

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a District Meeting on May 6, 2019 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. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mrs. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Yamartino.

Board members absent: Dr. Taylor

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

### **Pledge of Allegiance**

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

### **District Meeting**

Mr. Hicks read the call to the meeting, warning of district meeting and return of the call into the record as well as the resolution of the capital projects.

*Mr. Hicks made a motion, seconded by Rick Parmelee, to nominate Jim Finley as moderator of the District Meeting.*

*In favor of nominating Jim Finley as moderator of the District meeting: Mr. Augur, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mrs. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Yamartino. Motion passed unanimously.*

Mr. Finley invited the Board to make a brief presentation on the proposed budget.

Dr. Veronesi explained that Mr. Moore will go over the proposed bonding project and the operating budget and invited the public to ask questions during the Public Comment session. She explained that the budget is built towards the strategic coherence goals of student achievement, well-being and engagement. She felt that the budget is a responsible one to move the district forward and support the growth of the students.

Dr. Veronesi explained that the total budget being proposed is \$36,819,319, with a 0 percent gross change and a negative 2.47 percent change in the net budget from the current year. This also incorporates the estimated ECS cuts (\$593,627). The Appropriations Committee just recently recommended legislation that would change that amount to \$195,377, however that would not change the proposed budget. It also contains an allowance for the Teachers' Retirement (\$114,947). There is a .3 increase in FTE for staff overall. On Monday, the sixth graders signed up for their language in the middle school and, based on those numbers, a decision has been made to not increase staffing by a .5 Spanish teacher but rather to maintain the staffing level in Latin at 1.0. The increases include a math interventionist at Memorial of 1.0, a math interventionist at Coginchaug at .6, a library media specialist for the elementary school at 1.0, a slight increase in the three-year-old class of .2 and a slight increase in social studies at the high school of .1. There is a decrease in Latin at the high school by .4, a decrease of a grade 6 teacher at Memorial of 1.0, a slight decrease in math at Coginchaug of .2 and a decrease in administration at Central Office of .5 and a non-union staff member at .5. The Board of Ed-recommended class sizes have been maintained. Dr. Veronesi also commented that the budget continues to support the move to one district-wide educational approach for students.

Mr. Moore began by reviewing the five-year budget history and explained that the budget is driven by salaries, with a slight increase of 1.67 percent. Benefits was the driving force to reduce the budget by

almost \$959,000 due to changes in the health insurance programs. Savings was also realized by both towns. There is a slight decrease in purchased services. Capital is up \$753,285. The Debt Service remains constant.

Looking at revenue, Mr. Moore reviewed that the driving force is a fund balance carryover from 2017-2018 of almost \$1 million. Tuition and other activity fees account for additional revenue. Moving to grants, ECS is up about \$18,000, bringing the total revenue to \$877,000 which then reduces the net cost to the towns to \$34,602,000, a 2.47 percent decrease from last year.

Mr. Moore stated that the capital budget for turf replacement, track replacement, classroom furniture, power systems, stage work and family sciences account for \$439,000 of the total. He then explained that the \$6.9 million proposed bonding is broken up by school building, with \$1.05 million for Cuginchaug/Strong, \$2.875 for Memorial and \$2.197 for Brewster. There is also \$778,000 for a contingency as some of these costs were estimated several years ago. Mr. Moore explained that most of the projects are fixing things that are in the buildings, i.e. boilers, heat, air conditioning, lighting, etc. and also includes replacement of the culvert on Pickett Lane.

Mr. Moore then reviewed a graph showing the debt service, currently at \$1.49 million and with the new \$6.9 million. The Board has spent a great deal of time trying to come up with a long-term capital plan that will allow the district to meet the buildings' and equipment's needs but keep the debt service steady.

Mr. Moore mentioned that they had tried to accommodate additional cuts that the Governor was proposing in grant funding. This year, there was a total of \$5.4 million in ECS grants to both towns and the Governor's budget proposed that number be cut to \$4,808,000 or a \$593,000 reduction. The proposed Teachers' Retirement Board was estimated to be \$114,000 total for both towns. Both Selectmen and the district's State Senator have advised them to keep those numbers in the budget. The total reduction in State aid to the towns is about \$708,000.

