

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a public hearing on Wednesday, April 5, 2023 at 7:00 PM in the library at Cuginchaug Regional High School.

Board members present: Ms. Betty (by phone), Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Roy and Mr. Stone (by phone).

Board members absent: None

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

Mrs. Petrella opened the public hearing at 7:00 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Mrs. Petrella thanked everyone for attending tonight's public hearing.

Mrs. Dahlheimer read the Warning of Public Hearing and Return of the Call into the record.

Mrs. Petrella reviewed that the proposed gross budget for fiscal year 2023-2024 is \$39,426,575 which represents a 3.98 percent increase from last year. Inflation during the year was around 8 percent and was 6.5 percent when the budget was prepared. The net budget is \$38,155,713, which represents a 4.72 percent increase over last year.

The towns' assessments are determined by the school population, with Durham at 64.65 percent and Middlefield at 35.35 percent. After grants are subtracted from the totals, Durham's proposed allocation increase is estimated at \$1,132,895 and \$482,614 for Middlefield.

Mrs. Petrella then explained that the per pupil expenditure will go down very little even if staff is cut. In order to make a significant change in the per pupil expenditure, the district needs to close a school. School closings could result in a savings of approximately \$1.5 million per school per year which would drop the per pupil cost by about \$1,000 for each school.

Most of the increase in this year's budget is due to inflation, but the biggest budget driver this year is operating services. There was an increase of \$776,376, or 22.28 percent over last year. Of the total 3.98 percent increase, 2.05 percent was directly attributed to operating expenses. This includes out-of-district transportation and tuition, daily transportation, diesel fuel, property and liability insurance as well as energy equipment leases.

Going back to enrollment, the question has been if the district is losing students, what is happening with staffing. Mrs. Petrella reviewed a graph showing the decline in enrollment starting back in 2013-2014. Staff has also declined over that same period of time. Both declines have been kind of running parallel to each other.

Looking at capital reserve, Mrs. Petrella explained, as of last year, the district is now able to put aside up to 2 percent of the budget. The capital reserve being proposed represents close to 2 percent of the budget. Items include turf replacement which will start this summer, anticipated building repairs and maintenance, paving of Pickett Lane this summer, chillers and chiller pumps at Strong School and indoor air variable frequency drives, which total \$778,000.

Moving to debt service, Mrs. Petrella noted that a portion of the debt service will be retired within a couple of years. This represents approximately \$5 million that the district can bond for without changing the debt service payments.

Mrs. Petrella reviewed the budget history from 2015 to today, noting that the budgets have been pretty much below the rate of inflation. She felt it was very telling to see the rate of inflation vs. the proposed budget. Mrs. Petrella then went on to look at comparisons of budgets from reporting districts, regional districts and the DRG. The average districts are reporting an increase of 4.95 percent. Regional districts are averaging 4.12 percent and DRG schools are at about 4.52 percent. She reminded everyone that the district's proposed increase is 3.98 percent.

Mrs. Petrella then opened the meeting for public comment.

Donia Viola, from Durham, asked why they are talking about a 3.98 percent increase when the 4.72 percent net increase is what the towns have to garner. She also noted that the budgets have increased over \$1 million every year with declining enrollment. Mrs. Viola mentioned the project at Memorial School and felt that they are still adhering to the two programs that were supposedly combined. Mrs. Viola suggested that the board let people know what is happening with the programs first. She also noted that there seems to be an excess every year as well. Mrs. Viola is very disappointed in the turnout at the public hearing, but felt that was due to a lack of communication. She felt that meetings are being held when people are still making their way home from work. She would also like to know the cost of shot clocks. Mrs. Viola added that the lack of communication still exists with the timeliness of the minutes after meetings. The public needs to hear everyone on the board and asked that everyone speak up. Mrs. Viola felt that there should be a third party looking at the expansion of a school with enrollment so far down. She also felt that the board should take a look at the budget because there are ways to cut it.

Mrs. Neubig stated that the shot clocks were budgeted at \$7,000. Mrs. Viola felt that the numbers can be crunched, depending on the supplier.

Mrs. Neubig explained that the gross budget is actual expenditures of the district and the net budget is what the towns pay and that is increased because of a loss in revenue. By state statute, the towns vote on the gross budget.

