

River Grove Elementary
Board of Directors Community Meeting
River Grove Commons
Thursday, April 13, 2023 6:00 PM
DRAFT MINUTES

Our mission is to utilize the natural resources, history, arts, and civic stewardship of the community as a foundation for the study of language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, physical education, art, and other curriculum subjects. The place-based learning environment will be student centered, designed by teachers, and reinforced and supported by the local community.

1.0 Call to Order: Board Chair Jessica Hansen called the meeting to order at 6:10pm.

1.1 Roll Call: Katie Bruns, Annie Beck, Lisa Dochniak, Jessica Hansen, Eric Olsen. Greg Beaumont was ill and in attendance via zoom. Also in attendance: Drew Goodson, River Grove Executive Director.

1.2 River Grove Mission Statement: Hong read the River Grove mission statement.

1.3 Conflict of Interest Statement: Hansen read the conflict of interest statement and asked all board members to verbally affirm that they have no conflict of interest with the topics of conversation tonight.

2.0 Approve Agenda: Motion to approve the agenda by Beck . Second by Olsen. All members vote yes. Agenda approved.

3.0 Welcome and Thank You: Hansen welcomed parents and community members. River Grove just had a staff meeting and will now be sharing a proposal with the rest of the school community.

4.0 Property Presentation: Executive Director Drew Goodson
Goodson shared a presentation regarding the school property and potential changes for next year.

Background



September:

- Informed of letter of intent/purchase agreement between Wilder and Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership (MCYP)
- Discussions with Manitou Fund on alternative site planning

November:

- May Township eliminates Youth Camp as a potential conditional use in the conservancy zone (where the property is located)

January-March:

- Conversations begin with Wilder/MCYP on a short-term lease extension
 - Wilder/MCYP indicate they will continue to move forward with the sale and camp plans, displacing River Grove long-term.
- Manitou continues to engage on possible contingencies

- River Grove’s plan has always been to purchase our current property on our own or in partnership with another organization. After May Twp. modified allowable land uses within the Conservancy District to prohibit youth camps, we hoped Wilder might be willing to reconsider selling to us or offering River Grove a lease extension.

Paths Formed



1. Remain at Wilder Forest through a lease extension until a build at the Warner Nature Center property is completed and/or Wilder property becomes available for purchase.
2. Find an alternative site on an interim basis. Board and administration pursued the following site options:
 - i. Architectural firm engagement regarding Warner site(s), including use of temporary buildings.
 - ii. Camp Lakamaga
 - iii. Arcola Mills

Status of Lease Extension for 2023-24



Formal conversations were held with Wilder/MCYP near the end of March on initial proposed lease extension terms. Terms included in ongoing negotiations:

- The school assumes all responsibility for maintenance, repair, and upkeep of the property.
 - Wilder will no longer be providing a dedicated maintenance person.
 - Repair liability includes capital items and insurance deductible.
- The school calendar must end by May 17, 2024.
 - Possible additional week for adults to move items
- Renovations of the property to begin December 2023; school responsible for cost of accommodating displaced classrooms.
- MCYP requiring a “letter of support” from the school supporting their purchase and camp plans.
- \$100,000 security deposit to abide by all terms and conditions of the lease agreement.
- Contingent on Wilder, as the property owner, asking for and receiving approval from Washington County to delay septic system replacement for another year.

Financial Implications of Lease Extension



Expense	Cost
Deposit	\$100,000
Maintenance staff member	\$60,000
Contracted maintenance services	\$40,000
Annual fire sprinkler, fire panel and fire extinguisher inspection	\$3,600
Septic pumping (pending Cty approval)	\$10,000+
Insurance deductibles	Unknown-\$10,000 deductible
Capital expenditures	Avg: \$94,000/year (over past 5 years)
Total	\$300,000->unlimited

Hansen, Hong and Olsen met with representatives from Wilder and Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership in March to negotiate the proposed terms. It was a cordial and positive meeting, but Wilder did not indicate that they'd be willing to eliminate the security deposit or put a cap on potential costs to River Grove for repairs that might be needed in the coming year. MCYP was willing to provide one additional week for adults to move out but the last day of school for kids would need to be May 17, 2024.

