

Board meeting delayed over masks

BY JIMMY LARQUE
STAFF WRITER

Suffolk Police escorted several people, including Chuckatuck Borough School Board representative Sherri Story, from its meeting Thursday after not

complying with a directive from chairwoman Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck to wear masks.

The start of the work session was delayed for 9 minutes as Story argued against a motion to remove her for not wearing a mask, and as

several people in the council chamber of City Hall where the meeting took place argued with Brooks-Buck and told her they would not wear a mask. “Our protocol is that we are still under the CDC COVID guidelines that we have been follow-

ing,” Brooks-Buck said after gaveling in the meeting. “Our mitigation strategies are still in place. All persons who would like to be a part of this meeting must follow those CDC guidelines and our mitigation protocols. All persons who are not

wearing a mask must leave this room. If you want some relief from wearing the mask, (and) you’re not speaking at the mic ... you must step outside.”

After that statement, a motion

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from board vice chairwoman Phyllis Byrum and seconded by Karen Jenkins to have Story removed from the City Hall council chamber where the meeting took place for failing to abide by Brooks-Buck's order to wear a mask passed 4-2, with new board member Heather Howell joining Story in voting no, and Jenkins abstaining.

"Please don't have us have someone take you out," Brooks-Buck said after the vote. "Please put your mask on."

Story indicated that she would not, and Brooks-Buck at that point said she would wait for a Suffolk Police officer to remove Story from the meeting. Brooks-Buck then recessed the meeting for 10 minutes.

Brooks-Buck said that if Story put on her mask, she would not be removed from the meeting. Story said if she were removed, it would be at the board's own risk and threatened a lawsuit against it. She called having her removed "a power play," and that the board was prepared to remove her.

"I would say that none of you have the authority to remove an elected school board member on the basis of a mask," Story said prior to the vote. "We are not under mask mandates. The City Hall is not under mask mandates. I am not an employee of the School Board and I'm an elected official. None of you have that power to remove me from my seat right now for a mask. You do that at your own peril, but you know what will happen if you do this and you do not have the power, and I'm not sure."

Story continued to say that Gov. Glenn Youngkin has made it optional for people to wear masks in public. The governor's Executive Order 2 stated that parents could choose whether or not to have their children wear a mask in

school. An Arlington County Circuit Court granted seven school boards a temporary restraining order against the executive order, while the state Supreme Court refused to hear a claim on procedural issues from Chesapeake parents who sued the governor over his executive order, and it did not issue an opinion on the legality of the order. The state Senate voted 21-17 on SB 79 to make masking optional for students in schools. The House of Delegates has yet to vote on the bill. If passed and signed by the governor, it would go into effect July 1, but it's possible he could recommend an emergency clause that would have the law take effect the minute he signs it. However, both the House and Senate would have to approve such a move.

"I'm an elected official, I'm not an employee," Story said. "If you want to make the employees and the kids wear a mask, you have a right, but you don't have a right to do that to me as an adult, as an elected official. I'm not wearing a mask."

"Then board member Story, you need to leave the meeting," Brooks-Buck said.

"You haven't held the vote," Story said. "I want to hear an oral vote on this."

At that point, a voice could be heard in the chamber saying "Thank you Ms. Story," before a man could be heard saying he would not wear a mask, that he was in a public building and did not have to wear a mask, and Brooks-Buck asking him to leave. She also asked Suffolk Police officers to escort anyone out of the meeting who would not wear a mask. Another man who said he would not wear a mask said she could have a Suffolk Police officer remove him.

"This is City Hall, but this, today, is a School Board meeting," Brooks-Buck said. "We do indeed have the

right to run the School Board meeting no matter where we are. You must leave, sir, or put your mask on."

She said people, including Story, had a choice to wear a mask and stay, or to not wear one and leave. Brooks-Buck said everyone has rights, but that people also have a right to their health and safety.

"Your rights end where ours begin," Brooks-Buck said.

Another person said he had a medical reason to not wear a mask, and when Brooks-Buck asked for such proof, he said he would not share his medical information.

