

Rutherford College Town Council Workshop
March 10, 2011
6:00 PM

CALL TO ORDER/ Mayor Jimmy O. Huffman, Sr.
(Council McClure and Wallrichs were absent)

Mayor Huffman welcomed the approximate 150 member crowd. He also welcomed Dr. Art Stellar, superintendent of Burke County Public Schools, and members of the School Board, Sam Wilkinson and Buddy Armour.

INVOCATION/ Pastor Sally Queen

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIENCE/ Pastor Sally Queen led the audience in the Pledge of Allegiance,

INTRODUCTION/ Mayor Jimmy O. Huffman, Sr.

Mayor Huffman once thanked everyone for coming out and expressed his own personal reasons for wanting Rutherford Elementary to remain open. Mayor Huffman stated that he enrolled in RCES in 1942 and it was an exceptional school at that time, but it is even better today.

Mayor Huffman then introduced our Guest Speaker, Dr. Stellar, the Superintendent of Burke County Schools.

GUEST SPEAKER/ Dr. Art Stellar

Dr. Stellar began by stating that the consolidation issue impacts the whole school district, not just one community. The consolidation recommendation came about due to declining enrollment and lack of funds. He further stated that a budget, which has to be cut down by 12 million, has to be presented to the County Commissioners on May 15th. Dr. Stellar went on to say that Burke County's highest enrollment was in the 2002-2003 school year. Since then that enrollment has gradually declined. Within the last five years, the Burke County School system has lost 1,000 students and is projected to lose 1,200 within the next five years. The reasons for this are lower birthrate, movement out of the County, homeschooling, and the creation of Charter Schools. This decline is happening mostly at the elementary level. Fewer students mean unused space. He further stated that enrollment in the County is 160 less than September and he knew of only six families that have relocated their children due to the loss of accreditation. Freedom High School currently has 17 or 18 classrooms that sit empty, East Burke has 12 to 14 rooms empty, and Draughn High currently has 8 rooms sitting empty.

John Cort, architect for Burke County Schools emphasized by saying that due to guidelines from the Division of School Planning, an effective efficiency of school operation is an enrollment of 450 to 750 at the elementary level. Even at capacity, Rutherford College will only have an enrollment of 256 students which falls far below 450. The consolidation recommendation of closing the oldest schools with the lowest enrollments is a logical solution. What was acceptable when the building was built is not longer acceptable now due to stricter building codes. Rutherford College is first on this list. The overall capacity of Rutherford College is less than 75%.

Dr. Stellar further emphasized the point of consolidation by discussing finances. He stated that with every school they consolidate, they will save approximately \$500,000 a year. This equals the salaries of 10 teachers. Within the last two years, we have cut 15 million from the budget, including 36% of the administration costs, and we still

need to cut 12 million more from the budget. Dr. Stellar also stated that the school system has not purchased any textbooks in the past three years. He further stated that we are getting less money from the federal and state level due to the low enrollment figures. Catawba County has 3,655 more students than us with only one more school, but they have eight fewer teachers and thirty-one more administrative jobs. There are twelve districts similar to Burke County in North Carolina and we are currently the second smallest. He went on to say that by consolidation, the school system will save \$200,000 in food services alone. There are currently 28 million dollars in repairs that need to be implemented for the schools in Burke County. Rutherford College currently needs one million to get up to code. It is a tough decision to decide to consolidate certain schools but it is even harder to lay off employees.

Dr. Stellar ended his presentation by stating that if consolidated, Rutherford College Elementary students will move to Valdese Elementary.

COUNCIL COMMENTS

Mayor Huffman stated that Council Gary McClure was sick and regretfully unable to attend.

Council Richard Icard- Council Icard addressed the Superintendent and School Board members by asking them to consider the impact of closing this school. Consider the impact on Burke County as well as the families and businesses looking to move into our community. Many students from RCES has graduated to become lawyers, doctors, senators, as well as many other upstanding positions in our community, county, and state. Lastly, he pleaded for them to take in all the aspects of this school and wait it means to our children and to this community. We need this school.

