

City Council Work Session
April 30, 2018

Present were: Mayor Grenier, Councilors Otis, Theberge, Gentili, Remillard, Rozek, Morgan Allain, Nelson and Higbee

Others present: City Manager Jim Wheeler, City Clerk Elaine Riendeau, Community Development Director Pamela Laflamme, School Board members: Nicole Plourde, Scott Losier, Louise Valliere, School Superintendent Corinne Cascadden, School Business Administrator Bryan Lamirande, Planning Board Member Naomi Levesque, MRI Past President Don Jutton, Dave Griffin, Guy Stever and Destination Imagination Team members, Kelsey Alimandi, Briana Bergeron, Joshua Berthiaume, Alexis Griffin, Julia Belanger, Mr. Cornish, WMCC President Dr. Chuck Lloyd, Rachelle Gilcris, Ed McCormick, Barbara Tetreault *Berlin Daily Sun*, several teachers and public

Mayor Grenier called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

Mayor Grenier asked to add a discussion of budget dates to the agenda. Councilor Higbee moved with a second from Councilor Theberge to add the item. So moved, the motion carried.

Mayor Grenier introduced and noted that Dr. Chuck Lloyd, President of the White Mountains Community College is in the audience.

Destination Imagination

Kelsey Alimandi, explained that the team starts in September and they have been working on their project since then. They won first place at Regionals and second at States which qualifies them to go to Nationals. The team would love to represent Berlin by going to global finals. Briana Bergeron made the point that creative problem solving is a necessary skill to be successful when students get out of high school. Mr. Griffin mentioned that Josh Berthiaume designed a new trading pin which will be used for the NH team. Councilor Remillard moved to give \$2,500 to the Destination Imagination Team for their trip from Council Contingency; Councilor Otis seconded and the motion carried. The DI team left the meeting at this time.

SkillsUSA Welding Competition

Mr. Cornish came to represent his son, Noah. He stated that Noah has worked hard for the honor to compete in SkillsUSA. He won the gold medal in the state competition. Mr. Cornish applauded Berlin's welding program. Councilor Remillard moved to give \$1,000 for Noah Cornish and his teacher to attend the SkillsUSA competition; Councilor Higbee seconded and the motion carried.

Refining and Enhancing the Public Education Delivery System in the Greater Berlin Area – Challenges and Opportunities

Don Jutton founder and past president of Municipal Resources Inc stated that MRI has been in business for 30 years. He thanked the Council for the opportunity to work here. The report looks at the future ways to organize, manage and deliver public education. The study came to a number of conclusions.

1. Some kind of regional approach to education is inevitable due to the declining population. This translates to there being fewer students in the school system and an aging population that has less ability to pay.

2. A perceived anti- Berlin bias which may slow the process but won't prevent it. The other towns have fewer students but the same number of dollars to spend on education as Berlin.

3. Berlin has a dependent school district which means the City Council raises the funds to fund the schools through the tax rate. The conclusion is that the dependence is not a hindrance. The only scenario where it would be a hindrance is in a cooperative school district.

Mr. Jutton stated that creativity will be the solution. The perception of Berlin is different than reality. Denial and fear of change is an impediment. The entire region is sharing the same challenges. Critical mass is more of a challenge for smaller communities.

There are opportunities in that the Gorham superintendent is retiring and sharing superintendent services could be done now. He recommended looking at sharing and partnering rather than replacing staff. Every effort should be made to move toward a collaborative system. In the region, there is too much brick and mortar and not enough students.

Mr. Jutton suggested one educational leader in the valley to include high schools and the community college and one business infrastructure as well as sufficient teaching staff. There is nothing in the statutes to prevent such a format for education. The notion of high school students taking college courses to get a head start in college could become very attractive to folks from outside the area.

Area schools should be looking for opportunities to share talent such as the superintendent and sharing facilities. Look for partnering to eliminate redundancy.