Alternative Site: Zephyr Theatre Building



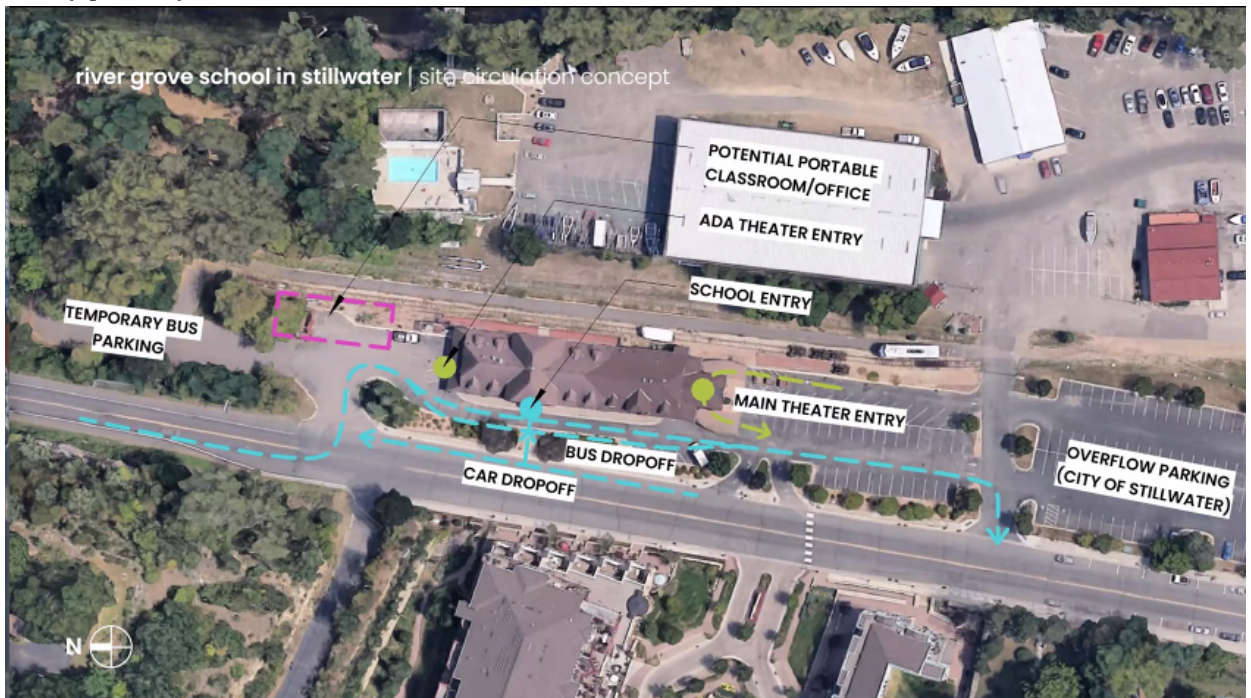
- Manitou Fund and River Grove leadership reached out to the Zephyr Theatre in January to discuss a potential partnership and use of their building as a temporary site.
- Conversations continued about what is possible in the space for River Grove.
- Planning and due diligence conversations occurred between Manitou Fund and Zephyr officials where a potential purchase discussion began.
- Manitou Fund architectural firm and contractors got involved to build a timeline for River Grove feasibility.
- Manitou's legal council reviewed ordinances and other matters.

- Manitou would remodel the property and offer a 2-year lease to River Grove with very favorable terms. There would be an option for the Zephyr to re-purchase the property in the future or for River Grove to extend the lease by another 2yrs if needed. This arrangement would also provide River Grove with unlimited access to the Warner Nature Center property. Manitou has also pledged their support and intention to build a new state-of-the-art environmental school at the former Warner property for us to move to in the future.
- Manitou has already donated \$250k to River Grove and has supported numerous teacher-training initiatives.

