

Public Hearing

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a public hearing on April 11, 2018 at 8:00 PM in the Julian Thayer Auditorium at Coginchaug Regional High School, 135 Pickett Lane, Durham, Connecticut.

Board members present: Mr. Augur, Mrs. Boyle, Dr. Friedrich, Mrs. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino.

Board members absent: None

Administration present: Dr. Veronesi, Superintendent of Schools and Mrs. Neubig, Business Manager.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Public Hearing

Mr. Hicks read the Warning of Public Hearing and the Return of the Call into the record.

Dr. Veronesi acknowledged the incredible amount of hard work that went into this budget process. She thanked both the staff and the administrative team. It is Dr. Veronesi's honor to work with this Board of Education as they have listened to her voice and the voice of the people. She also explained that they have worked closely with both towns as they have experienced a large cut in ECS funding.

Mr. Moore introduced the Board members and administration at the table. Mr. Moore began by thanking Nancy Heckler for all of her hard work as she has announced her retirement from Brewster. He reviewed some of the changes that have occurred throughout this year, including curriculum and student assessment. Advances have been made in STEAM and there is now a Career Center at the high school. He also reported that the girls' basketball team won the state championship and a number of awards were received by a variety of the District's bands, including one of the best musicals, Back to the 80s. He also added that they have been working hard on how to restructure the schools and have received enormous input about that.

Mr. Moore also spoke about threats that were received after the Parkland shooting and explained that they were dealt with very effectively. It did, however, raise a concern about security and some money has been added to the budget for that. Mr. Moore thanked Dr. Veronesi and Mrs. Neubig, as well as all of the other staff, for their work in putting this together.

Mr. Moore explained that the public votes on the total budget expenses of \$36,819,319. This budget is down from last year by \$318,582, or approximately .86 percent. Revenue has gone down this year and the net budget is at a zero increase. There was a 6.3 reduction in full-time equivalents, bringing the District down just over 37 positions in the last five years. With that reduction, the Board has been able to maintain recommended class sizes for all of the schools.

Mr. Moore also reviewed that they are in the process of Strategic Visioning which Dr. Veronesi has led with a variety of teachers, trying to define what the program for this century should be and how that fits with our buildings. There will be meetings on Strategic Visioning on April 15 and 24.

Mr. Moore reiterated that the Board worked in collaboration with officials from both towns. Between the two towns, over \$780,000 was cut from state funding.

Mr. Moore began reviewing the budget with salaries and explained that all union contracts have had an increase in salaries, but, besides the reduction of 6.3 FTE positions, they have also taken 1.5 percent out due to expected turnover, unfilled positions, vacations or sickness. The salary budget is projected at 98.5 percent of the total filled positions. Some of this money will be used to fund security. Benefits are down because all of the unions are now in a high-deductible plan and increases were negotiated.

The Board voted to move \$400,000 for security, some of which came out of the salary line item, some out of capital and some out of debt service. That money was moved into purchased services. Operating Services is down by \$157,000 (mostly through transportation). Dr. Veronesi commented that \$50,000 is included for engineering and architectural services as the District moves forward with utilization studies. They had been hoping to have the EdSpecs done by May, but that may not be the time line. That may also include an updated enrollment projection. There is also \$10,000 for a specialist to work on Strategic Visioning once the Board has decided on the configuration of the schools. She also explained that there is money included for exploration for an international partnership with China for the high school as well as \$50,000 included for the Korn School transfer.

Mr. Moore continued by reviewing that capital is up by \$92,000 after the Board removed \$181,000 for security which Mrs. Neubig will review. Several projects will be deferred for later investment. He reviewed that debt service has dropped from \$1.69 million to \$1.4 million. Some money has been moved from debt service into security also and \$100,000 has been taken out to give room for additional bonding in the future.

Moving to revenue, Mr. Moore reviewed the various revenue streams and explained that \$521,000 was carried over from last year. The District has lost the transportation grant and the special education excess grant has gone up by about \$50,000. The town assessment is based on what is left, which is \$35,479,692 or the same as last year.

Putting it all together, Mr. Moore showed the net reduction in expenses of \$318,000, the net reduction in receipts and grants of \$318,000, ending with a zero budget for 2018-2019.

Mr. Moore reviewed that the debt service is dropping off substantially and discussions have centered around keeping a level of debt to allow for future borrowing.

