

RUTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS BOARD OF SCHOOL COMMISSIONERS

SPECIAL MEETING

October 20, 2020

School Board Members Present:

Alison Notte, President
Joanne Pencak, Clerk
Brittany Cavacas
Hurley Cavacas, Jr.
Ann Dages
Dena Goldberg
Kevin Kiefaber
Matthew Olewnik
Charlene Seward
Erin Shimp
Cathy Solsaa
Isabella LaFemina, Student Representative

Members Absent:

Hannah Solimano, Student Representative

Also Present:

Superintendent Bill Olsen
Assistant Superintendent Rob Bliss
Director of Technology Patricia Aigner
Greg Schillinger, RHS Principal

President Notte called the meeting to order at 5:33 pm followed by the Pledge of Allegiance She noted all Commissioners are in attendance.

CALL TO ORDER

Approval of the Agenda – Motion by Cavacas (Hurley)/Seward to approve the agenda.

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

Mascot Discussion – President Notte noted the public forum held on October 6, 2020 and concerns raised by Commissioner Cavacas (Hurley) at the October 13, 2020 Board Meeting. She provided an update following legal counsel – there were no indications of violations of policy or improper threats. Commissioner Cavacas (Hurley) agrees that the concern has been resolved.

MASCOT DISCUSSION

Motion by Kiefaber/Solsaa Given that the Vision Statement for our District specifies that “RCPS cultivates a passionate, diverse and resilient community of critical thinkers who learn with purpose, create innovative and responsible solutions and lead lives of integrity.”

MOTION: NAME & MASCOT CHANGE

And that the Mission Statement for Rutland High School calls for “a school climate that values mutual respect and dignity”,

And that the Vermont Principals’ Association has recommended that any mascot, nickname or symbol that has marginalizing, racist or exclusionary elements should be replaced,

In light of these ideals, and considering that we have been presented with clear evidence that the origin of the Raider name and mascot was racist and meant to invoke negative stereotypes of Native Americans,

And that we have been informed that the American Psychological Association has called for the immediate retirement of all American Indian mascots, symbols and images due to the negative impact these have on students of Native American heritage as well as other students,

And that the great majority of speakers at our recent Open Forum on this topic, including many current and former teachers, students, athletes and parents, endorsed replacing our current mascot, because it creates a divisive and unwelcoming environment in our schools.

I therefore move that all Rutland City Schools cease use of the Raider name and imagery, and that the Rutland City School Administration work with our student body to come up with a new mascot that would be more inclusive and welcoming, and to bring this suggestion before this Board for approval no later than December 8 of this year.

**MOTION
(CONT.)**

President Notte proceeded to call on individual Commissioners for comments which included:

DISCUSSION

- Commissioner Cavacas (Brittany) noted that she will vote no on the motion. More discussion and transparency are needed. The Board needs to hear from current students and the citizens of Rutland.
- Commissioner Cavacas (Hurley) noted that he will vote no on the motion as he believes those who elected him into office have not been heard. This issue appears to be a concern within the community. Voices of the students have been muffled. Due diligence is needed and the Board needs to listen to those who elect Commissioners into office.
- Commissioner Dages noted appreciation for public comment at the recent forum. She acknowledged fear of the loss of tradition and change, but noted that interest in progress, growth and having an open mind to experiences of people.
- Commissioner Olewnik noted that the District Mission does not support the current mascot/iconography and tradition is not a valid argument for making change. Money is a dodge.
- Commissioner Pencak noted that this is a very difficult decision. Rutland is a community of heart felt, real people. She noted conversation and emails where people felt like they were losing something. She acknowledged students from communities who have been traditionally marginalized and the affects on students from the elementary level through college. She noted that a raider could be anything, but it wasn't and advised we need to acknowledge history before we can move on. She said it is time to get a new mascot.
- Commissioner Seward noted appreciation for both sides. She doesn't see why we need to change the Raider name and would like to hear more from the public and students. She advised that she will vote no on the motion.
- Commissioner Shimp noted she saw a lot of political movement and scripted behavior and the affect on students. She advised that more transparency up front may have alleviated a lot of tension. She noted that propaganda is still being used in the adverse today and Native Americans historically being supportive of the mascot. She advised that she doesn't think the Raider name should be changed, but would be open to eliminating the arrow head mascot. She expressed a need to refocus and use education in a positive manner.
- Commissioner Solsaa noted that she is in support of the change and all that was outlined by Commissioner Kiefaber in the motion. She advised that tradition is not a reason for bad behavior and we need to do better. She noted that there has been a lot of discussion and asking for more discussion is a stall.
- Commissioner Goldberg noted the shared purpose of the Board and love for the community, but acknowledged that we don't necessarily all share the same experiences (not based on opinions, or likes, dislikes) but the package that comes with us (color of skin, heritage.) She advised that she supports the change.
- Commissioner Kiefaber noted that the version of the motion being shown on the screen was an earlier version (the correct document was updated in the screen share.)
- Commissioner Shimp expressed concern for how the process was handled in the schools and community causing a division. She noted that fixing one issue may cause another. She noted that the feeling is being reversed and every Board Member should consider this perspective.