This year, Durham has 66 percent of the student population and Middlefield has 33 percent. Looking at the total budget of \$34,000,000, Durham's portion is \$22,989,000 and Middlefield's portion is \$11,612,000. When you minus the grants to the two towns, Durham will be up about \$100,000 over last year and Middlefield will be down \$384,000 from last year.

Mr. Moore reported that on May 1<sup>st</sup>, the Appropriations Committee came up with a different budget and instead of reducing the ECS by \$593,000, they will reduce that by only \$195,000, ending up with a net loss of \$310,000 rather than the \$710,000 that was shown. This would be very favorable to both towns and would mean Durham would see a net savings of \$196,667 in its budget and Middlefield would save \$485,000 (\$441 less than last year). This would not affect the Board of Education budget.

Mr. Moore explained the Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) and reviewed that one exemption is a decline in enrollment and the other is additional cuts in the ECS grant. The district's proposed budget is \$284,000 below the MBR from last year due to decreased enrollment. The other reduction for the ECS grant results in the district being \$308,000 above the MBR. The Board did not know what the state budget would be and kept it at the budget that was presented. If the Appropriations Committee budget goes through, the district will be \$89,000 below the MBR and that would have to be restored in some manner.

Looking at the per pupil expenditure, for 2017-2018, it was \$19,646 and the estimate for 2018-2019 is \$21,216, but the proposed budget brings it to \$21,258 per student. He reminded everyone that these numbers cannot be compiled until almost a year later.

Mr. Moore thanked everyone for coming and urged them all to get out and vote tomorrow.

Mr. Finley asked everyone to identify themselves and their town before speaking and to please use the microphones so that everyone can hear the questions. He then opened the meeting to comments and questions from the public.

Donia Viola, from Durham, stated that it had been reported in the Town Times that Mr. Moore said that the proposed budget already includes funding for the \$6.9 million capital proposal. She noted that it will not impact the budget for the first two years, however it will impact the townspeople over the next eight years. She has concerns about the capital plan, particularly classroom furniture at \$40,000 per year and yearly upkeep at \$50,000. She believes that many of these proposed items seem to have been neglected for many years and she doesn't believe that it was an unknown. Mrs. Viola stands firm against changing over to natural gas and cited an article in the Middletown Press that had to do with natural gas pipe maintenance. She would think that oil would have competitive pricing where natural gas would not. Mrs. Viola feels that the \$1,509,891 fund balance carryover is quite extravagant. She noted that Durham residents pay more because of the student enrollment equation and that there are four schools in Durham and two in Middlefield. She felt that issues have arisen with emergency responses or everyday care that cost more heavily on the Durham side of attention given to the schools and activities that are held in the schools. She also mentioned funding the field house and that there will be several million dollars for reconfiguration in the fall. Mrs. Viola stated that it may be flat this year, but it's not really flat when you think about the \$6.9 million capital funding. She reiterated that neglect played a big part and that is a real negative for many citizens. Mrs. Viola would like to know where the \$38,000 is for the trip to China in last year's budget and didn't feel that it was appropriate for the Board of Ed to just spend those dollars without voters' approval. Looking at math or English interventionists, Mrs. Viola thinks that it would be necessary to look at what is actually going on in the classroom that are in place. She feels that quite a few dollars are being spent per pupil. She felt that the main focus is supposedly delivering to the students and thought maybe the district could get a handle on that without considering more costs. Mrs. Viola also believes that Common Core has denied students success in achieving literacy goals. She felt that literacy encompasses writing, but cursive is not taught or practiced in classrooms. She asked if the town's heritage is important enough to subscribe to handwriting and identify with one's own signature. A Board of Ed member had explained to her that his daughter brought home a penmanship book to practice without having had any instruction. She suggested, rather than adding a librarian for the elementary schools, time might be better spent with the teacher instructing the class in writing. Mrs. Viola stated that if the resources do not support actual growth and achievement yet they continue to search to make it better with more money, you can't throw dollars just for achievement and it has to be in the core and the heart of the system. Mrs. Viola felt that proceeding with the student exchange with China is not in the best interest for District 13 since a Communist country's policies and values are in direct contrast to all America stands for. She felt there is much to learn here and asked everyone to remember Tiananmen Square and that China supplied weapons and personnel to North Korea and Vietnam against our troops. She felt that the district could have picked students to study here that would not risk them spying on us and maybe should have gone with one of America's allies, like France or England, who speak our language and French is taught here. Mrs. Viola thanked the Board for their time and effort, but felt that the application is not in the best interest for anyone.