Mr. Augur reviewed the \$400,000 associated with safety and security and explained that the recent events heightened the need to do more. He reviewed that the items shown are a work in progress and are in the discussion phase. Mr. Augur explained that this is not an easy process and they do not want to make quick decisions on how to spend the money to address safety and security. He encouraged the public to provide input on these issues and will post the date of the next Utilization Committee meeting.

Mrs. Neubig reviewed the District's identified priority capital items. These are priority items that need to be addressed immediately. The original budget proposal represented a total request of \$400,000 to fund immediate needs and continue planned funding of projects in progress. At the March 28, 2018 Board meeting, the Board reallocated \$181,000 from the capital account for security upgrades. That amount included continued funding for future track maintenance, continued funding for future turf repair, continued funding for the baseball warning track and the start of funding for short-term paving needs on the north side driveway. There was also a decrease for funding replacement of deteriorating ceiling tiles. Mrs. Neubig reviewed the high-need items, which add up to \$219,000. The items that were removed will remain on the District's capital plan to be addressed in future budget years.

Dr. Veronesi reviewed the enrollment trends and showed that predicted enrollment in the 2016-2017 school year was 1,727 and in June, 2017, the enrollment was 1,727. Predicted enrollment this year was 1,653 and we are currently at 1,658. They will contact Milone & MacBroom to see if the District would benefit from an update of the enrollment study next year. Looking to next year, enrollment is projected to be 1,629 but a

more significant downward trend is expected in the 2019-2020 school year. There are currently 530 students at the high school, with a predicted enrollment in 2023-2024 of approximately 409 students.

In the last several years, there have not been any significant staffing cuts at the high school level, however going into next year cuts were made in staffing including a .5 reduction in the library, .5 in art, a decrease in English and social sciences, family and consumer science as well as a reduction in physical education. At the middle school, there was a reduction of .4 in math and a reduction in English language arts. In special ed, two ABA positions in the District as well as a teaching assistant are not filled at this time. There was also a .5 music reduction in the elementary school which Dr. Veronesi knows has garnered a lot of attention. Again, she reassured everyone that this reduction will not have a negative, lasting impact on the music program. She is sure that this will maintain the high level of music programming throughout the District.

Dr. Veronesi reviewed that some positions have been repurposed, to include a reading interventionist, a math interventionist and a literacy coach at the middle school. They have also increased the career counselor who is at .6 at the high school to a 1.0 position. Class size projections remain within the Board of Education guidelines.

Mrs. Neubig reviewed the history of the per pupil expenditures in the District. In the 2016-2017 school year, there was a decrease of \$507 per pupil which was largely attributed to closing Korn School. The estimated per pupil expenditure shows an increase estimated to be in relation to a declining enrollment, even with cuts to the operating budget. For 2017-2018 and 2018-2019, the per pupil expenditure have been estimated and are in relation to the declining enrollment. A 1 percent budget decrease could potentially even increase the per pupil expenditure with declining enrollment. Mrs. Neubig then showed where District 13 stands in relation to the state average.

District 13 is 43rd out of 166 reported districts, in the top 26 percent for per pupil spending which ranges from \$12,000 to \$36,000 per pupil. Out of all regional schools, District 13 is ranked 8 out of 17, but that range is also from \$14,000 to \$29,000. In the DRG, District 13 is rated 7 out of 31, with the range from \$13,300 to \$36,100.

Mrs. Neubig then went on to review the proposed estimated tax impact on the two towns. Town assessments are computed utilizing October 1st student enrollment. For 2018-2019, Durham will experience a decrease in their assessment by \$177,400 while Middlefield will experience an increase in their assessment. There have been some conversations about utilizing a five-year average to compute town assessments as opposed to actual numbers which will help the towns to budget.

Mr. Moore then reviewed the five-year trend in the budgets. The budget has increased by \$180,000 or .5 percent over the last five years. He attributes this to the work by the administration and the Board to try to keep the school budget as stable as possible.

Mr. Moore explained that the District meeting will be held on May 7, 2018, with the referendum being held on May 8, 2018. Durham voters will vote at Korn School and Middlefield voters will vote at the Middlefield Community Center.

Mr. Moore then opened the floor for public comment and asked everyone to keep their comments to three minutes at a time.