Council Yates Jensen- Council Jensen began by stating that he was RCES class of 1982. He is currently an employee in the Burke County Public School System. He asked that RCES be treated as a special circumstance. Council Jensen further stated that his great-great grandfather Dr. R.L. Abernethy brought education to this community 150 years ago and from then on education has been what this community is about. Education is one of the main reasons for movement into this community. Why don't you redraw the district lines and bring students to RCES instead of sending them out. Lastly, Council Jensen stated that in 1630, John Winthrop, wrote about a "City upon a Hill", why don't we let RCES be that "School upon a Hill."

Council Bill Satterwhite- Council Satterwhite began by stated that this community is founded on the importance of a great education. He asked that they please make an exception of RCES. Learning is not about the capacity of a building nor the age, but is about the bond between a teacher and their student. RCES is the most successful campus in Burke County. Families have moved here from all over to have their children taught within those walls, and those walls will stand long after we've gone. Council Satterwhite further suggested another option such as keeping the school open and allowing any student to attend, no matter what district they are from. We could make this the only public private school in Burke County. Don't close the best and scatter the brightest.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Stacey Smith- Mrs. Smith addressed the board by stating that she previously worked at RCES as a Kindergarten teacher, and that she is speaking on behalf of the teaching staff at RCES. She further stated that she has worked in several different schools and RCES is by far the best. The teachers have an exceptional love for their students. RCES is an Honor School of Excellence and a Blue Ribbon Award winner. The teachers work together many hours outside of a regular school day and I can honestly say that this is not true in every school.

3rd Graders- Three third graders, Rachel Wood, Lacey Garrison, and Liviya Reed, read a book that they had composed in class showed the differences between the past and the present student life. They dedicated their book to all the past, present, and future students. They stated that they loved their school because of its great teachers, great students, and great principle.

Tom Wood- Mr. Wood stated that he was speaking on behalf of the parents of the students who attend RCES. He stated that schools should not be measured by their age; for if that were the case, than UNC Chapel Hill along with other upstanding colleges would be closed due to some of the buildings on their campus's being over 100 years old. He further stated that citizens would be more than willing to help keep up with the needed maintenance of RCES. Mr. Wood also stated that if the elementary school closed than the house values in this area may drop by 9.9%, and once you close them there is no reopening them. In the future when the enrollment numbers pick up, you will be forced to build another elementary school. How is that saving money? According to the 2010 Census, Rutherford College along with other communities in Burke County are growing. In searching on the internet, Mr. Wood found that Rutherford College and Forest Hill Elementary are the top two schools in the County. Many teachers are willing to take a pay cut in order to keep their schools open, administration should be willing too.

Donald Lennex- Mr. Lennex stated that he was a father for two boys who are currently attending RCES. Every day they travel 9 miles from Caldwell County to bring their boys to one of the top rated elementary schools in the state. They do this because they don't want just an average education for their boys but they want the best. He further stated that he was willing to pay \$200 to \$300 a child per year to supplement a portion of the costs. If this school is closed then I will relocate my children back into the Caldwell County education system. Mr. Lennex ended his comments by asking if it were not better to close a larger school.

Richard Jensen- Mr. Jensen pleaded with the superintendent and school members in a heartfelt emotional speech. He stated that he graduated in 1958, and that education is a big part of his life today. His ancestors as well as his children and grandchildren have all had the benefit of an upstanding education in Rutherford College. This school is the heart of this community.

Joseph (last name n/a)- Mr. Joseph began by stating that he felt the superintendent was being untruthful about the budget. He further stated that not five years ago, the school board stated with needed new schools and now all of a sudden we are being told that we are under capacity and need to close several schools. Mr. Joseph ended by saying that it would be so foolish to close the highest performing school in the county.

Martha Martinant- Mrs. Martinant directed her comments to Mr. John Cort, architect for Burke County Schools. She stated that back before Draughn High, Patton High, and Walter Johnson were built, you drew up a plan that said we needed new schools because we were over capacity; now you have drawn up a report that states we need to close schools because we are under capacity. Which one are we supposed to believe?

ADJOURN

Sam Wilkinson and Buddy Armour both stated that if anyone would like to talk with them personally they would stay after to talk with them. Mayor Huffman thanked everyone once again for coming out to support Rutherford College Elementary. Mayor Huffman adjourned the meeting at 8:00 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Jessica S. Bargsley
Town Clerk

Approved:

Mayor Jimmy O. Huffman, Sr.

Date: _____