Rick Parmelee, from Durham, felt that the district is always asking for more money and is now approximately 80 percent of the towns' budgets. Considerable scrutiny happens with the other 20 percent of the budget. He would like to see the cost of the football program brought to the attention of the public and added that he is concerned about head injuries. He wondered how many students from town are inched out for students from other schools. Mr. Parmelee noted that he was upset when the board stated that they were going to tear down Korn School when they didn't have the money to do that. He felt that the new water line should impact the insurance premium and was provided by the Town of Durham. The work on Pickett Lane was also funded by other sources, with the district contributing nothing. He felt that the town always ends up on the losing end when negotiating with the district and it is a private road.

Mrs. Neubig explained that the district has plans to pave Pickett Lane in this year's budget. Mr. Parmelee felt that it wasn't just paving, but also maintaining access 24/7. Mrs. Neubig explained that the MOU stated that access would be maintained when the school was open, but that will look a little different if the ambulance and resident trooper are there. She noted that the district has no plans to ask the town for maintenance. Mr. Parmelee added that the district has cut off access to the road in the past.

Mr. Parmelee felt that when enrollment was going up, the budgets went up. Now that enrollment is going down, the district is still spending more money. He would like to see some changes made.

Roger Kleeman, from Durham, noted that the cost of fuel has come down considerably. Mrs. Neubig explained that the district is part of the same consortium as Durham. She added that the bus contract also went up 3.5 percent. Mr. Kleeman also felt that buses are very empty when they leave the schools and parents are lined up into the street.

Donia Viola, from Durham, added that a talented and gifted program was tried years ago and didn't take off. She believes that every child is talented and gifted and the schools don't need any more discrimination. She felt that the two programs definitely do not unify the community and they need to get away from that. Mrs. Viola felt that the teachers have a union to represent them, but the public has no one representing them. She felt that the board was supposed to be doing that, but they can't even directly answer a question. She felt that each board member should be their own spokesperson and hold up to the character and responsibility that they were elected for. They shouldn't just follow the leader.

Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that the district is state-mandated to assess and identify students within the talented and gifted realm, but not necessarily the programming that goes with it. Mrs. Viola is tired of all the responsibilities being put on the teachers besides actually teaching. She does not see any savings from mainstreaming.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, reviewed that the field house is over 4,000 sq. ft. and asked if there is any money set aside for additional improvements for that building. Mrs. Neubig explained that the proposed 23-24 budget does not contain any additional funding for the fieldhouse. He is concerned that there will be plans for bathrooms and lights. Mr. Stoup would also like to see a study done of all the excess space in the district instead of adding buildings. He added that he has never known a building that has taught a kid; it's what happens inside the building that counts. Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that they are looking at that and will continue to discuss it.

Maureen Funke, from Durham, agreed that the best way to bring down the budget is to condense the school buildings and use space more efficiently to help make the community a more inviting place that people want to move to.

Martin French, from Durham, was saddened by the number of people present at the public hearing. He felt that is one symptom of a communications problem that the board has and added that, for months, a myriad of people have been saying that they can't hear the board. He acknowledged that it is much better to be there in person, but a lot of people are online. He encouraged the board members to get microphones and monitors. He asked for a commitment from the individual members that they want to be heard. Another example of the communication problem is the presentation of the budget included next to nothing about education. He felt that student outplacement, staffing, enhancement of programs and reimagining education should have been talked about. Mr. French stressed that the public wants to know what's happening and hoped that the board recognized that they do not.

Roger Kleeman asked if the proposed line-by-line budget was online anywhere and Mrs. Neubig explained that it is on the district's website, under Business Office and Board of Education. A hard copy is also in the libraries and with the towns as well. Mr. Kleeman felt that if people do not have kids in school, they are totally removed from the district. He felt that the board does not reach out to the

taxpayers, but instead they have to reach out to the board. He would like to see the budget on the towns' websites and not have to go looking for it.

Cindy Nick felt that decreasing programs at the high school will cause a bigger decrease in enrollment. She had hoped that the presentation would show what changes are being made, but thanked the board for all of their hard work. She didn't see a way around having an increase due to inflation.

Mrs. Petrella explained that they did not make any cuts to programming, but did decrease 2.6 staff members. The district just instituted a new reading program for grades K-5 which will begin to be implemented next Fall. Mrs. Petrella apologized for the public not being able to hear and explained that they have been working with IT on it. Mrs. Dahlheimer pointed out the microphones in the room.

Mrs. Petrella also noted that they have significantly increased the board's ability to have more people involved in meetings. Meetings are now on YouTube, people can comment remotely and the early meeting times have enabled the board to have work sessions that are publicly available.

