

1 **MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING**
2 **OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES**
3 **HELD APRIL 3, 2023**
4

5 A duly called Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Great Falls Public Schools
6 was held at the District Offices Building, 1100 4th Street South, on the 3rd day of April
7 2023.

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9 **ROLL CALL:** Brian Patrick took roll call.

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11 **Trustees Present:** Gordon Johnson, Chairperson
12 Bill Bronson
13 Kim Skornogoski
14 Marlee Sunchild
15 Amie Thompson
16 Paige Turoski
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18 **Trustee Absent:** Mark Finnicum - Excused
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20 **Others Present:** Tom Moore, Superintendent; Brian Patrick, Director of Business
21 Operations; and Tom Hering, Director of Information Technology.
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23 At 5:30 pm, Chairperson Johnson called to order the Special Meeting of the Board of
24 Trustees and asked everyone to join in the Pledge of Allegiance.
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27 **ADOPT AGENDA**
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29 Motion – Kim Skornogoski, Seconded – Bill Bronson, passed unanimously to adopt the
30 agenda as presented.
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33 **APPROVE CONSENT AGENDA**
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35 Motion – Kim Skornogoski, Seconded – Amie Thompson, passed unanimously to
36 approve the Consent Agenda as presented.
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38 **A. Minutes of the March 27, 2023, Regular Board Meeting** – The Board approved the
39 minutes of the March 27, 2023, Regular Board Meeting as presented.
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42 **COMMUNICATION**
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44 **A. Audience Communication** – Community member Whitney Olson, Great Falls Public
45 Library Board member, said she received a 2023 Special Purpose Elections calendar
46 from the Secretary of State’s Office. The calendar indicates the ballot certification
47 deadline was February 16, 2023, and asked if the school elections ballot has been
48 certified. Director of Business Operations explained the District has, by law, until March

1 31st to set levy amounts, if any. Trustee candidates had until March 23 to file with write-
2 in candidates having until March 30th. The District has final ballots due March 31st.
3 Whitney Olson asked who publishes closed registration or availability of late registration
4 and if that has been done three (3) times as indicated on the calendar. Mr. Patrick said
5 the Elections Office does this and he has only received proof of it being completed
6 once.

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9 **ACTION ITEMS**

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11 **A. Formal Request from the Great Falls Public Schools (GFPS) Trustees Calling**
12 **for the Cascade County Elections Office to Comply with the Approved Mail Ballot**
13 **Election Plan for the Required May 2, 2023, GFPS Trustee Election –**

14 Director of
15 Business Operations Brian Patrick said the goal of the District is to have a successful
16 election with all registered voters having the opportunity to vote. He explained that on
17 December 12, 2022, the GFPS Board of Trustees requested that the Cascade County
18 Elections Office conduct the May 2, 2023, Trustee Election. As per Montana Law, the
19 request was made at least 70 days prior to the election. The District received
20 confirmation on December 15, 2022 that the election was approved as a Mail Ballot
21 Election. The Secretary of State's Office confirmed this on December 29, 2022. Mr.
22 Patrick said he and Superintendent Moore met with Cascade County Elections
23 Administrator Sandra Merchant and County Commissioner Joe Briggs to discuss the
24 upcoming election scheduled for May 2, 2023, and were told the election would be held
25 as planned. On March 10, 2023, an e-mail was sent to the District stating it was not
26 possible for the Cascade County Elections office to run a Mail Ballot Election. Due to
27 an error in the e-mail address when the message was sent, Mr. Patrick did not receive
28 the notice until March 17, 2023. At the March 27, 2023 Board meeting, the Trustees
29 voted to not hold a levy election in conjunction with the Trustee election. Five
30 candidates have filed for three Trustee positions. The cost of an all-mail ballot Trustee
31 Election has traditionally been approximately \$40,000.00. Information presented at the
32 Cascade County Commissioner meeting held on March 31, 2023, indicated that the
33 ballot materials would not be sent out of town as the Elections Office originally planned
34 and would be handled in-house. This significantly reduces the estimated costs from
35 when the decision was made by Ms. Merchant to complete a Poll Election. Given there
36 was no cost estimate available for a Poll Election or a detailed plan of the Poll Election,
37 the Great Falls Public School Board is going on record to ask the Elections Office to
38 honor the original plan of an All- Mail Ballot Election. Mr. Patrick said he requested the
39 cost estimate of a Poll Election from Sandra Merchant today and had not received the
40 information.

41 During conversation of the Board members, Trustee Bronson said he would amend the
42 the motion to add that District Officials provide hard copies of the request to the County
43 Commissioners and in person to Sandra Merchant at the Elections Office.

