

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a District Meeting on May 2, 2022 at 8:00 PM in the Julian Thayer Auditorium at Coginchaug Regional High School, 135 Pickett Lane, Durham, Connecticut.

Board members present: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone

Board members absent: None

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, and Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance

Mrs. Petrella called the District Meeting to order at 8:00 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Mrs. Dahlheimer read the call to the meeting, warning of district meeting and return of the call into the record.

Mr. Parmalee made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stoup, to nominate Norm Hicks as moderator of the District Meeting.

In favor of nominating Norm Hicks as moderator of the District meeting: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Hicks began the meeting with a presentation from Mrs. Petrella, the board chair.

Mrs. Petrella showed both the gross and net budget amounts, along with their increases. The towns' assessments are determined by the school population, with Durham at 64.5 percent and Middlefield at 35.5 percent. The increase to Durham is \$188,411, with Middlefield's increase being almost \$1.3 million. The main reason for that the enrollment switch from Durham to Middlefield of 2.24 percent. There are 79 less students in Durham and eight additional students in Middlefield. The ECS grant is higher in Durham than Middlefield in order to offset the impact of the budget in both communities.

Mrs. Petrella reviewed the per pupil expenditures and comparisons between the state average, average of regional school districts, the DRG average as well as the district's average. The slide also showed the differences from 2019 and 2020. Looking at enrollment, the district has lost students every year since 2019, however the district has more students than the average regional school district and the average of the DRG. Mrs. Petrella reviewed that the district has been consistently lower than the Milone & MacBroom projections on enrollment.

The biggest budget driver this year is salaries. There were some savings in benefits. There is a slight increase in purchased services, building and grounds, operating services, supplies, and dues and fees which are all impacted by inflation.

Comparing enrollment to staff, staffing has been dropped along with enrollment though not equally. Mrs. Petrella reviewed that when the district loses students, they are scattered over a number of grade levels and staff needs to be maintained.

Looking at capital reserve, Mrs. Petrella explained that school districts had only been allowed to set aside up to 1 percent of their budget and that amount was raised to 2 percent this year. In the past, the district maintained a .9 percent reserve for capital and it is proposed to be 1.3 percent of the budget this year.

Mrs. Petrella then reviewed debt service and showed the \$6.9 million capital improvement bond and existing debt service which will be eliminated in the next three years.

Mrs. Petrella then reviewed a graph of the district's budget history from 2015 to today, show the gross budgets, the net budgets and the rate of inflation. She pointed out that the budgets have pretty much followed the rate of inflation. She added that this year's budget has not gone up nearly as high as the rate of inflation.

Mrs. Petrella then opened the meeting for public comment. Mr. Hicks asked that speakers use the microphone and introduce themselves.

Becky Anderson, from Durham, stated that the capital budget is almost a 45 percent increase and wondered what was included in that. Mrs. Neubig explained that that is largely due to the increase in capital savings that Mrs. Petrella had explained.

Jim Abley, from Durham, noted that there are quite a few new members on the Board of Education. He stated that he sees enrollment going down, but yet the budget number continues to go up. He doesn't feel that there is an endless supply of dollars and the district needs a different approach. Looking at the budget from 2016 to 2022, it has gone up but the enrollment has dropped by about 500 students. He cited that Watertown has a \$50 million budget, with 2,600 students which makes them under \$20,000 per student. District 13 is over \$25,000 per student. He encouraged everyone to think about of the box.

Donia Viola, from Durham, concurred with Mr. Abley. She noted that the American Rescue Plan funds came through on three separate occasions and wondered why supplies have gone up so much. She also felt that Lyman School will need to be addressed if it remains open and she didn't see anything in the budget. She reviewed that enrollment is down, a school has been closed and there is talk of closing another one and yet personnel have moved to existing schools. She mentioned that there are five counselors at the high school and felt that psychiatrists could be spread across the board. She also feels that the capital reserve that is being proposed sounds like a cushion and is unnecessary.

Mrs. Neubig explained that supplies encompasses classroom supplies, instructional supplies, buildings and grounds supplies as well as textbooks. Part of the increase is due to the fact that the coronavirus relief grant was fully expended last year. The other reason is inflation. They have also upgraded the filters in the schools. Fuel was budgeted at \$3.00/gallon and was \$1.99 the year before. New honors geometry textbooks are being purchased for the high school.