Public Comment

Laura Francis, First Selectman of the Town of Durham, spoke in support of the District's budget. She believes that the budget has everything in it to support the children in a positive way. She also believes that it is an acknowledgment of the current environment with declining enrollment and declining revenue. She also believes that the budget represents a really good, continuing collaboration between the towns and the Board of Education. Mrs. Francis stated that she has heard comments that perhaps the towns are starting to exhibit too much influence over the school and she asked people to look at it a little differently. She compared it to a three-legged stool. If one of the legs is broken, in disrepair or weak, the stool can't operate and cannot function. The towns have to remain strong and healthy for the school to remain strong and healthy. That can happen with continuing collaboration. There are more open discussions and decisions are being made through communication. She mentioned a few examples of collaboration and reported that districts and towns throughout the state are also creating partnerships for shared services. The state legislature has also passed legislation that incentivizes that and sometimes even requiring it.

Mr. Moore also stated that a Finance Committee has been formed, with two members from Durham, two members from Middlefield, two members of the Board of Education and two members appointed by the Board of Ed. Mr. Augur is the chair of that committee and they continue to work with the towns.

Donia Viola, from Durham, asked if the \$521,763 to be applied to the proposed budget could be increased so that there would be a dollar amount change more in the area of \$371,379 which would be closer to the total expenditure in the 1 percent that is allowed by the state. She commented that the District seems to be running between \$600,000 and \$800,000 every year in the fund balance. Mrs. Viola also advocated for having the best of both programs going forward. She feels that taking money from one account and moving it into another for safety shows that there is too much allowance for money in certain accounts that isn't being spent which means over-taxation. In summary, Mrs. Viola felt that the numbers can be crunched further and a little more work needs to happen.

Melissa Booth, from Durham, explained that what a lot of parents are uncomfortable with in the music program is that they don't know where the .5 will come from. She and her girls attended the musical last week and were in total awe. She is concerned that the decline is coming for the high school and wondered if her daughter, who is now in the third grade, will get the same offerings that are there now. She does have a bit of a problem with the Board taking \$119,000 from the salary line and moving it into safety when it's only \$33,000 for the .5 music position. She knows that you can't put a price on safety, but she does feel that the District's schools are safe right now. Mrs. Booth does have a problem with \$140,000 for the SRO which would be mostly at the high school. Once that SRO is put in, it will probably stay and that puts the students at the high school at a higher priority than the other students. She does not want guns in her kids' schools.

Tina Gossner, from Durham, realizes that the administration is hoping to cover the .5 music position with other staff but also knows how difficult that is for teachers to run between schools. She attended Korn School and there was fourth grade instrumental back then. It got taken out at some point, but her daughter was lucky to get instrumental music in fourth grade. The high school band director was much happier because the kids, once they made it to high school, were able to play much more difficult music. Mrs. Gossner is a bit nervous that the elementary music program will be piece meal and not a really strong program. She believes that the music department is a huge strength in the District and would not want to see it impacted.

Maya Liss, from Durham, was uncomfortable with the additions that have been made to the budget for security because she doesn't know how the money will be spent. She did attend the Utilization meeting and has been following this issue for the past month. There are some things that she is comfortable with and others that she is not. Mrs. Liss also feels that her children are safe in school and also feels like the District did a really good job responding appropriately to the incidents that happened in March. She will have a hard time voting for something, giving the Board basically carte blanche without knowing what the money is being spent on. Her second issue is the music program and she also felt that \$33,000 was not a lot of money. She related how her daughter had a hard time with her trumpet lessons, but the instrumental teacher had the time to work with her one-on-one and she is now playing beautifully. She is worried that if that position is taken away, the kids will not have the same positive experience.

Alexander Stephan, a senior at Cuginchaug, thanked Dr. Taylor, Dr. Veronesi and Mr. Moore for attending the musical. He, too, spoke about the .5 music position reduction and asked the Board to reinstate it. While it is such a small amount of money, it creates a vastly negative impact by forcing teachers to run from school to school and stretching them so thin. That will take away from the attention time that younger students need as they are learning how to play their instruments. All of the students involved in the musical and who perform in the bands all started in fourth grade and that's why they can do what they do now. He asked the Board to support the music program in the District and help it grow.

Erica Fenwick, from Middlefield, has two children at John Lyman and echoed the sentiment about the music department. Seeing \$20,000 allocated for unanticipated furniture needs makes her feel like emphasis is being put on the wrong things. She did not feel like \$33,000 was a large sum of money. She also has concerns about the security budget and would like to see it itemized as well. She was unable to attend the Utilization Committee meeting as it was held at 4:00 in the afternoon and asked if meetings could be scheduled for a later time, so working parents can attend. She, too, is also uncomfortable with guns in the schools and does not support armed guards. Even the SRO makes her very uncomfortable. She hopes that the community can hear more about these issues before the referendum.

