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TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

Buffalo School Board rebounds, pushes forward commissary, Fosdick Field, restorative trainings

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If August's meeting was dominated by infighting and inaction, September's gathering of the Buffalo School Board was cordial and productive.



Buffalo Schools' engagement on commissary project eases concerns of parents, board members

The School Board and, by extension, Buffalo Public Schools, took a significant step this week toward a new commissary, advanced a long-dormant effort toward a new athletic field at City Honors and sealed a partnership with a local nonprofit to train staff in restorative practices.

All in one meeting.

The flurry of progress Wednesday at Buffalo Academy for Visual & Performing Arts came after the School Board was criticized last month for its lack of decisive action on a new food preparation facility in which fresh meals could be chilled and then delivered across the entire school district. The district, for the most part, currently relies on processed foods.

By passing its resolution, the School Board unanimously gave Buffalo Schools Superintendent Tonja M. Williams Knight permission to engage in lease negotiations with McGuire Development, which during the last two years completed designs for the new commissary at 1016-1044 E. Delavan Ave. with Kideney Architects and a team from Buffalo Schools.

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McGuire has had to wait for several months, however, as the school district allowed its designated developer agreement to expire before construction began.

Board President Sharon Belton-Cottman defended the nine-member group's split decision in August that ultimately delayed progress on the commissary but allowed more public input before this week's vote.

"If something that does not feel right or does not seem right, I feel like our community is better served by a board that is prudent enough to know when to throw the stop sign up and let the green sign go when it's time," Belton-Cottman said. "We've done what we were supposed to do in regards to this. I want to thank everyone for their passion, concerns and their desires."

Williams Knight applauded the School Board and community members for coming together to act on the commissary.

“The most important thing is for the community to know it’s going forward and we’re all working together,” she said.

Commissary plan now has ‘teeth’

The board’s commissary resolution, sponsored originally by North District representative Cindi McEachon, was revised during and after the August meeting to demand the pursuit of state reimbursement on the estimated \$43 million project and a commitment to consistently involve the community – which actually began with four meetings held with various stakeholders last week.

The document calls for the creation of a Commissary Construction Advisory Committee that includes community representatives and presses for a **community benefit agreement**, a contract that gives community members a voice alongside developers to ensure the surrounding community is respected, minority- and women-owned businesses represented in construction and hiring, and nearby neighborhoods experience some direct benefit.

Jessica Bauer Walker, a parent group leader who raised the possibility of a community benefit agreement at a meeting at the existing commissary last week, applauded the School Board for heeding the suggestion. She said the addition gave “teeth” to the resolution and ensures “residents are a structural part of the process.”

It’s uncertain whether the state Education Department will take the unprecedented step to give Buffalo Schools lease aid on a facility that does not directly educate students. Buffalo’s Chief Financial Officer Jim Barnes said last week that the state would evaluate the district’s proposed lease with McGuire and the current food production capabilities of city schools before making any decision.

The state is more eager, however, for the district to earmark some of its roughly \$30 million surplus in its food services budget, which may be used toward commissary lease payments.

Formal steps for Fosdick Field



Long-delayed City Honors Field transfer nearing completion: 'There is momentum'

Although it was not brought up at the meeting, the School Board in its consent agenda approved a district resolution to acquire Fosdick Field, the green space in front of City Honors that since 2016 has been planned as an athletic field for school and neighborhood use.

The resolution lays out an agreement between Buffalo Schools, the City of Buffalo, the City Honors/Fosdick-Masten Park Foundation and the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority in which 172 E. North St., as well as two adjacent lots, would be restored to the school district for \$2.05 million.

To follow state education law, the City of Buffalo must purchase the properties on behalf of Buffalo Schools and hold title. The school district will use a \$500,000 grant from the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation, \$500,000 fundraised by the City Honors/Fosdick-Masten Park Foundation and \$1.05 million of its own money to pay the BMHA.

“Our neighbors, our 1,100 students and Buffalo’s second-largest school needs this resource,” City Honors Principal William Kresse said last month. “Everyone is healthier and happier when they have green space available to them.”

Restorative help for BPS

A Common Council education committee meeting last winter chaired by Zeneta Everhart spotlighted community organizations and nonprofits that could make useful district partners.

The Buffalo School Board took another step forward with one on Wednesday: the Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition.

The nonprofit, led by Dina Thompson, veers from punitive disciplinary strategies and instead advocates conflict resolution through face-to-face accountability and conferences between students, parents and school staff. The organization’s trainings and consultation in the Cheektowaga-Sloan School District led to impressive results and a refreshed school climate, according to that district’s leaders.

In July, Buffalo Schools committed \$100,000 of its Partnership Schools money to pay for ECRJC’s work in the district’s alternative school, Academy School 131, which educates students with lengthy disciplinary records and often great academic need. On Wednesday, the School Board approved \$43,000 to fund ECRJC’s training of school staff in restorative practices at International School 45, BUILD Academy and Highgate Heights, all elementary schools that aim to improve their disciplinary practices.

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