She apologized for the delay to the start of the work session.

"We have been delayed a half-hour with chaos, unnecessary chaos," Brooks-Buck said.

Later in the meeting, Superintendent Dr. John B. Gordon III addressed the pending legislation in the General Assembly. He said he was unsure when the bill would move forward, but that for now, students must still wear a mask on the bus, regardless of how that bill turns out, because that is a federal law that trumps state law. He said the bill does not address staff, and all visitors would still have to wear a mask on school property even should the bill pass. He said everyone must protect one another and said exposure to COVID-19 would only cause more disruptions for students and staff.

"Students will have an option to wear a mask," Gordon said. "Just because it makes it mask-optional, that also means it's optional to continue to wear your mask."

Gordon also said masks can still be required at school board meetings.

"The chair of the School Board has the authority on the conditions of the meeting," Gordon said, repeat-

ing that sentence before adding, "I know we've had comments related to political pieces and things of that nature. To us in SPS, and to me sitting in this seat, it's not about that at all. It's really about making sure that we don't have anything else that could potentially disrupt what has already been a disruptive two years for our students and our staff. That's the entire basis. This is also part of the reason why our mask regulations, mask mandates, are actually part of our regulations for dress code. Now if adjustments are made, we're going to make adjustments."

He said for 99% of students, the school division has not had any issues with them wearing masks at school. He said the division is still sending out letters for positive COVID-19 cases and closing classrooms, having closed two in the previous two days. He said they are sensitive about the topic of wearing masks in schools. He said the division has received support from the vast majority of its staff, along with the Education Association of Suffolk and the Virginia Education Association.

"One of the things that a lot of people sometimes don't want to admit is that it's not really about infringing upon your rights, it's really thinking about the health issues potentially, of the person beside you," Gordon said.

Brooks-Buck said fewer than five people have complained to her about wearing masks, and said she's had numerous parents and staff thank her for continuing the mask policy and keeping people safe in school. The division has ordered 40,000 KN95 masks for SPS staff. She said the board would respect the law if and when it is implemented.

Petition seeks school chair's recall

BY JIMMY LARQUE
STAFF WRITER

More than 800 Suffolk residents have signed a petition filed in the city's Circuit Court to recall School Board Chairwoman Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck.

The petition was filed

Tuesday by Margaret Rankin of the group Suffolk Citizens for Accountability. A show-cause order for the case was issued two days later and a show-cause hearing has been scheduled for 9:30 a.m. Friday, April 22.

The petition alleges that Brooks-Buck "has knowingly,

willingly and purposefully violated the Virginia Freedom of Information Act, and allowed the City of Suffolk School Board to do the same, on repeated occasions," and also "repeatedly silenced any critic" of the board and the school division, "including threatening the removal and

arrest of citizens exercising their Constitutional rights as School Board members." It also alleges that Brooks-Buck has censored and restricted other board members from questioning her actions, and "has deflected her own responsibility for the School Board's failures."

It said Brooks-Buck's actions "constitute a neglect of duty, misuse of office, and incompetence in the performance of her duties as a school board member," resulting in "a material adverse effect upon the conduct of her office, the

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Suffolk School Board and the Suffolk School division as a whole.”

Brooks-Buck has publicly defended herself against the recall effort.

“There have to be grounds for a recall,” Brooks-Buck said at the board’s Jan. 4 organizational meeting. “And since the announcement was attempted to be public at a most inappropriate time, both at (City) Council and at this meeting, apparently there have to be legal reasons for a recall. There are none.”

In a guest column for

the Suffolk News-Herald in January, Brooks-Buck wrote, in part, that “the Nansemond and Whaleyville Boroughs are diverse communities that represent all segments of Suffolk. The citizens understand the issues. Almost 12,000 people from the two boroughs voted in a free and fair election. Those individuals voted their incumbents in for a third and a fourth term, respectively. They know who they want to represent them. The most visible leaders of the anonymous movement do not

appear to live in the two boroughs that are under attack. “Incumbent leaders have simply been targeted. This is the time to take a position, whether or not it is ‘safe, popular, or polite.’ The Suffolk School Board has to make decisions for thousands of children, families and employees in the middle of a pandemic. Pitiful, partisan, power plays consume unnecessary time and energy.”

