

The Rockbridge County School Board held a special joint meeting with the Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors on Thursday, January 16, 2025. The meeting was held at the Rockbridge Innovation Center.

Present: Chairman Kathy Burant; Trustees Corey Berkstresser, Catie Brown, Lenna Ojure, Neil Whitmore; Assistant Superintendent Timothy Martino, Clerk Rhonda Humphries.

Board of Supervisors Members Present: Leslie Ayers, R.W. Day, A.J. Lewis, D.E. Lyons, David McDaniel; Spencer Suter, County Administrator and Clerk to Board.

CALL TO ORDER

School Board Chairman Burant called the meeting to order at 5:02 p.m.

Supervisor Ayers inquired how school was going after the extended Winter Break.

- Mr. Martino, Assistant Superintendent, stated that staff and students seem to be happy to be back at school. He stated that the Rockbridge Innovation Center is open and expressed two of his sentiments that the natural light is great for learners. He further stated that it was good to see more studying taking place in the Commons area of RCHS, and to see more students talking to one another and more students in the library. He feels this is a result of the new cell phone policy.
 - Supervisor Ayers inquired how the implementation of the cell phone policy has been going.
 - Mr. Martino responded that students may not have their cell phone on their person; the exception being if there are health needs or if a translation is needed. Most students put their cell phone in their book bag. He expressed that it will be interesting to hear from learners in five months as to what they think of the cell phone policy. He echoed Dr. Mike Craft, Principal, Rockbridge County High School, that in his tenure, the cafeteria is the loudest with students talking, than it has been in a very long time.
 - Chairman Burant stated that students knew it was coming and expressed that a big factor had to do with how staff reacted.
 - Trustee Whitmore stated that other school divisions had utilized other different level of approach. He stated that there will be a Summer 2025 re-evaluation to see how the process is working.
 - Trustee Brown stated that the feedback she had heard reflected that it had been seamless with no problems.
 - Mr. Jason Kirby, Chief Business Officer, stated that the students at RCHS are excited to be in the new building with CTE programs.

Supervisor McDaniel inquired how students who are not currently taking CTE classes are being made aware of the new building and programs.

- Mr. Kirby stated that the Curriculum Night is taking place on the evening of January 16, 2025. He also stated that core teachers are making information known and making it available for interested students to take tours of the programs.

FY26 BUDGET OVERVIEW

Mr. Suter stated that it is early in the budget process with the department budgets being due to him today. He stated that the Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors adopted the Capital Improvement Projects Plan at their January organizational meeting. He stated that there may be changes in the budget and are required to have an adopted budget by the end of April.

- Supervisor McDaniel stated that the RCHS bleachers and NBE HVAC need to be removed from the FY25 CIP as they are now complete. He also stated that there has been discussion multiple times about a multi-purpose room that may be housed on campus and that the Board of Supervisors will move money from escrow to study the need.

Mr. Suter stated that the Governor's budget is still wrangling with the General Assembly. The county has a good software system in place, but that Tyler is being considered and is ranked at the top for the finance department software. He stated that they should have the first contract soon and will be subject for approval at their next meeting.

Supervisor McDaniel stated the FY27 CIP has the auxiliary gym for RCHS and CES as a multi-use gym. He suggested they come out and have the CES gym and RCHS auxiliary gym together and then break them out.

- Mr. Martino stated that the special permissions have been cut back for CES which has helped to lower the ratio but the gym is still the lunchroom. He stated that that special permission for teachers is still granted.
 - Supervisor Lewis stated that all need to be cognizant of the needs of parents and the benefit to our teachers who need special permission.
- Trustee Berkstresser stated that there have already been site surveys and feasibility studies completed.
 - Supervisor Ayers stated that the Board of Supervisors would like to see the numbers again.
 - Trustee Whitmore stated that Spectrum Design touched on it but that a new study would give a better picture.

Mr. Spencer stated that a top priority is still school security. The new technology at the middle and high school provides an internal visual look at the school with internal mapping.

(Mr. Randy Walters, Chief Operations Officer, was not in attendance yet; he will provide more information upon his arrival.)

- Chairman Burant stated that the elementary schools will follow later.
- Supervisor Day inquired about GPS tracking for busses.
 - Mr. Martino stated that it has been on busses for a few years for RCPS, but is not available for parents to track busses.
- Supervisor McDaniel inquired if there is an app for teachers to use if they are in distress in their classroom.
 - Mr. Kirby stated that there is a BETA test that can be put on phone and computer.

Mr. Kirby stated that the school division administration is giving a best estimate now based off of the Governor's budget with a projected increase in State Funding for FY26 at \$483,043. The projected total of additional needed funding for FY26 is \$997,375.

