

Revised

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a Special District Meeting on May 23, 2022 at 7:00 PM in the Julian Thayer Auditorium at Cuginchaug Regional High School, 135 Pickett Lane, Durham, Connecticut.

Board members present: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mrs. Petrella and Mr. Roraback
Board members absent: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore and Mr. Stone
Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, and Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance

Mrs. Petrella called the Special District Meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

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

Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Mr. Roraback, to nominate Norm Hicks as moderator of the Special District Meeting.

In favor of nominating Norm Hicks as moderator of the Special District meeting: Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mrs. Petrella and Mr. Roraback. Motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Hicks began the meeting with a brief overview from Mrs. Petrella, the Board chair.

Mrs. Petrella explained that a handout was available for everyone tonight. She explained that the originally proposed budget that went to referendum was \$38,489,206 which represented a 3.96 percent increase from the 2021-2022 budget. When the referendum failed, the board revised the budget and it is now \$37,915,970, which represents a 2.41 percent increase from 2021-2022. The major changes include a slight increase in updated fuel pricing (\$22,291), the final health insurance rate (an increase of \$150,000), the field house funding was moved to Capital Reserve (no net impact) and staff positions were reduced (a net savings of \$745,527).

Mrs. Petrella noted that funding the Capital account has always been a concern as the district was always limited to no more than 1 percent of the budget. That was changed last year to 2 percent. Previously, Capital was funded at .97 percent. This year, the superintendent proposed funding 1.91 percent, the board adjusted that to 1.4 percent and, with tonight's changes of moving the field house, the Capital budget is now funded at 1.89 percent.

Mrs. Neubig explained the difference between budgeting the field house in the operating budget vs. capital is that the operating budget spans only one year. If the project is not encumbered in that year, the money allocated reverts back to the General Fund. If the money is in Capital Reserve, that is an ongoing fund and the money stays in there until the project is done. Money can be added each year (within the 2 percent cap) and if there is money left over after the project is completed, or if the project is cancelled, that money can be allocated, through board vote, to another project or cancelled. This process allows more flexibility and there is no rush to complete the project.

Dr. Schuch reviewed that they had talked about declining enrollment and the need for a comprehensive strategy to right-size the employee force. He acknowledged that they heard the community loud and clear. He explained that they had planned to do that next fall, but are doing it now. The cuts include 10.5 positions, with 9.5 of them coming from Coginchaug and Strong School. English, math, technology, world language, library media at the high school and English, language arts, math and science and some tutor positions at Strong School. The tutor positions are not even filled at this point. The library/media is being reduced 50 percent at both schools, mostly due to technology. A security position at the high school has also been eliminated, though the school resource officer will still be present. The only position proposed at the elementary level is a science specialist and that work will be picked up by other individuals.

Dr. Schuch explained that one of the reasons there are not more reductions at the elementary level is because the district has three campuses. He noted that they have been trying for years to reduce from three to two and the community has not given permission to do that. Dr. Schuch felt that, if they were able to close one school, there would be more efficiencies while providing a better educational product to the learners by consolidating staff resources. He also noted that no programs are being cut by these reductions. They are essentially making class sizes larger in the proposed areas. Dr. Schuch added that they are making every effort to use early retirement incentives and other means so that people don't necessarily lose their jobs.

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

Donia Viola, from Durham, liked what she heard from Dr. Schuch about the proposed cuts not impacting student gains. She stated that she finds it very poor that, as of today, the minutes from the May 11, 2022 meeting had not been posted nor had any mailing gone out to the public at large regarding these new proposals. She added that there was no notice in the Town Times about the meeting or tomorrow's referendum. She hoped that the board would be more diligent with communication. Mrs. Viola publicly thanked Mrs. Booth for serving on the board. She also supports putting the funding for the field house in the Capital Reserve fund and would like to see something happen moving forward. She appreciates that they will try to encourage early retirement and thanked everyone for stepping up to compensate for any shortfalls. Mrs. Viola does believe there are too many counselors at the high school and is something that should be looked at.

Richard Adams, from Middlefield, noted that he has attended a lot of these meetings over the years, and it was always packed to the gills. He was surprised to see nobody here tonight. Mr. Adams is puzzled that he hasn't seen much of anything in writing prior to the meeting. He would like to have seen a comparison between the defeated budget and the new one as he would like to go line by line and compare. He wondered how this information will be communicated to the people who didn't vote at all or voted against the last budget.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if there was something sent in the mail in the past for a second referendum. Mrs. Neubig explained that there wasn't enough time between the two referendums and it is also not required by state statute. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that Durham had sent the info out via email and she had asked them to send it out again.

Tressa Opalacz, from Durham, was not quite sure where they were heading with the field house and Capital Reserve. Her concern is that this is the worst time to be building and if it can be delayed, the price could

probably be lower. She is also a bit concerned about the staffing cuts hitting the regular ed kids and wondered about special education cuts.

Dr. Schuch stated that special ed staffing is largely driven by the individualized education plans (IEPs) and section 504 under the ADA. That staffing is constantly in a state of flux and he felt that they may be a bit understaffed based on the growing needs. They did look at special education, but this turned out to be the way to have the least impact on programming.

Mrs. Dahlheimer added that moving the field house to capital allowed the Building Committee to take a long, hard look at this project and get it vetted out. It also allowed for it to be spread out over more than one year. Mrs. Neubig added that the money will be set aside and can be used in future years and the funds can be reallocated or cancelled by board vote.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, thanked the board for the proposed cuts, but felt it was not enough. Expenses are way out of hand. They cut staff, but saved a building. He feels that the district's priorities are a little bit out of whack. The building is not needed for educational purposes. He did agree that water fountains are needed, but there is no need for a building. Bathrooms would be nice, but is it necessary when they will just sit there the majority of the year. The Durham Fair brings in portalets when there are excess crowds. Mr. Stoup reiterated that the field house is a big want and a big luxury and the towns cannot afford it right now. A comment was made to him that the district puts bricks over books.

Phil Muzio, from Durham, asked if the board has any plan as to how they will deal with Lyman over the next several years and if there is a plan to address the declining enrollment. He added that it was fine to hear there were no program cuts and 10.5 FTEs, but what about next year and the years after? With issues like Lyman and declining enrollment, he recommended that the board look at a five-year plan. Projections of enrollment have been pretty accurate, so they can use those to develop a more long-term plan that can be presented to the towns over a period of time, allowing them to know a direction and what to expect in future budgets.

Mrs. Petrella stated that building utilization and reorganization are definitely on the table and she hopes there will be some proposals before too long.

Tressa Opalacz, from Durham, added that she is shocked at the amount of people present at tonight's meeting. She did expect to see something in the Town Times. She was surprised to see the auditorium packed to elect Board of Education members, but then no one when it comes to the biggest thing. She hoped that parents and townspeople will talk to understand all of this.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, added that if the field house becomes serious, it should be put out as a referendum so that both towns have a say.

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 Coghinchaug Regional High School for Durham voters and at the Middlefield Community Center for Middlefield voters.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:38 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz
Alwaz First