

# Green Mountain Unified School District Board

## Regular Meeting Minutes

Thursday, April 16, 2020

Zoom

6:00 p.m.

### I. ROLL CALL/CALL TO ORDER:

**Board:** Joe Fromberger, Jeff Hance, Doug McBride, Kate Lamphere, Michael Studin, Wayne Wheelock, Lois Perlah, Jeannie Wade, Deb Brown, Rick Alexander,

**Staff:** Lauren Fierman, Deb Beaupre, Katherine Fogg, Mike Ripley, Todd Parah, Cheryl Hammond, Sue Willis, Mary Bauerband, Meg Powden, Pam O'Neil, Amy Hamblett, Alexis Palmer, Patty Rumrill, Norm Merrill, Keith Hill, Mary Moeykens

**Student Reps:**

**Public:** Shawn Cunningham, Sharon Huntley, Fred Marin

Mr. Fromberger called the meeting to order at 6:10 p.m.

### II. APPROVE AGENDA:

Mr. Alexander questioned if the HS administration discussion can be moved to executive session.

Mr. Fromberger noted that the personnel portion will be discussed in executive session, but then will have a discussion in open session. Mr. Wheelock **moved** to approve the agenda. Ms. Perlah seconded.

Ms. Hammond asked to add discussion of the online authorization and electronic signature for the warrants under new business. The motion to approve the agenda as amended carried without opposition.

### III. APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

#### A. April 6, 2020 special meeting unapproved

Mr. Hance **moved** to approve the minutes of the April 6, 2020 meeting. The motion carried without opposition.

### IV. EXECUTIVE SESSION: TITLE I V.S.A. § 313 (a)(1)(A)

#### A. Administrator Contracts

Mr. Fromberger explained that the purpose of the executive session is to discuss contracts under Title I V.S.A. § 313 (a)(1)(A) Administrator contracts. He suggested inviting Ms. Hammond, Ms. Fierman and Ms. Powden to the executive session.

Ms. Brown **moved** to find that premature general public knowledge about employment contracts would place the board at a substantial disadvantage. Mr. McBride questioned which contracts they would be discussing in executive session. Mr. Fromberger advised that the contracts to be discussed would be those laid out in the proposal that the board has been presented with already. The motion carried with no opposition.

Ms. Brown **moved** to enter executive session at 6:30 p.m. for the purpose of discussing administrative contracts under Title I V.S.A. § 313 (a)(1)(A) Contracts. Mr. Fromberger asked to include Ms. Powden, Ms. Hammond and Ms. Fierman in this discussion. Mr. Studin suggested not including Ms. Powden as this is a future plan. Mr. Fromberger noted that Ms. Powden is the current superintendent so she should be included in the discussion. Ms. Brown

questioned the need for Ms. Hammond. Mr. Fromberger noted that there may be questions about finances. Mr. McBride noted that he wanted to ask piercing difficult questions so he would like to have just Ms. Fierman present in the meeting. Ms. Lamphere suggested including Ms. Powden to hear about the status of what is currently in place, in order to know where they are going for the future.

Mr. Fromberger asked the board to cast a vote if they would support including Ms. Powden in the executive session. Mr. Hance, Ms. Perlah, Ms. Lamphere and Ms. Wade were in favor; Mr. Studin, Mr. Alexander, Mr. McBride, Ms. Brown and Mr. Wheelock were opposed.

The board consensus was to amend the motion to include inviting Ms. Fierman and Ms. Hammond to the executive session. Mr. Fromberger re-read the motion including the invited attendees. The motion carried without opposition.

The motion carried without opposition. The board returned from executive session at 7:05 p.m.

**V. HIGH SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION DISCUSSION:**

Ms. Brown moved to adopt the administration reorganization proposed by the incoming superintendent, Ms. Fierman. Mr. Fromberger advised the in executive session there was detailed discussion on the proposal. He advised that if they adopted the proposal, the details would become a public record, available for anyone to see. Mr. Cunningham asked if the public could be given a brief description of the proposal prior to voting.

