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Devens education deal may hinge on shared superintendent

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HARVARD -- The option to educate Devens students that several area schools were vying for has come down to Littleton and Harvard.

Harvard's chances to win the contract were good, according to Superintendent Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson is authorized to represent the School Committee at the table. However, an unanticipated wrinkle has developed that could be a deal breaker. In addition to educating middle and high school students, MassDevelopment wants the contracted district to provide a superintendent to oversee a new Devens elementary school as well.

The deal was to educate Devens students in grades seven through 12 that MassDevelopment will pay the receiving district \$10,000 per pupil -- twice the amount the state pays districts for students under the School Choice program -- plus a \$90,000 annual staffing fee and \$100,000 in capital improvement costs spread over the five years of the contract.

The district would also get a pass through on special education costs. For each Devens student with an individualized education plan (IEP) that exceeded per pupil expenditures, the state would pick up the difference.

Only MassDevelopment informed the two candidates that there has been a change of plans, and they need something more from the five-year contract than the seventh to 12th grade education both districts have agreed to provide: They need a superintendent.

The education plan MassDevelopment envisioned for the school district at Devens was to tuition out middle and high school students and create a charter elementary school on site. However, that is not a workable scenario.

Although the elementary school can operate under certain charter-like principles, it will be an operating district school by law, which requires a superintendent. This news comes late in the planning process. According to School Committee member William Wickman, who has served on the Devens Education Advisory Board (DEAC), it was a surprise to MassDevelopment, thus the sudden scramble to change the scope of the contract.

School Committee Chairman Paul Wormser, Wickman and Jefferson came to the Board of Selectmen (BOS) meeting Tuesday to talk about the issue. They said the other finalist, Littleton, is ready to accept the new provision, and MassDevelopment has clearly indicated that this is an all or nothing proposition.

"This is outside the scope of the original proposal. Before we commit, we came here for guidance," Wormser said.

Jefferson thought the duties called for would be minimal if he wore a second superintendent's hat since his role at Devens would mostly be advisory, and day-to-day operations would be handled by a principal.

The state sees the set-up as a cornerstone of how the new school district will operate at Devens, said Jefferson. He was paraphrasing the deputy director of the Department of Education (DOE), whom he said was present when MassDevelopment unveiled the new plan.

"I would be consulting overseeing, signing off, but not directing, as I do here," he said.

The school would be small, about 40 students. He estimated the administrative time it would take from Harvard at five percent. Sharing a superintendent among districts is nothing new, he said. It is common practice in some areas of the state.

If Harvard won the bid and agreed to share the superintendent with Devens, said Wormser, the contract would spell out the division of time, and would emphasize that his primary job was here.

Taken as a package, Wormser sees the Devens education contract as a chance to reap great returns on a small investment.

The selectmen were divided on the matter. Lucy Wallace favored the idea. Besides the financial advantages, she sees a chance to mend fences and build good community relations with Devens residents. Scott Kimball would prefer to involve the public in the decision process. Robert Eubank had reservations, but was supportive. Chairman William Marinelli was solidly against it.

Tracing the history of the Harvard school district bid to educate Devens students, Wormser said the School Committee had responded to MassDevelopment's request for proposals last summer.

At that time, the contract they sought called for educating Devens students in grades seven through 12, which would mean

taking in about 25 students at Bromfield. The incentive is financial, Jefferson said.

Regarding the notion that the workings of the arrangement have been less than up front, Wickman said it has been discussed several times at public School Committee meetings, covered in local newspapers and broadcast on TV.

In an arrangement similar to the choice program that allows students to attend schools in different districts at state expense, the receiving district would get added funding. Bromfield could easily accommodate the additional students, Jefferson said, and the income would be a boon to the district.

The catch is that contracted district is now being asked to provide a superintendent and central office administrative services for a planned elementary school at Devens for an added \$50,000 a year.

Marinelli, who was all for taking in Devens students, was strongly opposed to the shared superintendent idea. It raised liability issues. They also ran the risk of getting enmeshed in issues that would almost certainly plague the new school system, he said.

"The Devens population has high educational expectations (that may be unrealistic)," he said.

In his view, MassDevelopment has been feeding their dreams with promises and the outcome could be a disaster.

"We would end up owning that mess," he said.

"This is a momentous decision don't you think the whole town should be involved?" said Kimball.

The three School Committee representatives agreed that, unfortunately, there is no time to hold hearings, since MassDevelopment wants to award the contract soon. After much discussion, including questions from the crowd, they left the meeting with a lot to think about.

Asked what would happen now, Wickman said the School Committee would have to meet again to talk about it.

At press time, no additional School Committee meeting had been posted. The next scheduled meeting is Feb. 13.