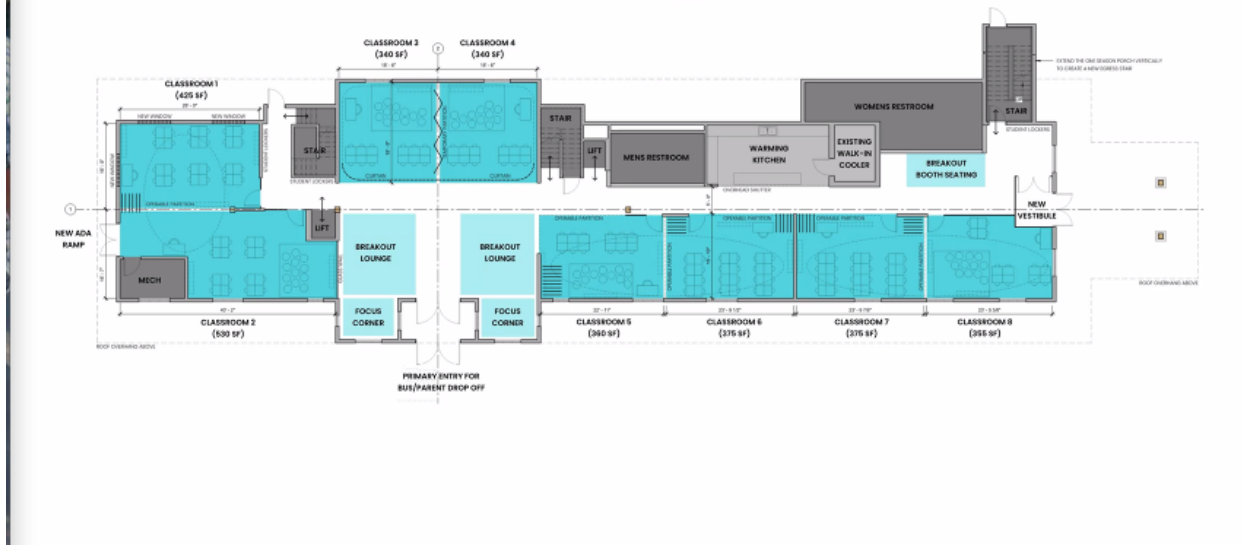
5.0 Guest Presentations and Comments - Dagmara Larsen-MSR Design, Nicole Bartelt-Zephyr Theatre, Carrie Jennings-Freshwater, Jim Zacchini- Minnesota Guild, Dan Miller - River Grove parent and past board chair.

Dagmara Larsen-MSR Design

- Larsen has two kids, ages 18 and 21, who both attended small Montessori schools.
- MSR is a national award-winning and woman-owned design firm. 33 staff total. 200 awards. Works on every kind of commercial building other than medical. Mission-driven work. Their office is Living Building Design Challenge certified. Projects include: Stillwater Library (1987), Mill City Museum, Children’s Museum, Oakdale Discovery Center, UMN Arboretum, McNeely Music Center in White Bear Lake (currently under construction). Experienced in working on indoor learning spaces for kids.
- This project would require a very fast 2.5-month turn-around to get the Zephyr remodeled and ready for kids by next year. There is potential for an outdoor theater/classroom and school “porch”. Proximity to Brown’s Creek Trail, Logger’s Landing (new city park on the river), Pioneer Park (up stairs), and downtown Stillwater.



river grove school in stillwater | concept plan level 1



LEVEL 1 (Level 2 not shown)

- Would need to add in ADA features and safety measures for use of the upstairs
- Would have a warming kitchen but not a full kitchen. Would retain a large flex space for big group meetings and performances. Zephyr could use on the weekends.
- Construction to allow for 13 classrooms. Would also add dormers and skylights to bring in natural light to every classroom.

Nicole Bartelt-Zephyr Theatre

- Board Chair of the Zephyr and water engineer as her profession.
- Bartlet expressed her gratitude to Manitou for purchasing the theater and excitement about this proposed partnership with River Grove. Already the Zephyr has supported River Grove music and theater for several years.

Carrie Jennings-Freshwater

- Freshwater has a statewide initiative to develop nature-based schools. Has been working with River Grove teachers, with funding from Manitou. River Grove is the first school in Minnesota taking the leap to join this initiative. They've conducted three teacher training retreats this year.
- Dr. Kathy Jordan. Pediatric neuro-psychologist and part of the Children and Nature Network. They are committed to helping River Grove teachers and leadership continue developing our environmental focus in a new setting.
- Kate Pound also spoke in support of the school and past teacher training with River Grove.
- Patty Born-Selly was not able to attend but is also part of the CNN group.
- Hansen noted that River Grove teachers really appreciated the training provided by this group this year.

Jim Zacchini- Minnesota Guild

- Minnesota law requires charter schools to have an authorizer. Minnesota Guild is one of the 12 authorizers in Minnesota. They authorize 16 schools across the state and River Grove is one of

their “shining stars”. We are one of their most successful schools in implementing our mission and operating autonomously. River Grove is meeting the statewide requirement for increased student achievement. Minnesota Guild completely supports River Grove if we choose to move. Teams like River Grove that are adaptive and can change succeed.

Dan Miller - River Grove parent and past board chair

- Miller reached out to Manitou in 2019 to initiate a relationship and we’ve continued to develop that relationship over the past four years.

