

Revised

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a special district meeting/public hearing on Wednesday, January 8, 2020 at 6:00 PM in the Library at Coginchaug Regional High School, Durham, Connecticut.

Board members present: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mrs. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino
Administration present: Dr. Serino, Superintendent of Schools and Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance.

Mr. Moore called the special district meeting to order at 6:00 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Item 1

Mr. Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Dr. Taylor, to appoint Mr. Hicks as moderator.

In favor of appointing Mr. Hicks as moderator: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Dr. Friedrich, Mrs. Geraci, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino.

Item 2

Mr. Hicks welcomed everyone to the public hearing and read the Warning of Special District Meeting.

Mr. Moore explained that the hearing is being held because of two proposed changes to the Regionalization Plan that had been originally adopted in 1968. These changes are being proposed because the bond counsel suggested that language about closing schools be added and the other is due to a change in the charter of the Town of Durham regarding elections of Board of Education members. Mr. Moore read the specific questions that will be on the referendum in February. These changes will allow the district to move forward with a bonding referendum in May.

Mr. Moore explained that prior closings of schools were not covered by the current court actions that have precipitated this change. He explained that Attorney Matt Ritter was present at tonight's meeting to help with any legal questions.

Mr. Hicks then opened the hearing to the public and asked everyone to keep questions/comments to the point.

Julie Carroll, from Middlefield, asked what the benefit would be for both towns to approve question 1 on the proposed referendum. Mr. Moore explained that the single largest benefit would be to allow the board to manage the school system that is cost effective to the community. Enrollment continues to decline and will continue by another 200 or so in the next 10 years. The district cannot continue to have buildings that are not usable. Mr. Moore stated that the district can invest in the buildings or in the programs for the students. He felt that the money saved on the school can be put into improvements of the programs and education of the students. Mrs. Carroll asked if the townspeople were to vote yes, would that mean that the board has the ability to do anything in the district. Mr. Moore explained that the board has very little

authority to do anything that costs money without going to the public. Mrs. Carroll asked to verify if the board would, in fact, have the authority to do things without going back to the townspeople. Mr. Moore again explained that a new school, renovations or anything costing money would have to go to referendum.

Dr. Taylor asked if Mrs. Carroll was asking specifically about the closure component and she explained that she has heard that if the townspeople were to vote yes on this question, then the board will have the full authority to make decisions without going to town voters. She felt that communication from the district to the communities is not happening. Mr. Moore explained that the board currently has the authority to decide programs and facilities that are needed. This new amendment is fairly narrow in that it specifically adds language about closing schools and that could be interpreted that it was already within the board's authority.

Mr. Yamartino added that the district has twice made the decision to close schools over the years and the decision this time requires bonding and that is why the language is being added. Any bonding or funding would still have to come back to the towns.

Anne Olszewski, from Middlefield, asked about the number of votes needed for these amendments and Mr. Moore explained that, in this case, each town has to approve the amendment. Mrs. Olszewski then asked what happens when one town votes no and Mr. Moore explained that they will have to work on that.

George Eames, from Durham, noted that his father had worked on the Temporary Study Committee report that the board is looking to amend. This report was developed into an actual charter and the school system was run under that up until about 10 years ago. He asked if the board has looked for the original charter that had more specifics, including closures, transfers of funds, etc. Attorney Ritter, from Shipman and Goodwin, explained that they are district counsel, not bond counsel, and they are here to help the district through the amendment to make the bond counsel comfortable. He stated that they relied upon what was filed with the State of Connecticut and what was provided by the district.

Dominic Venecia, from Durham, asked what will happen if the vote is no. Mr. Moore explained that the board will go back to try to determine why the vote was no and, if a change could be made, they will pursue that. It would prevent the district from bonding the improvements to Brewster and Memorial schools. Mr. Venecia asked what direction was given from the attorney and Attorney Ritter felt that the bond counsel was relying on a more recent court case and the judge had taken a very narrow reading of regionalization plans. The bond counsel felt that it would be safer to specify the words. The prior closures had predated the Supreme Court case and bonding was not associated or needed with previous closures. Mr. Venecia felt that this is not a simple change and that it grants the board a lot of authority.