Mayor Grenier asked for questions. He commented that we will have to look at delivery of education differently. Partnering with WMCC will help us all be successful and to provide sustainable education.

Dr. Lloyd stated that he sees the college as an integral partner and he stands ready to partner.

Barbara Tetreault asked about excluding the elementary schools from the change. Mr. Jutton said the reason for that is the Mother Bear Theory; the emotion that is associated with little children overwhelms any conversation. There was no educational component to not including elementary.

Ed McCormick asked what the time frame is for the steps. Mr. Jutton said we should start now. Change is very slow; there is fear and job security issues. The schools should start thinking strategically about sharing positions when there are retirements/vacancies. Part of the challenge is school facilities. Teachers are more mobile than students so they could travel between schools. He added that we should not wait for some great plan but start right away.

A member of the audience questioned the community college not accepting every student and how that would be dealt with. Mr. Jutton commented that these are man/woman made rules and those rules can be undone. It won't be easy; but it can be done.

Rachelle Gilcris commented that there has been a demand to become a highly qualified high school teacher; she questioned whether this model will hold teachers to the same standard. Mr. Jutton responded that if the standards make sense, they will be sustained. Everything will have to be sorted out. Dr. Lloyd added that there would need to be a discussion. Some of the standards are in place through NEA.

Mayor Grenier stated that we owe the children of the valley the best education that scarce dollars can deliver. If we can master a plan to develop a school system that is the envy of the state, we should take ownership and change so that we can begin the process of moving forward. Keeping schools separate is hurting the kids by not giving them the opportunities they need. We will have to look at the entire financial picture of the valley and do the best we can for our students.

Schedule for Budget

Mayor Grenier proposed a meeting for Thursday May 10 to decide on advertising the budget. Councilor Nelson moved with a second from Councilor Higbee. So moved, the motion carried. There will not be a work session Monday May 14.

Public Comments

Bryan Lamirande read a prepared a statement.

There are a great number of talented people in our communities dedicated to providing a quality educational experience in our schools. We need this talent and dedication now more than ever as we face the educational challenges set upon us in this valley. Challenges due to the loss of so many manufacturing jobs, a steady decline in area population and most recently the States' drastic, systematic reduction in education funding. I have included with this presentation a spreadsheet showing what Berlin Public Schools was receiving in 2016 and 2017 and the continued impact of a legislative reduction to state funding beginning in the 2016-17 school year. The spreadsheet shows a comparison for a household starting with a \$75,000 annual income and losing in proportion to what the state is eliminating annually from Berlins' education funding. It is important to understand that these future projections are best case scenario, as they rely on a stable student enrollment. As enrollment declines, the rate of revenue loss will accelerate. These numbers demonstrate the urgency to determine where Berlins' ability to finance education is heading.

Time is quickly running out to develop and implement a gradual plan that ultimately brings area high school students under one roof. A plan that I feel should include staff attrition and sharing services provided by remaining staff, between our two School Districts. If we can address this now, it has the greatest likelihood of producing a positive impact for everyone. Our communities expect us to develop a plan for their consideration, describing what our future educational structure could look like and how to get there. We have very capable people in both Districts to accomplish this. What we need now is commitment from all surrounding communities as to whether they want to move forward with one School District in the Androscoggin Valley.

Ed McCormick commented that there has been a lot of talk about change and it needs to happen; however people are needed to implement. With two communities making big changes, who will implement. He added his concern that he has children that will be involved in the change.

Mayor Grenier stated that this is about how to move forward. Management issues will be taken care of. Councilor Higbee commented that this study is liberating; it lets the discussion start. The problems we thought were insurmountable are not and there is a lot we can do if we decide to cooperate.

There being no further business to come before the Council, Councilor Rozek moved to adjourn;
Councilor Otis seconded and the motion carried.

Respectfully Submitted,
Susan Tremblay
Administrative Assistant

Minutes are unofficial until they have been accepted by the City Council by motion.