Mrs. Petrella reviewed that it is very difficult to cut personnel when enrollment goes down as it is spread over all the grades. She also mentioned that no money was put in the budget specifically for Lyman because it hasn't been decided as to what will happen with the school. It is difficult to compare school districts without knowing the number of buildings that need to be maintained.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, echoed Mr. Abley's comments as well. He then read a letter that he sent to the Town Times. He noted the proposed new building across the street from the high school wasn't even

mentioned tonight. He knows that the long-term goal is to install field lighting for a sport that RSD13 doesn't even have enough athletes to field a team. Other projects have been put on the back burner. He felt that this project will add to all future budgets and this is a big, big want, not a need. He went on to say that the Town Times edited his letter and did not print part of it, including that the Connecticut Department of Education Bureau of Physical Services lists 167 schools with the costs for each system. The RSD13 per pupil cost for 2021-2022 was \$24,917 is amongst the top 18 most costly. Mercy High School's tuition is \$16,700 and Xavier is \$16,600. He does not feel that closing John Lyman School will come through soon and the district will be stuck with these costs for a number of years. Students continue to opt out at the high school and Mr. Stoup wonders if part of the reason for that is the curriculum.

Rick Parmelee, from Durham, stated that he has been attending budget meetings for many years and the budget has always gone up due to an increase in enrollment. Yet now, they are still spending more money with enrollment declining. He noted that the state has been talking about a surplus, but there are debts they haven't paid. If their debts were to be paid, every resident of the state would have to come up with about \$20,000. He thanked the board for bringing the budget to referendum. He also spoke about the Board of Education having the right to make transfers. Mr. Parmelee is also uncomfortable about the increase being allowed by the state and would like to see more oversight. He also mentioned that the estimates to knock Korn School down were between \$900,000 and \$1 million and he was never in favor of that. He added that the benefits of a gas main and a water main are benefits that the district will reap as a result of town officials' efforts, but he knows there won't be a reduction in taxes. Mr. Parmelee was also unhappy to know that the district pays to publish the Devil's Advocate in the Town Times and felt that it should be noted. He suggested they just publish it on the district's website. He also does not want to see a facility added at the athletic fields without it coming before the voters as an individual item. Mr. Parmelee reiterated his dislike of parking rights being included in the deed for Korn School.

Mrs. Petrella asked Mr. Parmelee to limit his comments so that other people can speak.

Mr. Parmelee then concluded by saying he will not be supporting the \$38 million budget.

Simone Howe, from Durham, asked exactly how much was appropriated in the budget for the facility at the athletic fields and where she can find it in the budget. Mrs. Neubig stated that the budgeted amount is \$180,000 and it can be found under Capital Equipment. Mrs. Howe asked if that meant the structure would be completed for \$180,000 and Mrs. Neubig explained that that was a quote that they got a ways back and she wasn't sure it would cover everything at this point.

Charli Hicks, from Durham, asked to confirm that nothing was included in the Capital budget for John Lyman School. Mrs. Petrella stated that nothing was directly included for John Lyman and explained that there is always an undesignated amount put in for emergencies, so anything other than general repairs, including at Lyman, would be taken out of that line item. Mrs. Hicks then asked how many students are still at Lyman and when a decision will be made about it. She also asked at what point money will have to be put back into Capital to do more to John Lyman. Mrs. Petrella stated that she really couldn't answer her questions at this point.

Becky Anderson stated that she is confused about the cost of the field house and the determination about John Lyman. Dr. Schuch explained that they have reached out to the legislature to ask them for assistance because of the failed referendums. He stated that it doesn't feel like the board has a lot of options, so they

appealed to the legislature. He noted that he is not very optimistic given that they adjourn on Wednesday and they have not heard back. Dr. Schuch felt that the next steps would be with the board and they are in a very difficult position because they don't have the ability to take a major step to make the district much more efficient and bring the budget down. They do not believe that the framers of the original agreement had considered this type of situation and they now find themselves in a very difficult place and unable to do any serious long-range planning around facilities. Ms. Anderson appreciates the dilemma, but if the legislature does make a decision about closing the school, she felt this is not the year to build the field house and they need to keep more in reserve. She also asked if the repairs to Pickett Lane have been deferred and Mrs. Petrella explained that that project is in flux right now with different work being done on it. Ms. Anderson felt that in a time of high inflation, uncertainty about costs and what will happen with Lyman School that this is not the time to increase the Capital budget 45 percent.

