

**SELECT BOARD WORKSHOP
JANUARY 26, 2023, AT 6:30 PM
TOWN HALL, THIRD FLOOR CONFERENCE ROOM**

Chair Allen Phillips, Vice Chair Rick Antanavica, Second Vice Chair Dianna Provencher, Selectman Herb Duggan Jr, Selectman John Bujak, Town Administrator David Genereux were in attendance.

Select Board Chair Allen Phillips called the meeting to order at 5:30.

Motion 012623-1a: A motion was made by First Vice Chair Antanavica to go into Executive Session, seconded by Vice Chair Ms. Provencher at 5:33 PM. **Motion carries 5-0-0. (Roll Call Vote)**

The open meeting reconvened at 6:33 PM - Peter Cusolito, Jim Reinke, Wayne Sampson, Donna McCance, and Joseph McGinn of the Former Becker Advisory Committee (FBAC) joined the open meeting, as did Chief Ken Antanavica, State Senator Ann Gobi, State Representative David LeBoeuf. Leah Bradley of the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance (CHMA) and Alvina Brevard of the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) were also present.

2. SCHEDULED ITEMS

a. 6:30PM – Barrett Hall Lease Discussion

Chair Phillips announced at the opening that while this meeting was open to the public, the Board would not be accepting public comment. There would be another meeting scheduled if the Board was interested in the proposal being presented this evening, which would be open to public input.

Ms. Bradley and Ms. Brevard introduced themselves to the Board. Mr. Genereux asked that they confirm that the DHCD was interesting in purchasing the College surplus furniture. Ms. Brevard confirmed that they do want the furniture.

Ms. Brevard stated that MHCD was interested in leasing Barret Hall for use as a site for families in need of housing. DHCD would like a long- term lease, with all costs included, for this program. She explained that the program for housing individuals and families with children was assembled because children have a fundamental right to obtain state provided accommodations, as the Commonwealth is a right to shelter state. CHMA is one of fifty providers of shelter, which are funded through DHCD. Families that seek shelter must meet eligibility criteria. Regarding income, they must be 115% below the poverty line to qualify for the program, and they must be families of single mothers with children below the age of twenty-one. They must be Massachusetts residents.

DCHD currently has a contract with the Clara Barton Camp in North Oxford. They have been there for six months, but they must find other accommodations because the camp is in the process of opening up again as a camp. They need to move their clients by May 1.

She stated that in looking at the properties, they considered Barrett, Hampshire, Berkshire, the 5 Victorian properties, and the staff house. They settled on Barrett. The rooms in Hampshire/Berkshire were too small (Only good for pregnant women), and the staff house appeared to have some mold. The Victorians were not fully dismissed, but the funds required to rehabilitate them would be substantial. Barrett is in excellent condition and would suit their needs with few improvements.

Ms. Bradley explained that rising housing prices has created rents that are surpassing the ability of families to pay. This is creating a growing population of families that lack the income to afford basic housing costs. Families who cannot afford rising rental prices are being evicted by landlords seeking higher rental income and profit. This makes housing unattainable to those whose income cannot match pass with escalating price increases.

Ms. Brevard explained that once a family applies for services or becomes homeless, they go to an intake center at Devens, where they stay for three to five days for assessment. A family requesting services calls 1 of 10 offices in Massachusetts. A background check to determine if anyone in the family is a sex offender, as they are not eligible for services. It is then determined if their housing problem is immediate, or if they can stay in their current housing for a short time. If they have to leave immediately, they start in Devens, and then go to a Days Inn in Methuen for the short term. That motel currently has ninety individuals or families with children. Thirty-five percent of inductees are new arrivals.

Ms. Bradley explained that rental assistance is getting more difficult to obtain, leaving people with a higher cost burden. It is now common for individuals to have 75% of their income going to housing costs. This program was established to ensure that children have proper housing. They also believe that children should stay in the area that they were living in previously, so most of the families selected for a Leicester location would be from the Worcester area. In the case of children with language barriers or going to school under an IEP, there is funding available from DESE to cover additional expenses to the school district. There is also additional funding of 130 million being considered for this program.

The Chair then asked members of the Board for questions. The questions asked and the answers given are as follows:

Q: What is the size of the average family – 3.2 people. Various combinations of people, but mainly single parents.

Q: Typical age – various, but all children are under the age of twenty-one.

Q: Are pets allowed? – Only service animals. There are other services that take in pets.

Q: Are there behavioral screenings? – No. But there are programs that deal with that. No drugs nor alcohol are allowed. There is full time security and administrative staff assistance.

Q: Where do the families come from? – Combination of swaps and local families.

Q: How long is the typical stay? – It was about 8 months pre-Covid. Now it is about a year. There are longer term programs available if needed.

Q: The building being considered is part of the school campus. How do we make sure that this project does not create a risk to student safety? - There is 24/7 staffing and security. The Town will have the phone numbers of everyone in charge of the building and of those running the program. If there is an incident, which has proven to be quite rare, they would be relocated.

Q: Is security armed? - Yes.

Q: How many kids would be in the schools? – A hard number cannot be provided but DESE will ensure that the schools are not overwhelmed.

Q: Are local children given first priority – Yes

Q: Is the school compensated for new children being added to the schools? – Yes. There is federal money through the McKinney-Vento Act by the federal government. There is also state ARPA funding available.

Q: Do you need lunch/dinners served? – Yes, and they would be happy to partner with the school system, depending on costs. Regular breakfast and lunches would suffice, nothing extraordinary or special.

Q: You said that no drugs or alcohol are allowed. How often are units checked? – Living spaces are checked at least weekly. Security staff will work with the Police department and abide by any rules that are set.

Q: Is wear and tear part of the lease? - Yes, the program will take care of damage.

At this point, the Chair requested Police Chief Ken Antanavica to speak on any information that he may have regarding the program. Chief Antanavica stated that he researched the program thoroughly and spoke with the Oxford Police Department. They were not called to the camp during the time that they have been there. There has been one ambulance call, for what turned out to be false labor. The Chief reported that there was some pushback from neighbors, as the camp abuts a high value neighborhood, but that has since subsided. He further reported that they have a good emergency plan in place, and he is satisfied that they will be good neighbors.

Further questions were asked:

Q: Can we do anything to make the site available to public transportation? - The program provides transportation.

Q: Hampshire and Berkshire could be made usable by installing doorways between adjoining rooms. Is this something that could be considered? – Yes, we will visit those buildings next week.

Q: Is there a termination clause in the contract? - Yes. Standard contracts come with a 120-day cancellation clause for either party.

The Chair stated that any further questions should go through the Town Administrator's Office.

Motion 012623-2a: A motion to adjourn was made by Ms. Provencher and seconded by Mr. Bujak at 7:44.

Motion carries 5-0-0.

ADJOURN