

Norfolk K-6 School District To Hire An Interim Superintendent for 2010-2011

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would make sense for us to have articulation on a K-to-12 basis, preferably, as we have discussed in the larger committee, across the board with all three individual elementary districts, but Norfolk was the only one coming forward at the time," said Pat Francomano, a member of the King Philip School Committee from Plainville, during the joint meeting this past Wednesday night.

But a lot has changed during the past couple of months. LeClerc announced in January he is planning to retire this coming June 30, a year earlier than expected. (LeClerc had opposed sharing a superintendent with King Philip, saying Norfolk wouldn't get the attention it needs, and he also cited past disagreements with the School Committee over educational vision.)

Then the Norfolk School Committee came under heavy fire during a meeting February 3 from some parents and other residents worried that Norfolk's forthcoming school building project and teachers contract negotiations would get short shrift from a superintendent more concerned about the regional school district.

Most opponents said it's the timing rather than the concept they have trouble with.

Thus, an idea that drew applause at a candidates' night forum two years ago drew sharp criticism at a public hearing a month ago.

Supporters, surprised both at LeClerc's departure and the opposition from the town's selectmen and some residents, have decided it's too soon to try to share a superintendent with King Philip come July.

Beth Gilbert, chairman of the Norfolk School Committee, said the committee discussed the topic within the past week.

"Although we didn't take a formal vote at that time, the consensus was that we aren't ready to try to make any agreement by this July 1st, that we feel there are too many unanswered questions and too many things that we would have to hammer out," Gilbert said during the joint school committee meeting this past Wednesday night.

But King Philip School Committee members appeared to leave the door open for Norfolk.

Francomano, of the King Philip School Committee, said he'd be happy to take into account concerns that the Norfolk School Committee may have when selecting a new superintendent for King Philip.

"I don't think it is possible for us to hire anyone other than a King Philip superintendent at this point, but with that said ... I think it would behoove us as the King Philip School Committee to keep in the back of our minds that this is a possibility, and if I'm going to hire somebody, maybe I want to make sure I'm that I'm hiring somebody that could be put into that role if that person agreed and if Norfolk were still interested in going ahead," Francomano said.

The King Philip screening committee is planning to meet several times in mid-March to consider candidates to replace King Philip's current superintendent, Richard Robbat, who retired last June and has been serving on a temporary basis for this current school year.

Gilbert read a sentence from the brochure King Philip officials are using to recruit candidates for superintendent:

"Candidates are advised that the King Philip Regional School District is exploring the feasibility of sharing services with the Norfolk elementary school district, including the positions of superintendent and assistant superintendent for student learning."

There are limits to the accommodations that King Philip officials will make, though. Norfolk's elementary school building project is a key issue for Norfolk skeptics of sharing a superintendent with King Philip, but Francomano made it clear that Norfolk's project can't determine King Philip's agenda.

"As far as the screening committee is concerned, I don't want them hiring a superin-

tendent for purposes of overseeing Norfolk's building project. ... I'm hiring a superintendent, right now, to take care of King Philip," Francomano said. "That's my concern, absent some other communication."

Without a commitment from Norfolk, King Philip officials can't put in place the original strategy of formally phasing Norfolk into a shared superintendent arrangement.

"The idea would be you're hiring somebody under a three-year contract, that contract would say very specifically year one would be King Philip only, year two and three would be that transition into shared services with Norfolk. I think that's the part of it that's changed, because you're not in a position to do that at this point," Francomano said. "... So it will have to be an after-the-fact kind of thing. ... It certainly still can be done."

Later in the evening, the Norfolk School Committee voted 4-1 to pursue an interim superintendent to replace LeClerc on July 1.

An interim superintendent is typically a retired superintendent willing to work for a year or less for a salary over and above a pension. Interim superintendents hired under this scenario typically have significant experience running other school districts, but their commitment to the new school district is temporary.

LeClerc said there are pluses and minuses to each approach.

"There are some for an interim where you are getting a very experienced administrator who's had building experience, and I think that's going to be important, because in a district as small as Norfolk, you can't delegate that to anyone. You have to be the person driving those decisions and pulling the groups together and attending all those meetings," LeClerc said. "So you don't have an assistant superintendent or a curriculum director or anyone else really to delegate that to. So that part of it, having someone who can come in with the experience, is very beneficial. And they may also be very beneficial in your negotiations."

