

## RSU 18 Rome July update

### “Fire Safety, facilities maintenance, academic needs, food service debt, building consolidation and track and field”

**It's all on the table at the 7 PM Wednesday August 9 School Board meeting at the Middle school**

If you have a perspective on any or all of these issues it would be great if you could attend and speak. The July 12<sup>th</sup> meeting was quite stimulating and intense. Rome, RSU 18 and most importantly the students need your voice and your thoughts.

Everyone,

A quick up date. I am titling this update “**running a 3000 student school district on a shoe string.**”

RSU 18 has been running on a shoe string for many years. It may not seem that way to you but indeed it is the case. As a result a variety of important issues have been continually deferred without funding or resolution. These include:

- **Fire safety upgrades** for all our buildings that have been formally identified by the State Fire Marshall's office,
- Basic building **maintenance** including student drop off areas, roofs, bathrooms, kitchens, ADA (American Disabilities Act) upgrades to play areas, ambulance access to athletic fields, athletic field (track) conditions,
- Out of date science “lab” classrooms,
- Unfunded accumulated **food service debt** (It's substantial – approaching \$500,000),
- Building/school **consolidation** and
- The high school **track and field**

To the credit of an intense & mobilized group, this has all come to a head around a question of taking a \$4M bond issue to vote in November. The money would be used to rebuild the high school football field and track with a modern synthetic surface. The All Sports Boosters Club and the School Board Extra Curricular Activities Committee are strongly urging the Board to allow the \$4M bond issue to go to vote. It is to their credit.

However several members of the board, me included, are concerned that we may not have our priorities set out well. And maybe of greater concern, we may not (don't) have a plan to address and fund the several other important issues listed above. This has led to a fair amount of tension. It will all come to a head at the August 9 meeting. The Superintendent will present a five year (or more) capital investment plan so we can all see what is ahead of us. I hope he will present his recommended approach and timing to get these many issues funded, addressed and resolved.

As usual I believe our district can again be one of the best in the State, if not the best. However we have slipped over the last 8 years. We have slipped academically and we have slipped in terms of addressing these issues. As a result of managing the district “on a shoe string”, these issues have now accumulated into a significant bow wave. It is a bow wave that needs to be addressed. The questions ahead of us all are:

- Do we have the collective wisdom to address these issues in priority order and
- Do we have the will to accept the cost that is for sure ahead of us?

For my part I am more than willing to see us address all of them and get on with it. It will be a substantial impact for us. However things are not going to get better by continuing to defer them. And if we do address them, things will get a lot better for our students – the people we all care about.

#### **Andy Cook’s Perspective:**

My priorities (and the way I am voting at board meetings) are in this order:

- **Fire safety first** – get the requested modifications done and installed asap,
- **Basic building maintenance**, ADA compliance, ambulance friendly access roads, drop off areas, roof leaks, kitchen upgrades – do it now,
- **Food service debt** – pay it off soon – our auditors are on our case to get it done!
- **Academic upgrades** – do it soon and next on the list,
- **Building consolidation** – get the wheels rolling – we are over due to reduce the elementary schools in Oakland by one and for consolidating the schools in China. Our failure to address these two topics is resulting in added costs which means money unavailable for the items noted above. One apparent complication is that Maine State law says each town must, on its own, agree to close the schools (or not) in its town. This complicates things since consolidation benefits all, but a school closure may be seen as adverse for the town it is in. But this is no reason for us to not press ahead and get the process moving.
- And then address the high school **track and field** upgrade. I have been clear about this in board meetings. This upgrade will primarily benefit Oakland. China has almost no high school students at the high school (they are all at Erskine Academy). Further primarily the town of Oakland will benefit during non-school hours. Rome, China, Belgrade and Sidney are too far away. I wish, hope and desire that Oakland will somehow step forward and accept more of the cost of this upgrade than the current RSU 18 “cost sharing” formula would suggest. As it stands Rome and Belgrade would pay a disproportionately high share of the cost for the track and field while Oakland would get a disproportionately high share of the benefit. Something here is not settling well for me.

I think we could do all the things. We are probably looking at a bond issue on the order of \$14M or greater. But it is overdue. The district has been run on a shoe string for too long. Now these issues will not go away.

I give full credit to the people who are focused on the high school track and field. They have for sure precipitated long overdue board attention to these issues. However I am unwilling to proceed on the track and field unless we simultaneously address formally, in writing, these other topics.

I sincerely hope you will weigh in on these topics either at the meeting(s), with the Superintendent (Carl Gartley), with the School Board Chairman (Jim Isgro) or with me. At this point the voices for the track and field literally drown out any other perspective.\* For myself, my position – which I think makes sense and I hope you support, has resulted in some unpleasantness. More specifically Rome has been excluded from being on any of the Board standing committees. We are the only town so excluded. Needless to say I am as unhappy about this situation as I am sure you are. I am working to get this corrected.

I think we are on a good track, we can get these issues addressed. They are a major step towards making RSU 18 the academic leader for public school education Maine. I am optimistic that the Board will do the right thing – soon. However it is for sure not smooth sailing. I appreciate any support, counsel, insights or comments you provide.

On a very positive note our Rome Academic Options Exploratory Committee is hard at work. I had an opportunity to meet with them at their first meeting. They are a wonderful set of people who are knowledgeable about public school education and RSU 18. I am quite optimistic about the outcome of their research. We are in good hands!

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

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\* **Note:** Our Selectmen read a letter into the record at the last School Board meeting stating the same priorities as I outlined above. It is to their credit that they did this. It was wonderful to see their thoughtfulness and their support of our students! Kudos to Richard, Lois and Malcolm!