

RSU 18 Rome Director's January update

\$13.9M bond, academic excellence, personnel changes and the 18/19 budget

1/4/18

Everyone,

As always I hope you will reach out to me by phone, in person or email to share your thoughts and perspectives. (397-5332 acook@rsu18.org)

The News (some interesting, some less so but all important):

- The \$13.9 M capital improvement bond referendum passed. From the perspective of providing funds to do overdue safety upgrades, repairs and facilities upgrades to each of the schools this is a big positive.
- Our Chief Financial Officer, Bobbi Avery, is moving to a new opportunity at the Lewiston school district. This is a great loss. She was superb.
- An "academics" report from our Chief Academic Officer, Keith Morin, is now part of every school Board agenda. This is a wonderful step forward. For sure academics are what the schools are all about. I am heartened.
- Our Rome Academic Options Exploratory committee is hard at work. They are iterating with the RSU 18 administration, looking at other possibilities and asking me to research questions related to schools and options. I look forward to hearing their report at our town meeting.
- And kudos to the Belgrade School Board Directors, especially Becky Seel, the China School Board Directors and a Sidney Director. They voted for a policy change which ensures that each town will be represented on at least one of the Board's standing committees. This year Rome was blocked from representation on the standing committees. The vote corrected that.

Other considerations:

- This last item may seem hardly worthy of note. But surprisingly it is very important given the three major issues that face the Board and all of us. All three of these issues will take vigilance and active involvement by all the Board members, all the committees and all of us in Rome if the outcomes are to be positive.
- **The capital projects: The \$13.9M in capital projects will be the biggest capital effort the district has undertaken in years.**
 - o For everyone who has done a home project, built a house or been involved in a major business project you know how easily projects can over run their budget and come in with major delays. In extreme cases (like the Panama Canal) the project can be a factor of 10 over budget and decades late. In some cases projects (notably big power plants, new airplane designs, etc.) fail altogether.
 - o The way to avoid that outcome is careful planning, strong project leadership and rigorous, regular project reviews. I am strongly recommending that we do all of those, not just for the \$3.9M athletic project (that one is obvious) but also for the entire remaining \$10M of seemingly "cats and dogs." For sure, as noted by Selectman Malcolm

Charles, we don't want to find the athletic field project reaching into the kitty for funds that were intended for the schools.

- The Superintendent is working to hire one or two "owner's representatives" to watch dog the projects for the RSU. They will monitor (and control) change controls, ensure the work and invoices are reconciled etc. We still need the project plans (milestones, funding by milestone etc.) and also a schedule for the project reviews.
- I am encouraging quarterly, rigorous project reviews of the entire \$13.9M project, separate from board meetings so we can take the time to really bore in on the work. If there are some of you who have experience in managing capital construction projects I would love to get you involved in the reviews if we can help to make them occur). Call me! I will keep you posted as to how this goes.
- **Academics: It remains the case that we are not yet at the exemplary position our district once held in terms of academics in the state.** One can take issue with the measures used to determine our relative academic success (MEA scores, NWEA scores etc.). However every measure I have been shown has demonstrated a decline over the last 8 years. We seem to be starting to recover but one could also argue that the improvement could be statistical variation and not a trend. As I have mentioned, the heartening point is how well the Belgrade Central School is doing.
 - That raises the question, how could that level of success be achieved at all our schools?
 - We are urging the administration to create a written 5 year academic excellence strategic plan and make it public. It would be the way forward to show us all how the RSU can and will take us back to top. We can do it. It has been done before.
 - But achieving academic excellence is just like the major projects. Careful written preplanning is needed with regular progress reviews – and of course an overriding conviction that this an important effort and that we can do it is also needed.
- **The Budget-** so both of **these topics come to a head in the upcoming budget cycle.** Last year we had the largest budget increase in years. Now we have added to that the largest bond issue (and payments) in years. It remains the case that our enrollment is flat or declining.
 - My perspective is (and remains) that we are dramatically underspending on the education of our students in the RSU. Not in Rome, in the RSU. In terms of actual out-of-pocket taxes Rome continues to be the highest per student payer into the RSU. We remain dramatically higher than three of the five towns.
 - If all the towns contributed on a per student basis like Rome we would be off and running academically! However that is not likely to occur and several even take issue with presenting the cost of education in this way.
- **Regardless, the issue will soon face us** – will we support a budget increase? Today my perspective is –
 - **If we get a good, solid 5 year academic excellence improvement plan – then I would support a budget increase.**
 - However in the absence of a plan, I do not see how any of us could support any increase.

Action: Now is the time to express your perspective and provide input for the 2018/19 budget. Come to school board meetings. Speak in the "delegations" portion. Express your opinion. Now is when you can

have an impact. By the time we get the “public hearings” your voice is meaningless, the wheels are already in motion. I learned this the hard way. If you wait to the “public hearings” to speak you are too late to impact the outcome, other than by your vote.

I hope you will come and speak. **The next Board meeting in January 17 at 7 PM at the Administration building.** You have to speak during the “hearing of delegations” section (agenda item 3).

People question if Rome is just trying to “save a buck” or whether we really do care about our young men and women and their education. I know you do care – the people in Rome want to be sure our young men and women get the very best education we can afford. **Now is the time to speak up.** If we keep the pressure on I am sure we can once again make RSU 18 one of the best districts (if not the best) in the State. And that will be wonderful (and our goal) for the important young men and women from Rome!

Yours in helping our students by helping RSU 18 set the standard for academic excellence for public schools in Maine.

Rome – a great place to live, and a great place to grow up!

Dr. Andrew Cook
397-5332

p.s. If you want to talk or have thoughts, please call me or email me!

acook@rsu18.org

p.p.s. It is with trepidation and reservation that I have decided to run again for school board. It has been just an amazing experience. Rome seems has the least number of votes and often gets ignored. On the other hand we seem to be the town most firmly concerned about the quality of our student’s education. Several years ago when I was a new board member I reviewed the apparent decline in academic performance with a member of the administration. He said, “Where has the school board been?” Good point.

Well **we are here now and Rome is being heard now.** And we are all about academic excellence for our students.

If you feel I am on track, **please come out and vote for me on March 9, not as a vote for me but as a signal that you support our effort to take RSU 18 back into the realm of top 10 schools academically in Maine.**