"... On the flip side, if you bring in a superintendent over the next three years, the real good part about that is they will see your building through to fruition, and an opening.

So there are arguments to both sides. Again, I'm not able to say one's much better than the other," LeClerc said.

The Norfolk School Committee could have tried to hire a permanent superintendent for a longer-term deal (the usual length is three years), but Gilbert said it's so late in the hiring process that a consultant for the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, Jim Hardy, suggested it might be hard to get good candidates.

John Olivieri was the lone dissenting voice, arguing that Norfolk needs a superintendent who is willing to commit to the school district and especially its building project.

"One historical argument is, we don't want to run any post mortems on the school to see what happens to a new school. That's happened, in many cases, of the old schools. So by having a fellow who's on board, a person's who's on board, we can avoid post mortems that we seem to find time for later on," Olivieri said. "No post mortems. Do it right."

But School Committee member Linda Andrews argued that hiring in a hurry is a bad idea.

"Rushing at this point to find a full-time superintendent, with changes in the School Committee and other changes going on, is not a good idea, because that's when you're not thinking straight, you're not really thinking it out. You need time to think this out, you need time to pull a few things together. I think your option is to go with an interim so you can give yourself time to think, and then move forward from there," Andrews said.

Going with an interim also leaves open the possibility of proceeding with sharing a superintendent with King Philip in July 2011, since the interim superintendent in Norfolk would be expected to leave at that point, anyway.

K-6 Budget: Fees Up, Services Down

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9) \$14,000 for eliminating a lead teacher stipend

LeClerc said if he has to actually reduce the elementary schools' budget by 5 percent, he would have to cut another \$500,000 from his budget request.

"I don't know how to say it except that it's out of this world," LeClerc said. "... The only way you can possibly get to that is by just eliminating another nine or 10 teaching positions."

In rough terms, he said he'd eliminate four reading teacher positions and one reading tutor position, saving about \$300,000.

He also said he'd likely eliminate four additional full-time teaching positions, which would save about \$200,000. Class sizes would increase to anywhere from 23 to 26.8 per class. (They are closer to 20 now.)

"This is Armageddon scenario," said School Committee chairman Beth Gilbert. "I mean, this is not anything anybody wants to do."

LeClerc asked the School Committee to vote to recommend a 3.56 percent increase for a level-services budget, but the School Committee held off.

The stage is set for what could be seesaw negotiations with the town's Board of Selectmen and Advisory Board that would determine what recommended budget goes to Town Meeting and ultimately gets approved by the voters.

Many observers expect that selectmen will propose a tax hike through an operating budget override of Proposition 2, the state law that limits increases in a town's tax levy to 2.5 percent plus allowances for new growth. If approved, that could provide more money for all town budgets, including the elementary schools.

But the non-override budgets are key, since if voters reject the operating budget override then the non-override budgets will go

into effect.

Negotiations among town officials are affected by how much local aid the state Legislature approves this spring for Norfolk. Numbers are far from certain, but early indications are worrisome for local officials.

Gilbert noted that state officials are suggesting that local officials should prepare for a 5 percent reduction in state funding for local public education (known as Chapter 70 funds) and other local forms of local aid.

"I know that the people at the town side who are trying to balance budgets are sort of appalled by what they're getting from the state level, in terms of what our expectations can be. I know that the latest numbers that have been sent out through the Department of Ed and through the workshops that they've done are you can expect a minus 5 percent on your Chapter 70 funds and all of your local aid funds. When you hear those kinds of things, it is really scary. Because as we all know, local revenues aren't really going up," Gilbert said. "So as much as I'd like to say we're going to fight tooth and nail for that level-services budget, I think realistically where I really want to try to draw the line is at the level-funded budget. We can't go below that. But are there ways we can mitigate those cuts, so that we don't have to make those cuts that Don has recommended, but that we find some other way."

But School Committee member Ross Gilleland said school officials should press for the 3.56 increase for a so-called level-services budget.

"I would say personally I don't want to go below level services, and I would like to send that message," Gilleland said.

"I'd draw it at level services if I thought we had a shot, frankly," Gilbert said.

School Committee member Marie Zullo said it makes sense to stump for a level-services

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