Theresa Weimann, from Durham, was happy to see that reductions were made in the athletic upgrades to fund the security budget, however she felt there were other priorities, such as allocating money for fire sprinkler systems. The asbestos remediation at Lyman has been put on hold, but Memorial also has quite a bit of remediation that needs to be done and it doesn't appear to be happening. Mrs. Weimann also commented on the field house and appreciates that it has been taken out of the budget, but it was upsetting that it was even considered.

Jenna Driscoll, from Durham, appreciates all the work that has been done and was amazed that they could present a 0 percent increase. She respectfully disagreed with Dr. Veronesi that a music cut would not impact outcomes in that department. She asked that the Board please consider re-appropriating funding in order to eliminate that cut. She does not oppose money dedicated to safety, but feels very unsettled about the fact that the Board is willing to spend \$400,000 on security measure, but not \$33,000 on a music position. She also pointed out that many people in the public have identified this as something that is so important. Strong music students make smarter students. She felt this is an opportunity to make a decision to improve overall student well-being and music heals. Mrs. Driscoll also stated that her family thoroughly enjoyed the musical and felt it was truly amazing, but it made her wonder how we could consider taking a penny away from such a strong, district-wide program.

Martin French, from Durham, thanked the members of the Board of Ed for their countless hours. He felt that the presentation was opaque compared to the level of work that has been done. It was \$100,000 here, \$400,000 there and the public could not get a good sense of what is being done. Specifically, he felt that the \$400,000 was much too much money to put in an unidentified fund for school security. He felt that there should be more investigation with security professionals and best practices. Mr. French cannot imagine a time when there should be armed personnel in the schools.

Dr. Veronesi explained that they have consulted with experts in the security field and the Board discussed two specific suggestions, one being the 3M film for windows which was suggested as a very good first step for all the buildings at a cost of \$260,000, and \$140,000 towards the SRO. Dr. Veronesi believes that it is critically important to have a comprehensive plan for safety and security, but doesn't feel that the District should do nothing for next year. She also explained that she had not recommended armed security and she believes that the Board has moved from that position and is still discussing the potential of an SRO for the District, not just for the high school. There will be an information session on April 24, 2018 at 7:00 PM in the Library on the SRO program.

Dr. Veronesi appreciates all the feedback about how they responded to the incidents at the high school and the community only saw the tip of the iceberg in terms of the work that was done in-house. She explained that she is not a safety expert, but does everything she can to learn so that her decisions are the best ones possible. The SRO position was not in her original budget, but she does believe it will have the most value added to impact the safety and security of the children in the District. She reviewed the areas that an SRO gets involved in and explained that this is her priority, in addition to training for her, her staff and teachers. They will also do a vulnerability assessment and work with the State department to create a plan.

Dr. Taylor felt that the issue at the time was that there were questions about what would be the appropriate items for the money to be allocated to. He feels there is still a lot of disagreement on the Board about what items should go into that and while safety needs to be prioritized, he thinks the Board wasn't ready and didn't have the information to make a decision. Personally, as a father of four in the District, he is against any armed guards, including an SRO. He doesn't feel it increases school safety, but instead just the perception, which he feels is backed up by studies.

Mr. Augur agreed with Dr. Taylor's assessment and reiterated that the Board felt they were not in a position to definitively vote on specific items, but did recognize that money should be appropriated to make decisions when the information was available. He reported that he had asked a neighbor who has had experience overseeing an SRO that, if it was him, what would you prioritize and he went to physical safety, not SRO, as the first spend. He is not at a point of a decision and needs more information. He also noted that the Utilization Committee will have another meeting at a better time and look forward to more input.

Dr. Friedrich added that he is also a member of the Utilization Committee which has begun to study safety and to try to develop a plan. He pointed out that there is a lot of activity under the surface and mentioned that Dr. Veronesi has worked with a consultant about homeland security. He pointed out that the Board will never make decisions in a vacuum nor would Dr. Veronesi. He did vote in favor of finding and setting aside the \$400,000 because if no money was set aside, that is a decision not to have any resources to do anything for a year.

Mr. Moore agreed that the Board is struggling with this topic, but they do feel that the allocation of the funds will be better used to develop additional security and will shortly have a plan in place for both short-term and long-term priorities.

