposed 1,600 student capacity for the new George Wythe High School, and he added that he did not believe the proposed project adhered to the Richmond 300 Master Plan.

Member Mariah White stated that she did not believe the last school rezoning was conducted correctly. Ms. White also stated that a correct rezoning was necessary, and she added that she believed population growth was occurring throughout the city, and not just in the Southside.

Councilwoman Reva Trammell left the meeting at 7:11 p.m.

Member Jonathan Young stated that the addition of 400 students to the proposed George Wythe High School's capacity would cost an additional \$16,000,000. Mr. Young also stated that he believed the proposed 1,600 student capacity was correct, and that RPS needed to begin construction so that efforts for planning construction of other schools in the city could proceed.

Councilor Stephanie Lynch stated that she did not believe the School Board was taken recent census data into consideration when deciding school capacity.

Vice Chair Kenya Gibson left the meeting at 7:17 p.m.

Vice President Ellen Robertson stated it was the duty of Council and School Board leadership to ensure a proper education for the city's youth. Vice President Robertson referenced the city's real estate tax rate, and also stated that Council had a responsibility to review the use of tax revenue for school construction. Vice President Robertson further stated that it was time to build a new George Wythe High School, and she requested that leadership from Council and School Board reach an understanding. Vice President Robertson suggested that a school capacity of 1,800 students be considered as a compromise amongst the concerned parties.

Councilor Kristen Nye stated her opposition to any requirement that the School Board be required to amend construction plans to accommodate 1,800 students before Council adopts ORD. 2021-308.

President Cynthia Newbille stated she wanted to clarify that Council was not insisting on a 1,800 student capacity compromise prior to the adoption of ORD. 2021-308. President Newbille also stated Council was only requesting that the School Board have additional conversations regarding the potential change to student capacity.

Chair Shonda Harris-Muhammed stated that the School Board would ultimately make the final decision on school capacity and construction. Chair Harris-Muhammed also stated that the School Board would consider Council's request, but added that no guarantees regarding capacity changes could be made.

President Newbille inquired about a possible timeline for the construction of a new George Wythe High School.

Member Jonathan Young stated that he believed school construction would be underway if Council had not delayed its consideration of ORD. 2021-308.

Councilor Andreas Addison stated that he believed school construction impacted the entire city; therefore, decisions regarding construction should not be left to just the School Board.

President Newbille stated that she believed there were opportunities still to be explored regarding collaboration between Council and School Board.

Councilor Katherine Jordan stated that she believed George Wythe High School construction would be underway if the School Board had not taken control over school construction, which had previously been the responsibility of city administration.

Member Nicole Jones stated her frustrations with School Board's ability to collaborate. Ms. Jones also stated she was concerned that members were not talking productively to one another. Ms. Jones further stated her concerns with the School Board's ability to move forward on additional school construction, if agreements could not be reached regarding a new George Wythe High School.

Member Stephanie Rizzi stated she believed it was important for School Board members to be present to hear City Council's concerns. Member Rizzi also stated that RPS was ready to move forward with construction, but it was waiting on Council to approve the requested fund transfer referenced in ORD. 2021-308.

Councilor Ann-Frances Lambert left the meeting at 7:57 p.m.

Member Cheryl Burke left the meeting at 7:57 p.m.

President Cynthia Newbille stated it was important that Council and School Board members had the conversation that evening.

Chair Shonda Harris-Muhammad stated she agreed that the conversation was necessary and that it was important that Council and School Board come together to discuss such an impactful issue for the city.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 8:00 p.m.