Short Recess

6.0 Community Comments/Q&A

- **Outdoor recess and learning components**

- What does outdoor learning look like in the new proposed location vs. current programming?
 - Goodson: River Grove is committed to nature-based learning and will continue to do so.
 - Jordan: There are many resources in downtown Stillwater for nature-based learning. It can happen anywhere but she is also excited after talking with some parents from Stillwater and hearing more about resources in the area. There is a river, ravines, trails, and parks.
 - Parent comment: The Brown’s Creek Trail and surrounding forest are very special and a unique learning environment.
 - Zacchini: Upper Mississippi River School started near the river but had to move to a more urban location. They’ve kept their river connection even far away. In the example of River Grove, we’d still be on a river and near nature.
- Time spent outdoors learning? Everyday, pending weather? Immersive nature based learning is current. Should we expect less hands-on outdoor learning?
- Nicole A: Where will the children play outside?
 - There are some creative spaces right next to the building that could be used. Other nearby outdoor spaces, such as parks, could be an option with city support. Fairy Falls is close! 40 areas of trails on nps land.
 - Shelly Orr - the teachers will commit to getting the kids outside. They will walk the kids and get them tired and active.
 - Hansen - we have creative staff who are dedicated to making this happen.
- What about perimeter safety? To keep kids out of the road and river.
 - Miller - We can begin planning and designing for those needs as soon as we decide whether or not we want to move.

- **Indoor building considerations**

- Is there capacity for all kids currently attending to move to the new school?
 - Yes. The design is for 13 classrooms. Also, the school will re-send out the intent to return form to get a better sense of how many kids will be returning.

- **Working with City of Stillwater**

- Mitch Otterson: Have talks already started with the city of Stillwater? Traffic/Impact Study, Zoning, Permitting, and then construction before school start this fall. Timeline seems rough.
<https://www.ci.stillwater.mn.us/home/showpublisheddocument/2218/638144807716130000> Please address how this will be navigated and meet time lines needed for Fall of ‘23. What is the plan if there are delays to completion in time for start of 23-24’ school year start?
 - MSR will meet with the city tomorrow to discuss the plan and questions related

- to traffic, zoning, permits and construction. The plan is to remodel and be ready for the beginning of the school year. MSR will engage parents and teachers in the redesign process.
 - River Grove has not yet approved a school calendar for the year so we could move the start date back if needed but that isn't the plan. There is a little flexibility, if needed, because charter schools only have an hours requirement, not days requirement.
 - What about traffic and drop-off and pick-up?
 - MSR has not done a traffic study, but that might not be needed. There is parking available for drop-off and pick-up.
 - Goodson: the school will develop a safety plan for traffic.
 - Gayle Knudson: Are there any restrictions from the Wild and Scenic River (NPS) or the city of Stillwater?
 - Bartlett - the Zephyr had initial conversations with the city and they were very supportive.
 - MSR will be meeting with the city tomorrow.
 - The Zephyr is within an already developed commercial zone that doesn't have an NPS scenic easement.
 - Jill Kaufenberg: The positive economic and social impact to Main Street Stillwater would be substantial if RG occupied the Zephyr. I know that the businesses on Main Street would support this, no doubt, and many are connected to the City of Stillwater. Additionally, there is a great non-profit organization called Sustainable Stillwater, that I'm sure would be a great advocate/partner potentially. Thank you to Jessica & Drew & board for your tireless advocacy for RG.
 - Jody Dick: The Stillwater mayor's kids attended RG
- **Long term plans for the future school site**
 - Miranda Winbush: Is Manitou Fund supportive of the other potential, more permanent, locations? How much have they been vetted?
 - Miller - Manitou would move us back into the forest tomorrow if the option becomes available.
 - How will our "forest" community thrive in downtown Stillwater? Is there any feel for if the 2 year plan is feasible? Committing to 2 years vs 4 years is a big consideration.
 - The only limitation would be if there are challenges with May Twp zoning and approvals. The design and construction timeline to "do it right" is two years.
 - Built into the purchase agreement is that the Zephyr could buy the building back in 4yrs.
- **Other connections with Manitou, Arcola Mills, etc.**
 - Angie: Will the school day be extended to allow for extra time to bus to and from the Manitou property?
 - The board will need to decide but that is a strong consideration.
 - What about Arcola Mills - can we move there?
 - We are still interested in partnering with them on programming but there are several layers of requirements from NPS, DNR, county and May Twp that would be needed to move there. The township suggested it would be a tough uphill battle.
- **Decision-making process**
 - Cory Mulhern: What are the next steps in decision making?
 - Katie Carlson: If this proposal is voted down and/or appropriate permits cannot be gained in time, is there another contingency plan?
 - We are honestly out of contingency options. We could sign the lease extension and stay at Wilder until May 17.

