

January 7, 2022

Berlin City Council, Interim City Manager, Pamela LaFlamme, Mayor Paul Grenier
168 Main Street
Berlin, NH 03570

Re: January 3rd Meeting comments by Peter Higbee re: Brown School repurposing decision

Dear Mayor Grenier, Ms. LaFlamme and City Council Representatives;

This letter is in response to Peter Higbee's angry rant that ended the recent City Council meeting with an ugly tone. Several people, including other council members, attempted to speak following his outburst, and all were shut down, as the meeting was adjourned abruptly.

This behavior is exactly what is creating the problem we are facing with the Brown School decision. Councilor Higbee scolded those who disagree with the proposal the Brown School Subcommittee had brought forth. For this subcommittee to have worked for over two years without informing or involving the taxpayers was remiss. Further, the subcommittee is not represented on the city website, nor were their agendas, meeting schedule, or minutes made available. When the Jefferson Elementary School became vacant and was offered to the town by the school district, the Board of Selectmen mailed out surveys to every resident requesting their input on potential future uses. There was a clear attempt to solicit public opinion on how the community wanted to repurpose their school. Berlin also should have involved its citizens because it was the right thing to do.

Instead, no one knew the school was even being sold until the Daily Sun published an article stating that the City had selected a developer and entered into an agreement, pending approval vote. Many people do not understand why no sale of this valued school building was attempted, and the initial and second attempt to seek a new owner/developer was through a Request for Proposal (RFP). As recently as July of 2021, Councilor Higbee was quoted at a Council meeting stating that the Brown School neighborhood did not want a low-income housing project to replace the school, and now he is claiming the reverse. When and why did the people of that neighborhood change their mind?

Under the new law requiring all New Hampshire charter schools be allowed 60 days from notification of the contract to sell the Brown School building for \$1.00 to match that offer, this proposal could ultimately result in a charter school taking possession of the school with no requirement to pay any more than \$1.00. No tax dollars at all will be coming to the city if that occurs. Had this been managed differently and offered for sale on the open commercial real estate market, a charter or private school, developer or other organization, would likely have paid a fair price for the building assessed at \$1.2 million. Just this week Colebrook Academy was listed for sale with a real estate broker for \$1,150,000. We believe the only financially responsible decision the city can make now is to postpone the agreement with NEFH and attempt to sell this school building properly.

Additionally, we are curious if the subcommittee and council considered repurposing the Brown School as the City Hall and Berlin Police Department offices. This would eliminate climbing so many stairs (difficult access) for the older and less ambulatory people of Berlin and allow for ample parking. Any unused space could be leased to other organizations or used as community conference/meeting rooms, recreation areas, etc. The existing City Hall could then be sold or repurposed as residential apartments.

As taxpayers and voting residents of Berlin we look forward to more public notice regarding Brown School and all topics that come before council and hope to count on there being no repeat of Monday, January 3, when I and my fellow citizens were disrespected. The people who attend City Council meetings to learn and to voice their concerns do not deserve to be shouted at and silenced.

Sincerely,

Kathy & John Trumbull
348 First Avenue
Berlin, NH 03570