

Board Meeting Highlights
Special Called Joint Meeting with County Commissioners
December 8, 2016

The Gates County Board of Education met in a special called joint meeting with the County Commissioners on Thursday, December 8, 2016, at the Gates County Courthouse. County Commissioner Chairperson, Linda Hofler called the meeting to order at 4:30 p.m. The following board of education members were present: Glendale Boone, Leslie Byrum, Ray Felton, Dr. Daniel Dickerson and Claire Whitehurst. Dr. Barry Williams, Superintendent, was also present.

County Commissioners present were Linda Hofler, Jack Owens, Henry Jordan, Ray Freeman and Billy Felton. Also present were County Manager, Natalie Rountree.

Mr. Henry Jordan provided the invocation, followed by the pledge to the American Flag.

Chairman Hofler explained that this was an information meeting, and public comments would be heard at the end of the meeting, with the allotted time for each speaker being a maximum of five minutes.

The Commissioners followed the agenda for county business and then asked the board of education members to join them at the table.

Mrs. Natalie Rountree explained that at the joint meeting on May 24, 2016 it was decided that if the tax referendum for a new middle school failed, the board of education would need to provide a new plan. She asked Dr. Williams if there was a new plan.

Dr. Williams stated that we need to sit down together and find a way to solve the problems that we have. He talked to Pinnacle Architecture Firm and they have provided a proposed plan to demolish the oldest wings of Central Middle School, build new wings, and connect to the 6th grade existing wing. Pinnacle would provide mobile units for our students during construction, and they would be returned at the end. This would eliminate the need for the school system to take care of disposing of the mobile units. The cost for this project is estimated to be between \$6 and \$8 million. Dr. Ben Matthews, with the Department of Public Instruction, contacted Dr. Williams, and has assured him that he can still provide the \$6 million Qualified School Construction Bond money, if a commitment can be made prior to January 1, 2017. The request for the bond money was returned after the tax referendum did not pass, but Dr. Matthews has managed to provide an extension. This new plan would not allow for athletic facilities and the alternative school, which was originally included in the new school plan.

Mrs. Rountree requested that Dr. Williams provide a visual of what he was referring to. Dr. Williams drew a diagram, but noted that plans have not been drawn as of this date, so therefore it may look entirely different. He would like to have input from

the commissioners and the citizens in putting together a plan for the school, if this is approved.

Mrs. Rountree stated that she had researched the Qualified School Construction Bond proposal by talking with BB&T Bank. She noted that it is unclear if the QSCB would be interest free. This would need to be researched more thoroughly. The commissioners have requested that Dr. Williams provide information regarding this.

Commissioner Jordan felt that it would be beneficial if we had a contractor to look at the school and provide an estimate to renovate, and then to compare the numbers with building new. There was some question if this would be possible in light of General Statute 143. Both boards had concerns about what unforeseen problems could arise if you elected to replace the roof and renovate.

Ms. Hofler noted that we have to give consideration to the other schools as well, since due to their age, they will also require upgrading. The county is still indebted and the Local Government Commission limits how much the county can borrow. She felt that we should not make any hasty decisions and give careful thought to whatever is decided. Dr. Williams noted that the Board of Education had provided a 10-year plan previously. The commissioners stated that Gates County is in the top third of the state, (based on size) in spending for our schools.

The commissioners also questioned the declining enrollment and the possibility of consolidating schools. The Board of Education said that is a possibility for the future, but this will require redistricting and public hearings. It is not a quick fix. It was noted that it would be an emotional topic for parents, but that it had been done in the past.

The commissioners requested an update on maintenance goals that had been set for the schools. The list provided was from 2014-2015. Mr. Harrell addressed each item individually and was able to provide information that 70% of the maintenance upgrades had been completed. He feels that his department works diligently to maintain the aging buildings, and have saved the county a considerable amount of money by doing a lot of the work themselves, rather than contracting out.

The commissioners asked Dr. Williams to provide information about out-of-district tuition. Mr. Rube Blanchard, Finance Officer, was able to provide that we currently charge \$1675.00 per student, per year, for those students that are not residents of Gates County, but are attending our schools. There was some concern that this amount is not enough to cover costs. Mr. Blanchard explained that there is a formula used to determine the amount, and there is also a cap set by the Department of Public Instruction. We are very close to that cap now. Some surrounding counties do not charge any tuition.

Dr. Dickerson asked why these questions were not provided to the Board of Education prior to the meeting, so that they could have answers. The answer was that they were not compiled in time.

Mrs. Rountree asked if the Daycare was now self-supporting. The answer was that there have been great improvements, but there is still not enough enrollment and with more state mandates, the expenses have increased. Mrs. Hofler noted that the county is facing the same issues with state mandates.

Mrs. Rountree made a request for the entire local budget from the Board of Education. They were only provided with the Capital Outlay budget.

Dr. Dickerson did ask the commissioners what their long range plans to increase the tax revenue for the county were.

Mrs. Whitehurst complimented the maintenance department on their hard work in maintaining the schools, and invited the commissioners and citizens to visit the maintenance department to see what has been done.

Ms. Hofler then opened the floor for public comments.

Mr. Milton Carter spoke about the importance of health and safety for our students at Central Middle School.

Mr. Earl Rountree thought the revised plan submitted by Dr. Williams was a good idea. He also agreed with Ms. Hofler that we don't need to rush into decisions, but did comment that interest rates are going to rise. Therefore, the longer we wait, the more it will cost.

Mr. Chuck Brothers stated that his concern with the tax referendum was that it was open ended. He noted that Gates County is supported mostly by landowners, forestry and agriculture. He felt the two boards were not working together to solve the problem.

Both boards agreed to come together in an emergency meeting before January 1, 2017, if there is additional information that needs to be discussed.

Jack Owens made a motion to adjourn. It was seconded by Mr. Jordan and Madam Chair Hofler adjourned the meeting at 6:50 p.m.