A gentleman from Durham asked if this was a zero-based budget and how a fund balance transfer can be allocated when it is zero-based. Mrs. Neubig explained that they did not come in with zero and had to make cuts to get there.

Stephen Liss, from Durham, asked about the Latin program and the current sign-up. He believed that Dr. Veronesi explained that the Latin program would remain the same in seventh grade, but asked what changes at the high school. Dr. Veronesi explained that they are proposing a sufficient staffing level to meet the needs of the students who are enrolled in Latin at the high school. She explained that he was correct that the Latin program will remain the same at Strong School, as about 40 students requested Latin. Mr. Liss commented that he is very proud of the students for doing something about the Latin program.

Theresa Weimann, from Durham, asked if the cuts of .5 in Art and .5 in Music were still in and Dr. Veronesi felt that she might be looking at last year's budget. Mrs. Weimann had a concern about the fact that capital is still underfunded and she hoped that the Board keeps its promise to cover the capital without having to bond.

Mr. Yamartino explained that the district made choices, based on referendums and taxpayer appetite, to not fund the capital at a level that was sufficient every year. The equipment has been maintained to the best of its ability, but it is now at the end of the life of a lot of that equipment. Parts are not available for some of it anymore. He wanted to be sure that everyone understood that it was not overlooked or neglected, but in fact it was deprioritized for other things. Critical pieces of equipment could fail at any time and a school would have to be closed until it could be fixed. The bonding proposal is to fund those critical items, but they have funded and increased the capital line item for ongoing maintenance and capital. Mr. Yamartino feels that the list was very well-vetted and refined to be sure that all of the needs were addressed.

Richard Parmelee, from Durham, stated that Dave Levine represented Durham in the state legislature for many years and attended many district meetings. He always addressed the uncertainties of the funding from the state. Mr. Parmelee feels that that needs to be changed and the state needs to be held responsible. He felt that the numbers included in the budget may be the best that are available, but won't be good enough if the money is not produced. He asked if the Board would make a commitment to work with the towns to reduce the expenses, if the state funding does not come through.

Mr. Moore reviewed that the Board has a Finance Committee that includes members from both towns and the Board and that committee has worked with the towns to try to evaluate the state funding. The Board has worked hard to plan the budget with the anticipation of what the state will fund and this budget includes the worst case scenario, including the Teachers' Retirement contribution which may or may not be included and the worst reduction in ECS based on the Governor's budget.

Mr. Augur referenced the MBR slide that showed the range of what might come down from the state and that the district may actually go below the MBR. He explained that the district can go below the MBR, but there is a penalty for doing so. The Board did vote on doing further cuts at their last meeting and it was four in favor and five against.

Mr. Parmelee felt that a regional district is at a distinct disadvantage from other school systems because of the way they are funded and the restrictions imposed upon it. He believes that the State of Connecticut is in a pitiful state financially, but when the state tries to defer pension funding for educators to the local

school districts, that's not fair. The state isn't resolving any of their spending issues by giving somebody else their bills.

Mr. Finley asked Mr. Parmelee to keep his attention on the school budget and Mr. Parmelee considered his remarks valid because of what the district relies on for funding. He then commented that the football program partners with two other school systems because the district doesn't have a population to sustain the program by itself. He asked why the program continues as he would rather see his tax dollars go to a class of Latin students than subjecting students to head injuries on the football field. He mentioned that there is a declining interest in parents letting their children participate in football. Mr. Parmelee also reiterated that the district has no business instituting a fee for students in the school system to participate in activities as that does not put them on equal footing. If the district can't afford to eliminate the activity fees, they should eliminate some programs. Mr. Parmelee also thanked Mr. Yamartino for his presentation the other night and felt it was very informative. Mr. Parmelee also commented on the water and gas lines that will be coming into Durham through the efforts of Laura Francis. He felt that the capital should be invested in the buildings in this complex and not in another town. He explained that the water line has a fire rating as well.