Circuit Court Judge Matthew Glassman has recused himself from hearing the case. Carl Eason Jr., chief judge of the Fifth

Judicial District, has designated Lawson Wayne Farmer, another Fifth Circuit judge, to conduct all the hearings in the case.

The show-cause order states that Brooks-Buck has the right to demand a jury trial should the recall go to trial.

Brooks-Buck was first elected as the Nansemond Borough representative on the board in 2012, was reelected without opposition in 2016 and again won re-election in 2020 over challenger Andy Hilton with 58.7% of the 7,084 votes cast.

Any recall petitions must be signed by registered voters totaling at least 10% of the number of votes cast in the last election for the office that the person holds. For Brooks-Buck, the 10% threshold is 708 or 709, based on the total votes cast in Brooks-Buck’s 2020 race against Hilton.

The group has also initiated a recall against board Vice Chairwoman Phyllis Byrum, who represents the Whaleyville Borough, but no petition has yet been filed in that effort in Suffolk Circuit Court. Petitioners need at least 485 signatures

to be able to file a recall petition against Byrum in Circuit Court.

State law allows for a circuit court, once it receives a recall petition, to “remove any elected officer or officer who has been appointed to fill an elective office, residing within the jurisdiction of the court” for a number of reasons, including neglect of duty, misuse of office or incompetence in the performance of duties,” which is the apparent reason the group is looking to recall Brooks-Buck and Byrum.

Superintendent sets vision for division

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

Superintendent Dr. John B. Gordon III has a multi-tiered vision for the upcoming school year that seeks to increase community partnerships and parental engagement, puts a foundation in place for a schedule change for high school students, continues

with efforts to attract and retain staff and addresses infrastructure issues at schools across the division.

Gordon, at the Suffolk School Board's June 9 work session, said he wants to increase support for parents of special education students in Suffolk Public Schools through a support group to meet three times per year.

He also plans to establish transition teams to help families of students as they prepare to move from elementary to middle school (fifth to sixth grade) and from middle school to high school (eighth to ninth grade), and from high school to college or the workforce. Chief Academic Officer Dr. Okeema Branch and new Chief of Schools

Dr. Stenette Byrd will be leading this effort.

Gordon said he also wants to make it clearer for parents who they should contact should issues arise in their child's education, and list different staff members' duties and responsibilities. For instance, he said, if they have a problem with a teacher, to contact that person via email, but

also copy the principal on the email.

The division also plans to help parents be more proactive in their child's education by providing academic tips and behavioral strategies while helping build relationships with schools and continue to lower disciplinary

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issues.

The parental partnership program also will include a schedule of events, while providing potential opportunities for them to be involved through coaching, volunteering, parent-teacher associations and booster club organizations.

Gordon noted that he plans to expand partnerships with city businesses to have more of them offering internship opportunities for students. He pointed out the division's 100% workforce readiness rates, "but kids have also lost hands-on experiences because of COVID, so let's have a list of businesses that are already lined up that kind of match up with the fields that we're offering at CCAP (College and Career Academy at Pruden) or for some of our other kids who want to do it because of Project Lead the Way."

He said there are plans to create a "community champions catalog" that lists specific community and financial partners for the 2,325 employees in SPS to patronize for various services. Many of them, he said, already support the school division, or support individual activities within the division.

He has also had discussions with the Suffolk Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, which offered tutoring programs to students during the COVID-19 pandemic, to expand their partnership with the school division.

"We feel with this community leadership, and this community champions plan, that we will have consistency throughout the city and one uniform

message on supporting our kids," Gordon said.

On the instructional side, Gordon said the SPS Summer Series has been a success and will continue this summer with its four programs – Summer Academy for intensive, targeted support and Standards of Learning remediation, continued traditional summer school offerings, a Summer Bridge program to introduce students to new classes and a Summer Explore program where students are encouraged to get out into the community.