Kindra Liptak, from Middlefield, asked for more clarification on what it means to vote yes. She asked if the only items that would have to go to referendum would be monetary or would closings have to go to a town vote. Mr. Moore explained that the amendment includes a provision that a public hearing would be held and at least one school would remain open in each town. In general, referendums are for the budget and any bond issue though the board does hold public hearings and informational things on all kinds of decisions that have been made. Ms. Liptak summarized that the amendment would make a school closure the board's final decision and Mr. Moore explained that that is currently within the power of the board. Ms. Liptak also asked if there would be a time restraint on bonding if the referendum failed and Mr. Moore explained that they were not sure yet and would try to analyze why the vote was no. If they were to amend the plan again, another town meeting and another referendum would be necessary.

Heidi Johnson, from Durham, reminded the board members that they were elected by the towns and felt it is very important that the second question is passed so that more people are involved in voting. She felt that any future school closings would be proper as was the closure of Korn School. Ms. Johnson felt that the townspeople should have trust in the people they elect.

Roger Kleeman, from Durham, also believed that Mr. Eames was right and that a much more specific document had been submitted to the state when the district was regionalizing. This document seems to have disappeared. Mr. Kleeman explained that the superintendent can spend up to \$25,000 by her signature alone. He noted that the board changed the bus system and added that the townspeople are uninformed. Mr. Kleeman felt that the turnout at the meeting showed how uninvolved people are and this will give more power to 10 people with public input, however the public is not providing input because they don't know about it. Dr. Friedrich explained that all board meetings are recorded and broadcast. Mr. Kleeman felt that the mics don't pick it all up and it is very hard to follow.

Cheryl Pizzo, from Middlefield, felt that the 10 people on the board affect the lives of nearly 10,000 and that she would want the public to vote on issues such as closures. She would not want to have to make that decision. She asked why 10 people should make that kind of decision and why they would push to not have public input. Mr. Moore felt that that power was originally designed to be part of the board's authority. With regard to closing, building or renovating a school, it is done based on the number of students, number of programs, type of programs and how those activities would best be accomplished. Mr. Moore noted that most of the board would like to build a new K-5 school at the Korn School site, but know that the district can't afford to do that. He added that many hours are spent talking about these types of issues. Mrs. Pizzo again asked why the board would want to take that decision away from the voters. Mrs. Geraci felt that it wasn't being taken away from the voters and that all of the board members value the education that is given to the students. She added that the whole state is dealing with school closures at this point. Mrs. Geraci added that Mrs. Pizzo voted for her representatives and she should trust them to represent her and make the best decision. Mrs. Pizzo added that the original plan stated that both communities are supposed to have K-8 schools and that has not been amended. She is concerned that a handful of people are having too much power and that the original plan was to only come together for high school. Mr. Moore added that the original plan also stated that the Board of Education would determine the programs and facilities. Over the last 50 years, there have been numerous changes made. Mrs. Pizzo stated that she felt it could be legally challenged as the plan has never been amended.

Jim Irish, from Middlefield, asked for clarification of the language about maintaining at least one active school in each town and public hearings that is in the amendment, but not specifically in the question language. Mr. Moore explained that the Regional Plan amendment that the board adopted includes that language. Mr. Irish asked if that full amendment is available for the public to see and Mr. Moore explained that it is on the district's website and also available at tonight's meeting.

Mary Farnsworth, from Middlefield, was passionate about her feelings for John Lyman School and did not feel that passion being returned by the board. She was concerned that the board was asking for the public's trust with this amendment, but wondered how the board plans to better incorporate public feedback. Dr. Serino explained that the best way to predict future performance is past performance and that this board has always tried to garner feedback from students, parents and community members. They have had community information sessions, community engagement sessions, focus groups, surveys, board and committee meetings, strategic visioning, Portrait of the Citizen, publications by the board, monthly articles by the superintendent in the Town Times and monthly communications from each school. Dr. Serino feels that the board takes this very seriously and has been actively doing this for at least the past

seven years. Ms. Farnsworth explained that she has been to many of those and has never once felt like anything has been incorporated into the planning. Mrs. Booth encouraged people to speak up and become involved. She added that her children attended John Lyman and she does not want to see it close, but does feel that it is best for all of the children of the district to do so. Mrs. Booth hopes that the new program will incorporate a lot of the HOT aspects of John Lyman for all the students in the district. Dr. Serino added that Mr. Moore has heard that 90 percent of the people don't read his newsletter. She added that they may do a coffee or an after-hours because they feel that public meetings are the best way to convey this information. Mrs. Geraci also encouraged the public to attend meetings and write to the board members. Mr. Yamartino added that most of the work done by the board is done at the committee level and the board adopted a policy to allow members of the public to participate on committees. There are currently seven or eight members of the public serving on committees. He also reviewed that school configurations have changed several times as a result of public input.