Elmer Clark, from Durham, asked how many students are at John Lyman and what the capacity of the school is. He didn't understand why the board voted to close it and then to keep it open. Mrs. Petrella explained that the board voted to close John Lyman School but it had to go to referendum and be approved by each town individually. Mr. Clark felt that the district did not have to have students in the building and could just mothball the school. Mrs. Booth explained that there is not enough room at the other schools and they would have to add on. Mr. Clark felt that they must have planned to do that if they voted to close the school. Mrs. Booth acknowledged that there are plans, but the numbers have not been updated.

Donia Viola stated that Mrs. Neubig had given her an estimate of \$85,000 to repair the bricks at Strong School, but only \$80,000 is in the budget. She asked if there were other bids and, if not, then \$85,000 should be the number in the budget. Regarding staff in Korn School, Mrs. Viola had referred to a number of people being put in other positions in other schools and found it offensive that the public is led to assume that the savings that were to be had when Korn School closed never came to fruition.

Mr. Moore explained that the 2016-2017 budget went down by around \$900,000 which was due to the closure of Korn School, including the elimination of some clerical and administrative positions. The teachers went to a different school with the students. He also added that there had been at least two years with no increase in the budget.

Carl Stoup felt that the \$180,000 field house is just the tip of the iceberg and the beginning of a big project that is a big want. Services are being duplicated and he felt that the way the building is being proposed is very deceptive. He felt that there was no way it will be only \$180,000. The budget will be pushed up every single year from here on.

Mrs. Petrella explained that it is the board's intention to basically put a shell of a building over the existing cement slab that was installed and paid for. Everything came to a halt when a lawsuit was filed. She stated that it was not her intention, nor the board's intention, to completely fund a field house. Moving forward, the district has spoken to a number of community organizations who are willing and ready to fund-raise to complete the rest of the building. She stated that it is not the board's intention to continually add to this project.

Mrs. Neubig then explained that the current enrollment at John Lyman School is 188 students and the capacity of the school is 266.

Carl Stoup understood the field house project, but stated that the slab can be protected with a sealant. He felt that if the put the building on it, a few years from now the district will have to become involved with maintaining it.

A member of the public made an inaudible comment.

Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that the facility is a beautiful, state-of-the-art facility but there have been track meets when portolets have had to be roped off because they are full. She felt that they have to start finishing things that they started. Teams still come to the fields and note that they are still under construction, even 10 years later. She has full confidence that groups like the Benchwarmers will do everything they can to fund-raise and help with that building. She also noted that being able to store the track equipment near the field will cut down on time and allow life-saving equipment to be accessible. Right now, every team must fill up buckets with a hose. She felt it was embarrassing and time for the district to finish something they started.

Rick Parmelee stated that the public was led to believe that the district may be able to secure funds from the private sector to build the structure and that never happened. He felt the building wasn't necessary and they should get rid of football. He mentioned the cumulative injuries that are acquired with football and the district should not continue to expose students to that. He also felt that Durham and Middlefield youth may be excluded from the program so that other schools can participate. He again stated that the facility should be a standalone issue and discussed in a public forum.

Thomas Peters, a CRHS graduate, asked if there has been any significant investment in speakers to talk about racial equity and racial literacy.

Mrs. Neubig explained that nothing specific was added in this budget other than professional development and in-service in this area, but the district does receive a grant for \$10,000 that is used for different speakers, including racial issues, internet safety and social-emotional learning.

Simone Howe agreed with Mr. Parmelee and felt that the football program should be eliminated because of the injuries that can occur to young people. A former resident of Durham chose to end his life in Switzerland because he came down with dementia at a young age. He had been a football player from the age of eight and a Heisman trophy winner's son. Mrs. Howe did feel that the grounds are extraordinary and noted that her daughter began running there and is still running 25 years later. She agreed that the issue of portolets might be a good reason for pursuing the field house.

At this point, hearing no further comments, Mr. Hicks ended the public comment session and declared the meeting adjourned until 6:00 AM tomorrow morning. Voting will take place from 6:00 AM until 8:00 PM at Cuginchaug Regional High School for Durham voters and at the Middlefield Community Center for Middlefield voters.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:12 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz
Alwaz First