44 Community members Jane Weber, Jasmine Taylor and Gerry Jennings thanked the
45 Board and said they agree with the amendment Trustee Bronson has added to the
46 motion.

47 Trustee Skornogoski expressed her concerns with the lack of details from the Elections
48 Office as to how a Poll Election would be conducted. She also expressed concerns if
deadlines are missed and about the additional costs the District would be expected to

1 pay due to moving from a Mail Ballot to a Poll Ballot Election.
2 Trustee Bronson said the District made a timely request to the Elections Office for an
3 All-Mail Ballot Election, which was approved and conveyed to the Secretary of State's
4 Office. He said he had hoped for answers to the questions concerning a Poll Election at
5 the County Commissioner Meeting held on March 31, 2023, but answers were not
6 provided. He referred to Montana Code Annotated 13-19-101 which concludes the
7 conduct of elections by mail ballot is potentially the most desirable. From his former
8 work as a City Commissioner, he agrees it is the most desirable option with the least
9 cost to the taxpayers. He said while the Elections Administrator can make changes, it
10 needs to be provided in writing with evidence for making the change. Trustee Bronson
11 said Sandra Merchant's letter to the District informing it of the change provided no
12 details of how a Poll Election would be conducted. He said approximately 87% of
13 voters are absentee ballots, with a turnout of 30-32% for a Trustee Election. With an All-
14 Mail Ballot, an additional 13% of registered voter ballots would need to be mailed and
15 not all of those would be returned.

16 Trustee Turoski said anytime there is a new person in a position, change is to be
17 expected. She said she would like to have been provided with a plan that included
18 financial implications and she is not comfortable moving forward without having the
19 information.

20 Community Member Rina Moore, former Cascade County Clerk and Recorder, said she
21 contacted the Secretary of State's Office and was told there are 40,919 active voters in
22 Cascade County and of those, 30,975 are absentee voters. She said during her first
23 year in the position, there were 38 polling places for elections. During her second year
24 in office, the elections were moved to an All-Mail Ballot as it was the most cost-effective
25 method. The elections have since continued to be All-Mail Ballot elections.

26 Community member Jasmine Taylor asked if the Board can request recourse for the
27 additional costs of a Poll Election. Director of Business Operations Brian Patrick said
28 he would need to consult with legal counsel for the answer.

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30 Motion – Bill Bronson, Seconded – Kim Skornogoski, passed unanimously to formally
31 request the Cascade County Elections Office to comply with the initial plan for the Mail
32 Ballot election and honor its commitment in writing that the election would take place as
33 specified. With five candidates running for three positions, it is only appropriate that all
34 voters can vote in this election as they have in the past. Trustee Bronson amended the
35 the motion to add that District Officials provide hard copies of the request to the County
36 Commissioners and in person to Sandra Merchant at the Elections Office.

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38 Chairperson Johnson, on behalf of the GFPS Board of Trustees, directed
39 Superintendent Tom Moore and Director of Business Operations Brian Patrick to
40 arrange a meeting with the Cascade County Elections Office and inform them of this
41 formal request to comply with the "Approved All-Mail Ballot Election Plan" voted
42 unanimously by the GFPS Board of Trustees with an offer from GFPS to assist, in any
43 manner, that would enable such election to run smoothly and timely.

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REPORTS, DISCUSSION, AND POLICIES

1 **A. Discussion, Committee Reports, and Comments –**
2 Trustee Thompson relayed her appreciation to Superintendent Moore and Brian Patrick
3 for working to make sure all voters have an opportunity to vote and to ensure the
4 election is as cost effective as possible.
5 Trustee Skornogoski thanked the Trustees for their comments and said the dollar
6 amount of the election cannot be taken lightly. She hopes that by the April 10 Board
7 meeting there will be answers to the election questions.
8 Trustee Turoski hopes the District does not end up with huge costs if the Election Office
9 denies the request for a Mail Ballot Election.
10 Trustee Bronson thanked the Trustees and community members for their comments
11 and reminded everyone to stick to the facts and the law.
12 Trustee Sunchild said it is important that the public stays involved and knows how
13 important the election process is to the community.
14 Chairperson Johnson thanked the public, Trustees, Superintendent Moore and Brian
15 Patrick for their comments.

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18 **UPCOMING EVENTS**

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20 Chairperson Johnson said the next regular Board meeting is scheduled for April 10,
21 2023.

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24 **ACTION TO ADJOURN**

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26 Motion – Bill Bronson, Seconded – Kim Skornogoski, passed unanimously to adjourn
27 the Regular Meeting of the Board of Trustees at 6:13 p.m.

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Gordon Johnson, Chairperson

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Brian Patrick, Clerk