

Chairperson Tessa McKinley's statement

Public Participation

ABRSC Meeting 1/7/2021

As a committee, we rarely respond to comments and questions raised during public speak. The reason for this is that they are often items outside of the agenda. I need to clarify a few things, however, because over the course of the last few weeks, a few members of the community have persisted in presenting information that is incorrect. I understand that there are members of the community who disagree with our unanimous vote to retire the colonial mascot. They have persisted in presenting their concerns at all of our meetings since the decision was made. So, let me clarify. Prior to our decision to retire the mascot, all members of the committee were aware that two petitions had been created. While we were aware of both petitions, let me be clear: only ONE petition was officially presented to the committee (with all of its signatures) and that was created by the students of ABSEJ in their efforts to retire the mascot. In our efforts to understand the perspectives of all stakeholders, a request went out on September 25 for public comment.

“The Committee recognizes that the Acton-Boxborough community includes many members and groups who may have a variety of views on the issue before the Committee. The School Committee will deliberate on the petition again and consider action at its meeting on October 15, 2020. We invite the public to submit comments in writing by Wednesday, October 14th by emailing us at abrsc@abschools.org. While we recognize that public comment is not a vote, we are interested in hearing a variety of opinions on changing the mascot to help make our deliberation more meaningful.”

The creators of the petition to keep the mascot DID write to the committee and they DID meet with the superintendent about their concerns. When the students wrote to us originally, they made clear their desire to remain anonymous. The original request they made was to meet with the committee between meetings. Because we are a public body, we cannot as a committee meet with individuals outside of our open meetings, so the Superintendent met with them. One of these students later emailed us again as part of our request for public comment. The student made us aware of the second petition and that it had 2300 signatures, but the petition was not sent to us. Regardless, when we met to deliberate, we met with the knowledge of its existence and that there was a large group in the community who wished to preserve the colonial mascot.

We have heard comments that all sides were not represented but this is not accurate. As our request stated explicitly, public comment was NOT going to be considered a vote. Our mailboxes were flooded with comment; nearly 700 emails were received and read. While there were many impassioned letters about the merits of keeping the colonial, most of the responses we received from people interested in maintaining the mascot, were simply names with a subject line of “keep the colonial.” Let me repeat: This was not a public vote and it was never intended to be. As many members noted in the statements on 10/15, we all spent many hours reading the comments of our community members. Not only did we receive letters from current students and staff, we received letters from alumni, community members and elected officials. This unanimous decision was not made in a silo and it was made with the support of the high school principal and the superintendent as well as other members of the leadership team.

One of the most passionate community members wrote a letter that was shared by many who wished to keep the mascot. That member of ABRHS class of '89 was impassioned in his defense of the values he felt were at the core of the colonial mascot. After our unanimous decision, he again wrote to the committee.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'd just like to say well done. Thank you for the well considered discussion of the retirement of the Colonial. You are each a credit to the town. I logged into the meeting very much in favor of keeping the Colonial. I left convinced that its retirement was the right thing for the school. I am prayerful that the community can quickly decide on a new mascot that all students can claim as their own. “

I understand that we are not all going to agree but to claim that we did not listen or consider all perspectives is false. This decision has been made by unanimous consent. We, as a committee, have many other responsibilities to the students of our district and we will not be reconsidering our vote.