Ms. Fierman explained that rather than looking for a new principal in “challenging times” she has proposed that they maintain the current administrators at the high school for the coming year with an interim principal (Mr. Ripley). There would be an increased supervision and presence of the superintendent within Green Mountain. They would not replace the associate principal. Instead they would have some of the teacher leaders and a guidance counselor take on some of the additional pieces of the associate principal’s work (attendance issues, discipline issues and standardized testing structure as examples). Ms. Fierman would continue to supervise a small number of staff within the high school. This would allow the school to remain on the same path toward proficiency-based education that they are currently. This plan would also allow for savings of approximately \$80,000. She felt this would be a good way to save money and minimize disruption to the high school setting.

Ms. Brown’s motion carried without opposition. A number of board members congratulated Ripley, thanked the superintendent and thanked the leadership at GMUHS for helping to provide consistency in the coming year.

**VI. PUBLIC COMMENTS:**

None.

**VII. COMMUNICATIONS:**

**A. Student Representative Comments**

None.

**B. Board Member Comments**

Mr. Studin thanked the staff for their dedication to the students and continuing to educate the students in the district. He spoke about the challenges in his home and felt that it is important to work with their children. He appreciated the teachers sending work home to students and hopes that the children will continue to succeed. He thanked his children’s teachers specifically. He also discussed the communication between the teachers and the students. He encouraged

parents to discuss their concerns with the teachers and they have been very receptive to parent communications. He suggested parents turn off the students' devices when they don't want them to be contacted by the school.

Mr. McBride noted that he didn't want to take away from the enthusiasm of the teachers, but he felt that the board should have had an opportunity to weigh in about the continuity of learning plan. He also noted that they may see a shortfall in taxes and asked if there was a concerted effort at the SU to underspend the budget in anticipation of the shortfall in the taxes.

Ms. Powden noted that the continuity in learning plan is not final. It was sent to the AOE and they have asked for more information. They will be working on the plan with the principals next week. The senior management team has met and will continue to work on it. Ms. Powden advised that the business office is aware of the financial picture and when she meets with the principals next week, they will be discussing areas of savings that they might look at in the next budget. Ms. Lamphere questioned if the board will see the next revision of the continuity of learning plan before it is finalized.

Mr. Studin noted his concern with not sending the plan to the board before it is finalized. Ms. Powden advised that after the administration makes its final revisions, they will send it out to the board for their comments before it is finalized with the AOE.

**C. RVTC Update**

Ms. Perlah advised that they are down 60 students next year and this is the normal time for recruiting so there might be some issues with declining enrollment for next year. The VTVLC has been asked to do some guidance on remote learning for next year. The RVTC has reduced the business position and two other positions due to budgetary issues.

**D. TRSU Update**

Mr. Fromberger advised the AOE has approved Ms. Fierman's hiring as the superintendent subject to the background check.

Ms. Wade noted that she appreciated Mr. Studin's comments about the teachers and the family interruptions. She felt that it is difficult for families to balance the work along with educating their children.

Ms. Powden noted that last week the administration sent the continuity in learning plan to the families to give them a sense of where they are headed.

**VIII. COMMITTEE REPORTS:**

There are no reports, but Mr. Fromberger will be working with Ms. Moeykens regarding the committee assignments.

Ms. Brown questioned if the finance committee will be starting its work soon. They have discussed beginning the budgeting process earlier this year than last. Mr. Fromberger noted that they will need to work with the finance department to see when they can begin the first draft of the next budget. Ms. Brown noted that she didn't want to rush through and felt they did a good job this last year, but felt that there was still improvement to be made.

Mr. McBride thanked Ms. Brown for bringing up this topic. He understands that there is an issue of having no information from the state for months, but he felt it was necessary to discuss contingency plans in the event that there is a large shortfall in money. He suggested that they need to think about ways to cut the budget in that event.