Richard Parmelee, from Durham, acknowledged that the board works very hard on financial matters but added that the public works very hard to pay their taxes. He feels that the district's budget does not get the same scrutiny that town finances do. With regard to the election of Board of Education members, Mr. Parmelee felt that the town meetings are not very well-attended and those that are present do not know who is running. He also felt that elections held at town meetings offer a very narrow opportunity to vote and the hours of a referendum would offer more flexibility.

Jennifer Rubino, from Middlefield, is the president of the Brewster PTO. She is extremely humbled to be amongst such amazing parents and community members and feels the passion in the room. She asked why the decision was made to move the third grade to Memorial next year when the referendum had not yet been passed. She added that she has heard that the board doesn't hear a lot from Brewster parents, but noted that she does. Mrs. Rubino also did not feel that the board takes the passion from the parents into consideration when decisions are made. Mr. Moore explained that the board voted in December to move Brewster third grade into Memorial next year because they also voted to move sixth grade into Strong and that gives the opportunity to handle third grade at Memorial. This, in turn, will allow all K-2 to be brought into Brewster in the future. Mrs. Rubino wanted to know why Lyman is still accepting kindergarten students next year. Dr. Serino explained that there have been no changes in kindergarten for next Fall.

Janina Eddinger, from Middlefield, thanked the board for all of their hard work. She is ready to vote yes because she has witnessed the process and, while she has loved Lyman for her children, she has seen the work that has been done to do right by the taxpayers. She did ask if there has been discussion about expanding integrated arts for all students, expanding the music program to younger students and/or expanding orchestral strings offerings as well as school-wide assemblies at least two times per month for all students.

Carolyn Janis, from Middlefield, also appreciates the time and efforts of both the board and the communities. She has attended past meetings where comments have been made about Middlefield being a silent partner. Ms. Janis is strongly concerned if that is the opinion of the board and Middlefield will become more disempowered. She does feel that Middlefield feels disempowered by some of the changes and in the waiting. She wondered why these changes haven't happened yet if it is just a matter of a language change. Mr. Moore explained that the board had moved forward to make changes at Brewster and Memorial, but the bond counsel indicated that they would not justify the bond until the language was changed.

Dr. Friedrich added that this is after the Supreme Court decision and had not been necessary before. Attorney Ritter explained that the Supreme Court case was one made by another regional school district and explained that you could, in fact, read the original Plan of Regionalization and feel that it does allow the board to close schools, which was, in fact, done twice.

Rebekah Doweyko, who attended district 13 schools, was happy to be in a town where there is a choice. She is sad that that is coming to an end, but does accept the problem of declining enrollment. She asked if the board would be willing to consider having a start time later than 8:00 AM at Memorial. Mr. Moore noted that they will discuss that at a future point.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, felt that the temporary plan was in fact the one that was filed with the state and should be considered the final plan. He thanked the board for all of their efforts and supports the amendments, especially the change of terms for the Town of Durham. He felt that this just clarifies what's been going on for years and nothing is being taken away from anybody.

Theresa Weimann, from Durham, was concerned about the amendment based on the temporary report. She had heard that three superintendents ago was the last person who had the final plan and she felt that there is no point in doing this until they have been given the final plan. She felt that somebody does know where that plan is and they need to get it and show it to everyone. Ms. Weimann is also very concerned about not having seen any details about what the new program will look like.

Oanh Stephan, from Durham, asked if the vote on the amendments would change the board's decision to bring the district to a one-program district. Mr. Moore explained that it would not. Mrs. Stephan asked for a plan on how the district will proceed, specifically about moving the sixth grade to Strong School. She also added that she is tired of hearing 10- and 11-year-olds talk about "them" and "us" and would like to see the district move forward as one.

Mr. Hicks then declared the public hearing as ended.

Mr. Moore thanked everyone for their comments and explained that the full board meeting will start at 7:30 PM.

Mr. Moore announced that Dr. Veronesi is now officially Dr. Serino as she was married on the Saturday after Christmas.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First