Another gentleman asked about approximately how much it costs to maintain Korn School and what the plans are for the school going forward since the Town of Durham voted down the purchase of the school.

Mr. Moore explained that it costs approximately \$68,000 a year to maintain Korn School at a constant temperature. He added that there had been two options for Korn School, one was to raze the building and the other was to transfer it to the Town of Durham. The Utilization Committee met with the First Selectmen and are working on a new plan. Laura Francis indicated that the Town of Durham would be happy to participate, but would not take the lead on a proposal. The Utilization Committee will analyze further options and look at restrictions on leasing and/or sale of the building. Mr. Moore explained that he doesn't have an answer to the question today, but there is a process.

A woman asked if the Board goes back to figure out why a referendum fails and Mr. Moore explained that they don't have a record of going back to try to figure out why a referendum fails. They certainly monitor social media and see that people are concerned that there is not enough money for sports or something else. He felt it could fail because people think more money should be spent or it could fail because people think that too much is spent. Mr. Moore believes that if a referendum fails, it is generally because people feel that too much money is being spent but that isn't necessarily the case.

A gentleman from Durham asked about the \$6.9 million appropriation and noted the natural gas conversion and LED lighting. He asked if anyone has approached Eversource about cost sharing on the lighting. Mrs. Neubig stated that they have been working with a company to potentially do that process which would dovetail with the \$6.9 million very nicely. The gentleman explained that if you don't get pre-approval, they will not do it. Mrs. Neubig stated that they are working through the process with an energy conservation group. The gentleman commented that Eversource will reimburse 65 to 70 percent of the expenditure. Mrs. Neubig also explained that that would be a school construction applicable project and reimbursement would be available from the State of Connecticut as well. Following that line of thought, the gentleman asked why they would be bonding for something that they expect to get reimbursed. Mr. Moore explained that the vote is to authorize the board to borrow and to spend. He explained that they would only borrow the money if it is needed and the amount could be reduced by grants or other methods along the way. He added that the district would not issue a grant for \$6.9 million, but that it could go out in several stages as needed. For example, no money would be issued for the

Pickett Lane culvert until the design is done. Mr. Yamartino added that the funding could also include bond anticipation notes as well for projects where state reimbursement is expected.

Donia Viola, from Durham, added that she takes exception to Mr. Yamartino's remarks having to do with neglect at the schools. She feels that Korn School is a prime example. Things have been taken out of there and put into other schools. Korn School didn't have hot water for many years and hot lunches were brought in by car from other schools. Durham's eyes were opened with the horror of Korn School with asbestos still remaining and it will probably cost a vast amount of money to raze it because of that situation. She feels that this has happened only because it was neglected and nobody is being fooled about how it was maintained. Mrs. Viola asked about the end-of-life at the last hearing and she got no acknowledgement that the board could recognize that. She noted that the Town Times reported that the Town of Durham pays \$58,000 a year for the lease at the Carolyn Adams' establishment which seems to be the same number as Mr. Moore stated that it cost to maintain Korn School. She felt that that was a coincidence that seems obnoxiously obvious. Mrs. Viola noted that the town had voted it down and she has called Laura Francis to speak to her about it.

Mr. Peterson, from Durham, asked to clarify the fund balance carried forward and Mrs. Neubig explained that the \$1.5 million is an exact number and part of that is used to balance the 2018-2019 budget, with the remainder going for the 2019-2020 budget. She noted that they won't know the remaining fund balance until the end of the year. Mrs. Neubig noted that this happens every year. She also explained that the salary and benefits line item had been largely underspent in previous years and in response to that, the board budgeted that line item at 98 percent.

(A question was asked from the audience that was inaudible.)

There were no other questions or comments.

*Mr. Hicks made a motion, seconded by Dr. Friedrich, to adjourn to the referendum.*

*In favor of adjourning to referendum: Mr. Augur, Mrs. Caramanella, Dr. Friedrich, Mrs. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Yamartino. Motion passed unanimously.*

The meeting was adjourned at 9:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz  
Alwaz First