

**CRESSONA BOROUGH COUNCIL SPECIAL MEETING  
MINUTES OF OCTOBER 16, 2023  
SALE OF CRESSONA ELEMENTARY TO RIVER ROCK ACADEMY**

**Call to Order:** 6:00 p.m. by Council President, Linda Walinsky.

**Roll Call:** Those in attendance were council members Linda Walinsky, Mike Pascuzzo, Kathy Butz, Robert Barr Michelle Blankenhorn, Mayor Sandi Renninger, Secretary Regina Sonon, Special Council Joe Troy, and on behalf of Systems Design Engineering Matt Davenport.

**Citizens Participation:**

Linda addressed the audience and explained that the meeting will end at 7 pm. She asked that Dr Helsel and the Representative of River Run Academy address the citizens and Council. She requested everyone be respectful of the time constraints and to one another.

**Blue Mountain School Board**

Dr Helsel, Super Intendent and Attorney Eric Prock

Dr. Helsel: spoke briefly regarding the sale of the Cressona Elementary and the students that are attending River Rock. He believes that it is the community's responsibility to educate the kids. The sale was able to move forward once they had the buy in of the other school districts in the county along with the Schuylkill IU. It has been in operation since the beginning of the school year.

**River Rock Academy**

Dr. Richard Fry, Director of Student Engagement, Ryan Woll and Brandon Huff, Regional Managers and Frank Scicchitano.

The kids attending the school are special needs students, they are not court adjudicated. The kids attending are learning or emotional support and AEDY, and special needs students through PALS licensing. They work hand in hand with the districts. Grades 7 through 12 at the Cressona location. The goal is to engage students to prevent the kids dropping out of school. They have been in existence for 20 years.

- **Lori Blugis:** What schools moved out of the county? Why did they leave the county? How many students are currently at the Cressona location? Will it ever become a residential campus?
- **Response:** The schools that closed were not able to meet the licensing requirements, there are currently 8 students at the Cressona location will not offer residential services from Schuylkill County. They are not licensed to offer a residential facility. It is a very structured program to meet the students needs.
- **Chris Blugis:** Inquired about student transgressions, security and has River Rock met with the state police?
- **Response:** The State has 6 Criteria that the student must meet: disregard for school authority, violent threatening behavior, expulsions, misconduct, drug violations, commission of a criminal act on school property. They haven't formally talked to the State Police yet, but they will. They do work with the State Police at the other campuses. When the student arrives, the student is patted down all possessions are bagged and labeled and returned at the end of the day.
- **Andrew Taczik:** Asked who provides transportation?
- **Response:** The home school district is responsible for getting the student to and from school.
- **Ed Kantner:** The process of selling the school?
- **Response:** The hearing is October 30 to make sure the school district is getting a fair market value of the school. They are for profit and will have to pay property taxes.
- **Atty. Troy:** Cited the School Code regarding unused or unnecessary buildings. Statute requires the district to file a petition with the Court of Common Pleas requiring 2 affidavits from appraisers.
- **Thomas Mitsky:** Questioned the appraised value and are there any plans to expand or add on to the school, any plans to fence the property?

- **Response:** At this time no plans to expand the building and will evaluate security plans at a future time.
- **Joan Furman:** What is in place to secure the kids if they are triggered, working in the community and student Capacity
- **Response:** All staff are trained in “Safe Crisis Management” if the student is a threat to themselves or others, they have restraints. The goal is to avoid triggering them. If the kids are meeting their goals, then they are able to work in the community under staff supervision. There are 4 students to 1 staff member depending on the program the kids are enrolled. The school can take in approximately 45 students.
- **Michelle Brennan:** Cited a newspaper article, are you taking in expelled students? If there is a fire, what is the protocol?
- **Response:** They have 2 different licenses; yes, they can be expelled students. The student’s home school is responsible for their education and provide transportation to get the kids to River Rock. Regarding a fire situation the kids will still have adult supervision they have no time to themselves. The child is escorted to and from the bathroom.
- **Lisa Pascuzzo:** Are the funds from the sale of the school earmarked? Will it be used for athletic field expenses?
- **Response:** The money will go into a fund balance and will be used for facility projects or day to day expenses.
- **Dave Ramsey:** Felt the sale of the school wasn’t very transparent. Will the kids filter into the community?
- **Response:** Kids are picked up at their home and picked up at the school at the end of the day. There are no walker students. The kids at the Lancaster campus have participated with Habitat with Humanity for the last 5 years. Also, a rails to trails program at another campus.
- **Renee Williams:** How do you walk the kids to the bathroom if it is 1 teacher to 12 students?
- **Response:** There can up to 3 staff members in a classroom at any given time to meet the student’s needs.
- **Gail Heath:** Asked about the history, how long you have been in operation, any incidents? Community Service details?
- **Response:** Started 20 years ago in York County, to Cumberland County the growth has been organic and through word of mouth. Community Service is never unsupervised, have helped with mowing grass for elderly residents. It’s voluntary and if a student is struggling, they do not do community service. Number of incidents are similar to a public school, there have been a few traffic accidents but nothing of note.
- **Jim McCaffrey:** Maximum number of students and will school run continuously throughout the year.
- **Response:** Will be operating 185 days similar to a traditional school. Looking like 45 students may have a separate school for special ed and autistic children.
- **Cathy Phillips:** Were there other offers to purchase the school? Followed up by asking the audience if they were aware of the sale? Much discussion broke out among audience member.
- **Response:** There were inquiries but no official bids were placed other than River Rock.
- **Atty Troy:** Explained to the audience that the Borough has nothing to do with the sale of the school.
- **Atty Prock:** Said it has been discussed at multiple School Board meetings and that it has been publicized on multiple occasions.
- **Jim Haas:** Asked if the mold had been remediated?
- **Response:** Dr. Helsel responded that there was no mold at Cressona. It was less expensive to consolidate the Wayne and Cressona into a new school. River Rock has a facilities team that evaluates the schools prior to purchasing to ensure that it is in good condition and the students will learn in a safe environment.
- **Fire Chief Mike Pontician:** Recommended reviewing their safety plans with the State Police. They have not reached out to the fire department to review their plans would like to set up a meeting with the school.

- **Unknown Resident** (Recording not Clear): Will students be attending from outside the county? How do you provide lunch?
- **Response:** No agreements from outside the county. Lunch is provided by the Blue Mountain High School cafeteria. River Rock picks up the lunches.
- **Michelle Brennan:** Wanted clarity on when the approval of the sale of the school went through?
- **Response:** According to the Petition, January 19 district had a hearing regarding closing Cressona Elementary June 22 entered into the Rent to own with River Rock and a sales agreement with Salsbury House.
- **Joan Furman:** Asked about where the teachers are coming from and will Blue Mountain do the oversight?
- **Response:** Blue Mountain does not have oversight and the teachers come from all around as long as they have their certifications.

**Adjourn:** A motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Mike and seconded by Linda at 7:01 pm. All Ayes

Respectfully Submitted,  
Regina Sonon  
Secretary/Treasurer