Mr. Kirby provided the following highlights:

FY26 Estimated Funding Projects/Needs

- RCPS Local Composite Index (LCI): The state determined Rockbridge County to have a higher ability to pay for education when compared to the last biennium. The increase in LCI for the FY24-26 biennium equates to a lesser percentage of state funding for RCPS, with hopes it goes down in the next biennium.
- RCPS Average Daily Membership (ADM): The RCPS FY25 budget is based on a locally projected ADM of 2200. The state projected ADM for FY26 is 2231, a difference of 41 additional students. We do not feel that this is an accurate estimate of our ADM for the upcoming school year due to our internal projections. When budgeting for FY26 and using an ADM of 2200 the estimated increase in state funding revenues with the Governor's proposed budget will be approximately \$483,043 more than FY25 state revenues. This increase is contingent on RPCS giving a 3% raise effective July, 2025. If we do not give this raise, our revenues will decrease with each percentage that our raise declines.
- RPCS FY26 Mandatory Budget Considerations:
 - Worker's Compensation: increase of \$14,900;
 - Property and Casualty Insurance: increase of \$5,215
- RCPS FY26 Budget Considerations:
 - Employee Salaries: 5% Salary Increase for Staff / with the current state budget including a 3% staff salary increase, we will need to be ready to keep pace with surrounding school divisions as they will be prepared to continue to increase staff salaries again this year. Each year that we cannot maintain pace with teacher and staff pay, we will begin to fall behind other school divisions as we compete not only for the best teachers but also to simply fill needed teacher and staff positions.
- Mr. Kirby stated that the beginning salary may be better than surrounding areas, but 10-15 year teachers may leave for surrounding areas because of salary amounts. He stated that there are two different approaches when studying surrounding salaries: new teacher salaries, and experienced teacher.
 - Mr. Martino stated that those teachers under the old VRS plans are cognizant that their last three years salary are averaged for their retirement amount.
 - Supervisor Lyons stated that the new plan has been around a long time with teachers aging out and staff leaving for more reasons than salary.
 - Trustee Ojure expressed her sentiment that a good starting salary is attractive and is critical for retention.

- Supervisor Ayers inquired if retirement benefits still outpace other localities.
- Mr. Kirby stated that the Early Retirement Incentive Program (ERIP) is still a good incentive.
- Supervisor Lyons stated that the school division does not have to give all employees the same raise at the same time.
 - Mr. Kirby stated that the division utilized that last year with some employees receiving more of an increase than others.
 - Supervisor Lyons inquired if exit interviews are conducted and what are the findings.
 - Mr. Kirby stated that some are moving or there may be individual conflicts; salary is usually the third or further reason for leaving.
- Health Insurance: RCPS switched to Local Choice (Anthem/Delta Dental) for the 2024-25 school year. Moving forward into the FY26 budget, we hope to have a concrete number in February 2025. RCPS administration is working with One Digital to explore rates and are looking at several options including Local Choice and others to try and control this cost. We are currently looking at a conservative rate increase estimate of 19% which will cost approximately \$708,000.
- Inflation/Rising Costs of Services and Materials: Costs for items such as fuel, technology, and maintenance materials have been on the rise for several years now and we have worked to control these costs and keep the increases within our budget, but it is becoming more difficult to maintain.
 - Mr. Martino stated that during Covid, there was good instructional material available but now that the cost increase is significant.

Chairman Burant continued the discussion of internal mapping for security purposes and requested Mr. Walters to provide more information.

- Mr. Walters stated that the internal mapping will be completed at Maury River Middle School and Rockbridge County High School and then they will look at the elementary schools. The internal mapping provides a digital look, room to room. He stated that grant money has been received to fund the mapping process.

Chairman Burant requested that Mr. Walters address the GPS in buses and county cars.

- Mr. Walters stated that the GPS will provide the location, speed, and reflects when any button on the bus is pushed.
 - Supervisor Day inquired if parents will be able to track bus location.
 - Mr. Walters stated they are in negotiations with the company. Tyler offers that option and that RCPS can install the equipment. There is Safety Grant that would allow parents the capability to download and see the location of the bus and to receive a camera upgrade, which would allow for a remote real-time look at camera and see if a child gets off the bus.

ROCKBRIDGE INNOVATION CENTER

Mr. Walters stated that the completion date for the Rockbridge Innovation Center was December 24, 2025. KNA received the Certificate of Occupancy on December 6, 2025 and RCPS began moving equipment into the building. The punch list of line items is still not one hundred percent, from doors and hinges. He stated that Curriculum Night is being held this evening, with staff, students, and parents in attendance.

- Supervisor Lyons inquired if the project came in on budget.
 - Mr. Walters confirmed that the project was on budget.
- Supervisor McDaniel requested that Mr. Suter communicate with Superintendent Thompson for any change orders.

Mr. Suter stated that the challenge of the recent snow and ice event was the problematic turn-around spots for buses. He expressed his appreciation to Mr. Steve Kingery, Director, Rockbridge County Department of Fleet Services, for preventative maintenance that was done in working to keep roads safe during the weather event; and expressed appreciation to the bus drivers for keeping their buses prepared for the return to school.

ANY ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION: None

ADJOURNMENT

Upon motion by Trustee Berkstresser, seconded by Trustee Brown and passed by 5-0 vote, the meeting was adjourned at 6:04 p.m.

Kathleen M. Burant
Kathy M. Burant, Chairman

Rhonda B. Humphries
Rhonda B. Humphries, Clerk of the Board