

January 7, 2024

Town Council
Housing Task Force
Planning Board
8 Newmarket Road
Durham, NH 03824

*RE: ORCSD student capacity per Supt. James Morse
Town Council meeting October 2, 2023*

Greetings,

In the course of my conversation with Michael Behrendt last week, we expressed different takes on/recollections of ORCSD Superintendent Jim Morse's recent comments regarding ORCSD capacity. That led me to look at the approved minutes documenting Dr. Morse's presentation to the Council on October 2, 2023, and, from there, to review the DCAT recording.

It is important that all parties engaged, or potentially engaged, in community planning be on the same page regarding this fundamental issue.

To that end, I have transcribed the relevant passage from that October 2nd Council meeting. That transcription can be found below the excerpted minutes recording that section of the meeting. Both can be found on the following pages.

- Minutes of the October 2, 2023 meeting of the Town Council may be viewed at <https://www.ci.durham.nh.us/sites/default/files/fileattachments/town_council/meeting/72142/100223.pdf>
- The DCAT recording of that meeting may be viewed at <<https://durham.vod.castus.tv/vod/?video=aafc39f4-5315-4c71-8c3f-666ef995d91e&nav=recent>>

A final note: It may also be worth posting this letter and transcript in the "Other Planning Information" section of the Planning Department's website.

Regards,

Robin

Agenda item B. Presentation on the opening of the Oyster River Cooperative School District 2023/24 school year – Dr. James Morse, Superintendent

ONE: Relevant excerpt from the approved minutes:

...Regarding open enrollment, Dr. Morse said the District still maintains around 2,100 students. It is expected that over the next five years, enrollment will decline somewhat before cycling back up again. He noted that there is limited room for additional students in the school district.

TWO: Transcript from the DCAT recording

[Councilor question period starts about 57 minutes into the meeting, per DCAT]

Councilor Jim Lawson:

....My question is, in just round numbers, so we get a sense of it, how many more students can be accommodated at Mast Way and Moharimet before we have to look at adding classroom capacity?

Dr. James Morse:

So I actually get this question it seems like annually now from the committee that the Council has in play about workforce housing. I've responded in writing to the committee, I've responded to Al [Howland, member of the committee] specifically on this issue.

There is almost no room at Moharimet and Mast Way for additional elementary kids before we would have to start thinking about additional classroom space, adding on to the buildings, and so forth.

We added on to the Mast Way school pre-Covid, and we added on to the Moharimet school pre-Covid.

If you go back to the beginning of my time in the district, there were 417 children at Moharimet school, and the building is designed to hold about 320. It has 300 in it. So, you could say well, there's 20 spaces. The same thing is true for Mast Way. It has about 320 in it, and it is designed for about 340. So, you could say, well, there's 20 spaces there.

The problem is they don't, when people move in, they don't magically land in the spots where there are spaces. So, for example, in the third and fourth grade at both schools we're bursting at the seam. So Murphy's Law would be that a family moves in, what grades are they going to hit? Third and fourth grade. So

we have elbow room of about 8 kids at kindergarten. We have zero elbow room at third and fourth grade.

Now, the middle school is now beginning to get a little smaller each year by about 30 kids. And the reason that is that the elementary enrollment had decreased. This goes back to the cycle of enrollment. So you could say, Wow! We should be making room for students at the middle school, and the middle school will fill back up on its own.

However, I did share with the board an idea that I think is worth pursuing, which is, you know, if we sold 20 seats at the middle school to area school system parents, you know, that's \$20,000 a pop. And so, right now, we have a family that's paying full tuition for their child to come to the middle school, which is really what sparked this idea. What drew that family to our school was the strings program.

So, there is a lot that could be marketed—without going crazy—at the middle school. And of course the high school, we are fortunate enough to have the Barrington tuition agreement, which is bringing in about \$3.5 million worth of revenue, and so the high school today is very similar in size to the high school of five years ago, but about—give or take—200 kids more than it was when I came in.

So, the high school is full in the same sense that Mast Way and Moharimet are full.

So, the only place that the district has wiggle room is the middle school, and we could absorb children there, but you'd have to do it wisely. You couldn't just open the doors and, you know, flood the school, but if you did it wisely through tuition, making it marketed, I think that you could bring in 20 kids a year at \$20,000 a year. So, there's some decent money in tuition initiative. But that requires a certain strategy and public relations—and support of the school system itself. That's just an idea I floated.

Councilor Carden Welsh:

But is that pretty much it, just 20 for the whole middle school?

Dr. Morse:

No. You could bring in as many as 100, Carden, if you were aggressive. I would think that you'd want to start small and make sure it worked.

Councilor Welsh:

But when we look at, for instance, the housing subcommittee, which we're going to talk about later, if it's 100 for the middle school, it's, say, 25 a grade if they magically match?

Dr. Morse:

Yeah, but remember, they're not going to, because they're going to come in K through 12. They're not going to come in just at the middle school, and so you start pushing the envelope at the elementary, and you're going to turn right around and end up in a building project.

Councilor Welsh:

Got it.

Councilor Lawson:

Of course, even though there's fixed costs for the additional students, the funding formula still shifts the cost to Durham.

Councilor Joe Friedman:

How long is the agreement with Barrington, and is that somewhat variable—the Barrington resident just decides which school district they want to go to?

Dr. Morse:

Sure. It was a 10-year agreement, and I believe it ends next year or the year after. But it has an interesting clause in it, which is, if neither system makes a move, the contract continues. So if Oyster River said we don't want to do this any more, we would have to give Barrington a four-year notice. If Barrington said they didn't want to do it anymore, they would have to give us a four-year notice. The four-year notice is to make sure entering freshmen aren't short-changed in their sophomore year, or junior year, or senior year, so that's what it's all about. So it just continues, as both districts are comfortable. Nothing stops, either district form saying let's renegotiate the contract, but it doesn't end until one or the other says, let's call this a day.

Councilor Friedman:

And how regular is the population coming in from Barrington?

Dr. Morse:

It's actually, we were, so they had a really small eighth-grade class, and we ended up with almost 50 of them, and 50 is our limit per year, so 200 is our

max. And we have around 180, 185 kids, and so the Barrington tuition agreement has really worked well for the school system. It's worked really well for the students as they blend into the Oyster River High School. And I would say it's nothing short of a total success in terms of the EXPERIENCE as well.

Carden?

Councilor Welsh:

Dr. Morse, were there any unexpected problems at the middle school with the opening?

Dr. Morse:

Yeah, no.

Councilor Welsh:

And, secondly, how is the energy system working there?

Dr. Morse:

Thank you, Carden, I appreciate the question. *[end of transcript; conversation continues but not relevant to the topic of this letter]*