He also outlined plans to shift to a four-by-four block schedule in the 2023-2024 school year. He said students would take four classes per semester, and teachers would teach three, but noted that it would require additional instructional staff, because students will be taking eight classes per year instead of seven.

"This is the missing link, right here, to improving our graduation rates," Gordon said.

The graduation rates from 2020-2021 range from 78.7% (down 5.7% from 2018-2019) at Lakeland High School, to 84% (down 6.6%) at King's Fork High School and 92.9% (down 2.6%) at Nansemond River High School.

The four-by-four schedule would allow students to take up to 32 classes in high school over four years and provide incentives for students to stay in school.

He said it also would help increase the number of students who receive advanced diplomas, and reduce achievement gaps

for special education students to allow them more support and resources. Additionally, it will help with English Language Learners, or ELL, giving them more time to master English and graduate on time.

Gordon plans to ask the school board to vote on it in October so the division has time put this in place. He said he wanted to put this in for this year, but thought it might be "too much" coming out of the pandemic.

There also will be increased opportunities for SPS staff professional development, he said, and said some staff members were challenged in returning to the classroom full-time after being in virtual and hybrid formats. He said technology should be a supplement and built into the lesson plans, not necessarily the primary resource for teachers.

The division plans to continue with staff bonuses for new hires (\$250) and hard-to-fill positions (\$2,000) in areas such as math and special education. It plans to expand its reach to find new staff.

Gordon said the division will continue to work through infrastructure issues that include repairing sinkholes at King's Fork High School and adding more security cameras at the division's elementary schools.

He said the division is working with the city to add fiber infrastructure in several areas — from King's Fork High to Elephant's Fork Elementary, from John F. Kennedy Middle to Mack Benn Jr. Elementary, from Col. Fred Cherry

Middle to Northern Shores Elementary and from Florence Bowser Elementary to John Yeates Middle.

He noted work to improve the audio, video and lighting to the King's Fork Middle auditorium, the Nansemond River gym and at Lakeland High.

Several schools are getting their heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems replaced this summer, including Elephant's Fork Elementary and the Lakeland High and Nansemond River High gyms. Other HVAC repairs is planned for Mack Benn Jr. Elementary and Northern Shores.

"These are things that have to be done," Gordon said.

Design work also will begin on a new John F. Kennedy Middle and the school administrative offices, along with painting, roof replacement and floor replacement at several schools.

Work is ongoing on putting in Lakeland High's turf field, and tracks are being replaced at all three

division high schools.

Parking lots also will be resurfaced at Forest Glen Middle, John Yeates Middle, Lakeland and Nansemond River.

In addition, work is nearing completion for Lakeland's Center for Performing and Production Arts, which will start this fall, with classrooms and sound booths being completed this summer. Next year, plans call for its auditorium to be renovated.

There also are plans to replace the mobile unit decking at Kilby Shores Elementary and upgrade fire panels at John F. Kennedy Middle. He said discussions will begin on expanding Northern Shores Elementary.

The division also plans to begin its own pharmacy in partnership with the CCAP pharmaceutical tech program. Gordon credited Chief Financial Officer Wendy Forsman for her role in implementing it. The pharmacy will be located in unused space in the division's operations center, which Gordon said would allow staff to save

money on prescriptions.

The board will receive an updated presentation in August, and Gordon hopes the program can begin by January.

Board members who spoke at the meeting were generally favorable of Gordon's plans for the upcoming school year. Lorita Mayo and Vice Chairwoman Phyllis Byrum spoke in favor of the four-by-four block scheduling, while Heather Howell supported the increased internship opportunities. Byrum also supported the plans for the pharmacy, and Mayo spoke favorably of the support systems being added for students and families transitioning from elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school.

"We can only get better," Mayo said, "and we can improve. And we're always looking for ways to improve. Are we perfect? No. But we're getting there. We're addressing our students' needs and that's first and foremost what we need to do."

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