## **IX. ADMINISTRATORS' REPORTS:**

### **A. Superintendent's Report**

Ms. Powden reported that the teachers and most of the staff are on break this week. The administration, bus drivers, food service and many para-educators are working this week. The teachers' association has asked that the board bargaining team negotiate with them regarding a memorandum of understanding given the current work environment. Ms. Moeykens is arranging meeting times. Letters of intent have been sent to teachers and they must be returned within 15 days. She met with secretary French to discuss the CARES Act. There are \$13 million earmarked for VT education funds. There was also a recent webinar from VT Superintendents Assoc regarding the current financial situation. She reported that the situation is dire. Prior to COVID-19, the education fund had a surplus of \$12.9 million and a reserve of \$34 million. Governor Scott has deferred sales tax and meals and rooms tax until June 25<sup>th</sup>; therefore, the taxes are down. For FY2020, they are projecting a \$39million deficit. The emergency funds will not close the gap. Secretary French doesn't know how the funds will be disbursed and anticipates that school districts will need to borrow money. The AOE will be giving guidance to school districts regarding graduations and end of year celebrations. Ms. Hammond advised that she has added lines for COVID-19 related expenses. This should not put them over budget at this point, but is shifting expenses from one line to another.

She advised that there is an overbudget item in technology but there is an offsetting revenue. She also advised that there is an athletic overspend, but they are under in other areas of the athletic budget. There was discussion about the school districts needing to borrow money in order to meet their budgets. There was discussion about the districts' need to borrow the money and then having to pay it back in a future budget which would require that taxes are being raised. Mr. McBride noted that this is a concern which is why he's asked about cutting the budget aggressively. Ms. Powden explained how education is funded—local taxes, meal and rooms taxes—and explained how these would be negatively impacted. There was discussion about the CARES Act and any other sources of federal funding.

There was discussion about whether or not the state has given them any indication of the return to school in the fall. Ms. Hammond advised that the information about the CARES Act has not yet been fully realized regarding how it will be used in the state.

Mr. Ripley thanked the board for their support, but had to leave the meeting.

There was discussion about whether all non-essential staff has been reduced in order to save money. Ms. Powden advised that they are working on doing this next year. Ms. Powden advised that there are teachers' contracts and support staff contracts. She noted that they can not reduce staff in the contracts without guidance from the governor.

Ms. Lamphere felt that given the upcoming difficulties, she recommended having a finance committee meeting sooner rather than later due to the financial challenges. She also noted that they can't just cut budgets without being sure that they are looking to student needs because the students will come back to school with more needs. The finance committee needs to look at not just next year, but also at what needs to be changed right now so they can tolerate those

changes next year. There was discussion about proactively reducing next year's budget, but do so intentionally and in some cases add to the budget to protect the children.

Ms. Fogg recognized the teachers, para-educators and staff for helping to make the home learning plan successful. They are adjusting everything daily and appreciate the hard work that parents are doing. Ms. Fierman echoed these thoughts in thanking the staff and families for their work in being generous, flexible and kind.

**X. OLD BUSINESS:**

**A. Newspaper of Record**

Ms. Powden advised that Ms. Hammond negotiated with the VT Journal and they will honor the Town of Chester rate of \$12 per column inch. Mr. Wheelock **moved** to approve the Newspaper of Record as the VT Journal at \$12 per column inch. There was discussion about whether there were other proposals submitted. Ms. Hammond and Ms. Powden did not receive any other proposals. The motion carried without opposition.

Ms. Huntley thanked the board for that decision.

**XI. NEW BUSINESS:**

**A. Appointment of Cavendish Board Member**

Mr. Fromberger advised that Mr. Marin has volunteered to serve another year on the school board if the board approves. He explained how the board can appoint a member until the next election. He reported that they advertised for the vacancy, but they have received no responses.

Ms. Brown **moved** to appoint Mr. Marin to the one-year term until the next election. The motion carried unanimously. The board members thanked him for serving.

**B. FY20 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter Financials**

Ms. Powden reported that the webinar she discussed was sent to the board members and she can send out the link to the recording. Ms. Hammond advised that they are one pay period beyond the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter. She discussed encumbering the payroll and benefits. This will help them forecast for the rest of the year and even next year. She reported that there are spring sports savings, the world language position that will have some savings, as well as a few other positions that weren't filled. They will discuss with the principals and the facilities directors to see where they can save money and cut spending. She will gather this information together before meeting with the finance committee. There was discussion about the contracts for transporting the students where there might be some savings.