- Commissioner Cavacas (Brittany) asked the Board to consider that they took the perspective of students when taking up the Black Lives Matter Flag. She said kids deserve more and need to be heard and we need to hear what they have to say. She noted the need to respect input, listen to the community and advised that she thought the Board would have a different view.
- Commissioner Seward acknowledged that this is a hard topic and expressed a desire to find a middle ground. She questioned further discussion regarding removing the symbol and keeping the Raider name to bring the community together/satisfy both for now.
- Commissioner Cavacas (Hurley) noted that a logo or a name does not create the climate inside a school, advising it is created by the staff, faculty and administration. He suggested looking past the issue to see what is going on in school buildings.
- Commissioner Goldberg noted change and process creating waves, but advised the need to look at the broader sense of the mission and the right thing to do.
- Commissioner Olewnik addressed comments made regarding the comparison to the Black Lives Matter Flag. He advised in that case a student group approached the Board, similar to the group of stakeholders who approached the Board on this issue. He said that there has been plenty of time to weigh in and participate (including students.) He advised that this is not a political issue for everyone and not to dismiss someone's experience because you don't understand it.
- Isabella LaFemina thanked Commissioners Dages and Goldberg for the points they made. She noted that students are really confused about the issue. They don't see the problem with the mascot, but she thinks that they would support the change if they had seen and heard the things she has seen and heard. She noted that people affected by the change directly need to be more understanding and educated.
- Commissioner Shimp requested an amendment to the motion to include retaining the name and eliminating the arrow head logo.
- Commissioner Kiefaber noted that he thinks the name has been associated negatively with Native Americans for a long time and he doesn't think it could be separated from the image without retaining some negativity. He did not agree to amending the motion.
- Commissioner Goldberg requested an amendment to the motion to allow Administration to provide a timeline.

Discussion revolved around appropriate timeline, implications, on-going process and considerations (learning and reflection process, pandemic, yearbooks, uniforms.)

Motion by Kiefaber/Solsaa to amend the motion to: I therefore move that all Rutland City Schools cease use of the Raider name and imagery, and that the Rutland City School Administration work with our student body to come up with a new mascot that would be more inclusive and welcoming, and to bring this suggestion before this Board for approval no later than February 9, 2021.

MOTION
AMENDED

President Notte reviewed the motion on the table.

Roll Call Vote: Cavacas (Brittany) – No, Cavacas (Hurley) – No, Dages – Yes, Goldberg – Yes, Kiefaber – Yes, Olewnik – Yes, Seward – No, Shimp – No, Solsaa – Yes, Pencak – Yes. Motion carried 6 – 4.

Motion by Pencak/Goldberg to adjourn at 6:35 pm. Passed.

ADJOURN

Respectfully Submitted,
Betty Kapitan, Recording Secretary