Cindy Nick asked if the board has brought anything back that was cut last year, specifically personal finance. Mrs. Petrella noted that it will be an online course this year, but they are hoping to expand it. Mr. Mennone felt that no one on the board wants to cut anything and they would all want to expand programs to make the district a place where kids want to stay. He felt that it is extremely important for the board to look forward to see what needs to happen to close schools and continue to progress. Mr. Roraback added that fixed costs of the buildings are not going away until buildings are consolidated.

Mrs. Petrella reminded everyone that the discussion about reconfiguration has been going on for almost 10 years. There have been several votes to try to close a school or upgrade a school and nothing has passed. Consolidating the students make the most sense educationally as well as fiscally. Mrs. Petrella stressed that they need the community's support.

Donia Viola asked if there is money put aside for the Memorial School project. Mrs. Petrella stated that they do not, other than paying for consultants to give a proposal to see what it would cost. Mrs. Viola stated that there were numbers in the minutes that the board felt were too costly and that is why she believes a third party needs to look at it. Mrs. Viola also felt that maybe the costs should be split evenly between the two towns. Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that the split was based on student enrollment, but Mrs. Viola didn't feel it was an even divide. Mr. Mennone added that the agreement was made and the board cannot change it. Mrs. Viola felt that it could be changed if they wanted to.

Rick Parmelee reviewed the past failed attempts at closing schools and/or renovate. He felt that each community has always paid their share, but both towns had the same number of votes on the Board of Education. He also felt that the town side of the budgets are heavily scrutinized. He again asked if the board would explain to the voters how the money is spent on football. Mrs. Dahlheimer didn't feel that any kids from Durham or Middlefield have been excluded from the football team. Mrs. Neubig added that it is a condition of a co-op that everybody has to be accepted to play. She also noted that the co-op teams pay \$650 per athlete to the district and there is a 100 percent collection rate because they can't play if they don't pay. That money goes to offset the cost of the program, based on the cost of transportation, uniforms, referees, etc.

Mr. Parmelee reiterated his belief that no student should have to pay to participate in any activity in a public school.

Andrew Taylor, from Durham, acknowledged the board's work on the budget. He felt that it might be helpful to provide some type of public comment during budget workshops. Dr. Taylor had also heard about removing some of the differentiation in classrooms at the high school and asked if that has ever come to fruition. He believes that a lot of people in the public would want to hear that type of information. Mrs. Petrella explained that it has been discussed, but nothing has been changed.

Dr. Taylor asked if there have been discussions on other options for a simpler plan of a K-5 school. He didn't believe there was a palate for \$20, 40 or 80 million. He would hate to see this not come to some sort of resolution and believes that it is vital that something happens. Mrs. Petrella stated that they are in the process of discussing the current proposal and have been looking at past proposals as well. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that the latest numbers hit everyone hard and they will not rush into anything.

Dr. Taylor also asked if anyone has heard anything about a potential state-sponsored bond to complete the field house (lights and bathrooms) and if there has been any discussion about the long-term budgetary impact of it. Mrs. Neubig stated that the state legislature put in the bond proposal to finish the complex to what it was originally designed to be, which would include lights and potentially bathrooms. That amount was calculated to be \$443,000. She did not know the status of it at the moment. Dr. Taylor asked if an analysis has been done of the upkeep and costs associated with heating, etc. and if the board approved the bonding. He felt it was odd that it was brought forward without approval from the board. Mrs. Neubig explained that the board was informed about the bonding. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that it was talked about at the Building committee, but they have not had discussions about maintenance and costs.

Dr. Taylor also asked if there were any specific budgetary items dedicated to push the strategic plan forward. Mrs. Petrella explained that contractual changes have gone forward that are geared towards that. Dr. Schuch added that, as they move forward with implementation of the strategic plan, they feel like they are well-resourced. There were no specific adds to the budget to specifically move that forward because they don't feel that it necessary. They did restructure a number of stipend positions through the last bargaining agreement as well as professional learning. Dr. Schuch reminded everyone that this is an evolution, not a revolution, and getting to where they want to get isn't going to happen overnight. This budget does support the district moving in that direction.

Mrs. Dahlheimer added that certain changes have been discussed as well, including splitting the curriculum director into two learning specialist positions, as well as stipend positions that did not produce budgetary changes. If roles are not needed, stipends will not be expended. Dr. Taylor thanked the board for the hard work they do.

Adjournment

Hearing no other public comment, Mrs. Petrella declared the public hearing closed.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

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Alwaz First