Cindy Nick, from Middlefield, has two children in the District, is a high school math teacher and a musician. Music is an extremely important part of her life and both of her children play musical instruments as well. She noted that math and reading test scores are always important, but she pointed out the connection between math and music and quoted from a study about that. She also felt that some of the instrumental lesson groups are large and she would like to see smaller lesson groups so that student needs are met.

Sarah Jane Daley has one child in the District and she does feel that safety is important. She attended the Utilization Committee meeting and has since looked into a nonprofit agency called SandyHookPromise.org who can provide support. She would like to see the children be safe without guns, SROs and armed guards in the schools.

Heidi Johnson, from Durham, hoped that the Board could look at the SRO in context. Law enforcement in town is very good, but it takes time for a response. If there was a serious incident at school, she believes the District would be better off with an SRO and a number of the other things that are being contemplated. She urged the Board to consider it in the context of law enforcement in Durham and Middlefield and to think about how past needs were met.

Janina Eddinger, from Middlefield, felt that the Board needed to hear from some more Middlefield people. She felt that \$260,000 is an awful lot of money allotted for 3M window film. She feels that there's got to be more options for physically protecting the glass. She asked the Board to please get multiple estimates and do a lot of research on where the money will go.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, thanked the Board for all their time and effort and the fact that they are looking at declining enrollment and cutting positions. He understands the passion about the music department and reminded everyone that they are not talking about eliminating any music, just a position. If there are less students, less personnel are needed.

Laura Francis was happy that everyone recognized the good response by the school district in light of the threats that were made, but they could not have done that without law enforcement being involved. Census at Troop F has gone from about 65 troopers down to about 35 troopers in the last six to eight years, so the response time is going to be longer. She felt that trained educators cannot be expected to make split-second law enforcement decisions and we cannot depend on the State Trooper from Middlefield or Durham to be available. Mrs. Francis explained that those who provide public safety services are trained to look at all hazards, so while the terrible tragedies with active shooters are there, they have to remember all the other hazards that law enforcement can help with. The SRO program is tried and proven. Congresswoman DeLauro just spoke about the increased funding that school security effort will be getting. SROs are eligible to be funded from that funding pool. She was also at a COST meeting today and all districts are going to an SRO in addition to physical improvements. Mrs. Francis urged the Board spend what they can get overnight and an SRO can be obtained overnight. They can then do due diligence with the physical improvements.

Cindy Nick understands people's concerns about the SRO, but she wanted to say that her husband has an SRO at his school and it is a very positive thing. The SRO develops a great relationship with the students and is the eyes and ears of the school. They are well-trained, great people that are selected to work in a high school.

Donia Viola added that the SRO in Parkland, Florida was outside the building at the time of the shooting and chose not to go in. There are weak links in every profession. She also asked about the increase in a counselor at the high school and thought that there were already three counselors there. Dr. Veronesi explained that the increase was for a career counselor. Mrs. Viola felt that one of the other counselors could be eliminated if there is a need for a career counselor. She also felt that some money could be better spent on improving Pickett Lane. She asked about the oil lid pump set and where it would be located, but Mrs. Neubig didn't know exactly where that is located. Mrs. Viola asked about the cut in transportation and where it would come from. She also mentioned that two buses coming out of the high school tonight both went through the stop sign. Woodworking, metal, home ec, automotive shop were all taken away and she felt it would be nice if somebody knew how to change a tire. As far as the music program, she suggests that it remains as proposed.

Dr. Veronesi stated that she and Mr. Hicks were at a Chamber meeting this morning and part of the discussion had to do with growing businesses and keeping them competitive and profitable as well as the skill set that employees need to have. Part of the reason that changes are made at the high school, including the career counselor who was actually a social studies teacher who has been repurposed, is for the students to see the careers that are out there and for the schools to offer courses that are truly preparing students for the world in which they're graduating into.

Mrs. Viola felt that not everyone is going to college and practical experience and common sense seems to be getting lost.

A member of the public asked how many other schools in our DRG have SROs and Dr. Veronesi stated that they will provide that information at the upcoming information session. Dr. Veronesi also addressed the cut in music and explained that she doesn't hope that the cut can be covered; she knows that it can. She doesn't think that the music program isn't going to be destroyed; she knows that it's not going to. She also stated that they are trying to work toward a comprehensive plan for safety and security, but she knows people will still disagree.

Mr. Moore thanked everyone for the comments and reminded them that the referendum is on May 8th. There will be a few more meetings between now and then. The Board will adjourn the public hearing and return to the library to finish up Board meeting.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First