- What are the hard deadlines for on time completion?
 - Timeframe for Stillwater approval? We'll be meeting with them tomorrow. Are hoping to have approval in a relatively timely manner.
 - Zephyr met with them earlier this week and got positive feedback on the suggested plan.
- Katie Carlson: What is the timeline families will have to make our new intent-to-return decision?
 - We realistically will need to know within 1-2 weeks in order to know how much space we need
- Sarah Godsave: We've talked about student retention. How is teacher/staff retention looking for next year?
 - Admin will try to get that commitment from staff as soon as possible. It's a lot of news and change to process and we want to give them a few days to react and process before asking for a commitment.
 - Bruns talked with Dagmara and she said they want to come here and meet with staff asap to begin planning.
- What about 6th grade for next year?
 - It's always dependent on enrollment. If we have 15-17 we'll run it. More than 20 expressed an intent to return, though this could obviously change things.
- Is there the possibility to re-open enrollment if we're short on any of the grades? There may be Stillwater families who would be interested once the school is closer to home.
 - Not sure yet. Will decide once we see re-enrollment numbers.
- Mitch Otterson: Will parent involved committees be established to assist in this process? If not, who is lead from RG on this project?
 - MSR will engage parents and teachers in the redesign of the building
 - Olsen is eager to give parents a role to help get us ready for the move and new programming.
- Will we change the name of the school to remove "A Marine Area Community School" from our name?
 - It is a consideration but is quite a process and would require board approval.
- Lisa Demars - many of us have been here since before River Grove existed. We fought hard to stop the school closing, then build River Grove, and then try to save the forest. If there is any silver lining in this it is the community that we've created.

7.0 Board Discussion and Potential Action:

Goodson discussed the Letter of Intent offered by Manitou. River Grove board is asked to consider signing an intent to lease the property for the coming year. The actual lease could be signed after the property sale closes on May 11. The terms of the lease are fairly standard and much more favorable to River Grove than our current lease.

Board questions and comments:

- Hong wants people to know how tirelessly Jessica Hansen has worked this year to explore every possible new property we could move to and to negotiate a potential lease extension with Wilder and MCYP.
- Dochniak - She observed Jamie and Elle (1st grade teachers) teaching recently and was impressed. River Grove teachers design their own curriculum and the content value to our students would be remarkable if the school moves to Stillwater. There is so much history in the city. This is a gift and will open our eyes to the amazing staff that we have.
- Beck is looking forward to being closer together with other teachers and having easier opportunities to collaborate.

- Hong: would we then sign the lease in May as soon as the property closes?
 - Yes. And we need the lease in hand before we can receive lease aid from the state.
- Hong noted that the board just learned about Manitou's intent to purchase the Zephyr and offer us a lease over the weekend. Board members have had time to process this new info and the emotions involved but she recognizes it is probably a shock to parents at the meeting.
- Olsen: excited for our school and community to put their energy toward something positive. People have been begging to help for months. This is how we move forward.
- Dochniak: If we don't make a decision tonight, we won't know where we'll be in a month. We have to decide now.
- Beck: We're also excited to deepen our relationship with the Zephyr.
- Beaumont: I have no professional, financial or personal ties to River Grove, Wilder, the Camp Group, or Manitou Foundation that could influence my statement. My son is a kindergartener at River Grove. My only interests are 1) a great school for the kids and staff and 2) my civic duty as a board member to help the school thrive. In my opinion, based on what I know, working with Manitou Foundation as a partner gives River Grove the best chance for long term success and building towards something wonderful for both the kids and staff.
- Goodson: This has been a rough year but we finally have a path forward. He is less scared about starting over and creating a new school than he is about living in uncertainty for another year. Our staff have been stressed all year and this is the best possible solution.
- Hansen: Shared her gratitude to all of the board members and administrative staff. Goodson has been working nights and weekends, around the clock.

Hansen is seeking a motion to sign a letter of intent to lease the Zephyr property.
Dochniak moved. Hong seconded. All members vote yes.

8.0 Adjournment: Beck motion to adjourn. Second by Olsen. Meeting adjourned at 8:30.