Mr. Studin suggested refinancing existing debts to see if there is any savings to be had. He also suggested seeing if there are lower fuel rates. Ms. Hammond will look into those. Mr. McBride questioned if school districts benefit from the paycheck protection. There was discussion about whether the district is covered since they are closed but still have to pay the employees. Mr. McBride also questioned if they have the option to furlough staff or if that isn't a possibility because of negotiated contracts. Ms. Powden advised that she has asked this of the secretary of education and hasn't received guidance yet. Mr. McBride noted that he understood that SU's have been directed to not lay off staff. Ms. Powden advised that that is a rumor, but they want to be sure they have correct guidance before doing so. Mr. McBride felt that many of the lower paid employees would do better getting the unemployment pay than the school district pays. Ms. Powden advised that this is another topic that they have been discussing, but are still waiting for guidance. Ms. Powden advised that the state is taking some time to address the unemployment pay so that may be a challenge. There was discussion about the essential worker

package to see if there is anything that can be done for the special educators and having some of their pay subsidized. Ms. Hammond will look into this as an option. Ms. Hammond advised that they still have one more special education payment coming from the state that is still expected on schedule. She anticipated that next year will be the concern.

**C. Authorization for Electronic Approval of Warrants**

Ms. Hammond asked the board to temporarily approve warrant approval electronically. The auditor advised to develop a policy, but given the short timing, she asked for board approval. She invited board members who wanted to see the warrants to reach out to her to see them. Mr. Fromberger explained how the approval is being done currently. He reviews them electronically but then signs them physically. Ms. Hammond will verify whether an email from the warrant signer saying “I approve” can suffice. There was discussion about allowing things outside the normal would be efficient and appropriate. There was discussion about the various methods that warrant signers can accept the warrants. Ms. Lamphere felt that electronic signatures are efficient, even post-COVID-19.

Ms. Brown **moved** to continue the current practice, while also looking into electronic signatures to make approval of warrants more efficient. Ms. Lamphere suggested not just Adobe Sign, but also DocuSign and other methods. The motion carried without opposition.

**XII. PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Mr. Cunningham questioned where the district is with attendance in the various schools, citing a recent report indicating that this might be a problem. Ms. Fierman noted that there are attendance issues. They have similar numbers of attendance issues that were present when children were in the building. There are some children who struggle to attend school electronically, while there are other students who were struggling physically who don’t struggle currently. They are dealing with those issues similarly, by reaching out to families. There was discussion about the families who haven’t been connected as yet. There are some families who have been driving kids to a place where they can get internet.

There was discussion about the families who aren’t connected are receiving paper packets so they can continue their education.

**XIII. EXECUTIVE SESSION:**

**A. Contracts for administrators and non-bargaining support staff**

Ms. Brown **moved** to find that premature general public knowledge about employment contracts would place the board at a substantial disadvantage. Mr. Cunningham noted that the legislative citation for both executive sessions were the same, however the discussion is different. Mr. Fromberger advised that they are the same citation but different conversations. The motion carried without opposition.

Ms. Brown moved to enter executive session at 8:31 p.m. for the purpose of discussing administrative and non-bargaining support staff contracts under V.S.A. § 313 (a)(1)(A) Contracts. Ms. Powden asked to have Ms. Powden, Ms. Hammond and Ms. Fierman invited. Ms. Brown amended her motion accordingly. The motion carried without opposition.

The board returned from executive session at 8:41 p.m. No action at this time.

**XIV. NEXT MEETING AND AGENDA ITEMS:**

The next regular meeting will be Thursday, May 21 at 6:00 p.m. via Zoom. The finance committee meeting will be determined at a later time, with the goal of being before the regular board meeting.

**XV. ADJOURNMENT:**

Mr. Alexander **moved** to adjourn at 8:44 p.m. The motion carried unanimously.

Respectfully Submitted,

Amber Wilson  
Board Recording Secretary