

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a District Meeting on May 1, 2023 at 7:00 PM in the Julian Thayer Auditorium at Coginchaug Regional High School, 135 Pickett Lane, Durham, Connecticut.

Board members present: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella and Mr. Roraback

Board members absent: Mrs. Roy and Mr. Stone

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

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

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

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

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

Mr. Hicks began the meeting by asking Mrs. Dahlheimer to read the district warning of the district meeting and return of the call into the record.

Mr. Mennone made a motion, seconded by Rick Parmelee, to accept the warning and return of the call. Motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Hicks declared the meeting in session and asked Mrs. Petrella, the Board chair, to make a statement.

Mrs. Petrella explained that they are presenting a gross budget and a net budget, which is the budget that the towns pay for. The gross budget represents a 3.98 percent increase. Inflation rose to around 8 percent this year and was about 6.5 percent in March when this budget was created. The gross budget increase of 3.98 percent is obviously much lower than the inflation rate.

The towns' assessments are determined by the school population and that shows an increase of .15 percent to Durham, with a decrease of .15 percent to Middlefield. The government-proposed ECS grant for Durham was \$3,208,722 and \$1,959,060 for Middlefield. Looking at the net cost to the towns, Durham will be 64.65 percent of the budget and Middlefield will be at 35.35 percent. The increase to Durham will be \$1,132,895. Middlefield's share of the budget will increase by \$482,614.

Mrs. Petrella reviewed that the per pupil expenditures from 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 are actual figures. The numbers for 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 are estimated. The estimated cost per student is \$27,616 for 2023-2024. To significantly reduce that cost, the district would really need to close one, or even two, schools. Any other reductions, including staffing, will reduce the per pupil cost, but only very little.

The biggest budget driver this year is operating services, with an increase of \$776,376 or 22.28 percent over last year. Of the 3.98 percent proposed total budget increase, 2.05 percent of that is operating services. That increase includes out-of-district transportation and out-of-district tuition, which represent a

combined increase of 75 percent over the current year. Also included in the increase is daily transportation, property and liability insurance and the energy equipment lease repayment schedule.

Comparing enrollment to staff, both student enrollment and certified staffing have dropped.

Moving on to capital reserve, Mrs. Petrella reviewed that the district is now able to put aside up to 2 percent of the gross budget and they are close to that this year. Capital improvements include turf replacement at the high school which could happen this summer (\$80,000), unanticipated building repairs and maintenance (\$100,000), paving of Pickett Lane which will happen this summer, Strong chiller and chiller pumps, and indoor air variable frequency drives. This totals \$778,000 which is close to the maximum that can be put aside.

Mrs. Petrella then reviewed a graph showing debt service, showing prior debt that will be paid off in two years and the debt service amount will go down. The \$6.9 million capital improvement is noted on the graph in orange. If the district level-funds the debt service, they would be able to bond up to approximately \$5 million and maintain the same debt service amount in the budget.

Mrs. Petrella then reviewed a graph of the district's budget history and pointed out the top line which shows the rate of inflation over the years from 2015 to today. The blue and green lines represent both the gross and net budgets. For the most part, the district's budget increases have been well below the inflation rate.

Mrs. Petrella then noted that all reporting districts from the state have reported an average 4.69 percent increase, regional districts reported average increases of 3.94 percent and school districts in the DRG reported average increases of 4.66 percent. She reminded everyone that the district's projected increase is 3.98 percent.

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

Chuck Stengel, from Durham, asked why the interest income is so low at \$45,000 when there is a base of \$38 million. He thought it would be around \$400,000. Mrs. Neubig explained that the district doesn't receive the \$38 million at one time; rather in monthly installments. That doesn't give them the ability to invest the funds. The projection is based on what has been received to date in 2022-2023 and then annualized.

Craig Bradanini, president of Region 13 Education Association, stated that the members of his executive board support this budget and urge the public to vote in favor. He felt that the budget does an outstanding job of supporting the students, teachers, district priorities and responsible spending. Although the 3.98 percent increase may be higher than what the towns are used to, it is still well below the inflation rate as well as the state and DRG averages and almost even when comparing it to other regional districts. He thanked the board for their hard work and presenting a very responsible budget.

Donia Viola, from Durham stated the increase of 4.72 percent is rather high for both communities to support, especially when one school has already been closed for two years and enrollment continues to decline. She feels that they haven't really realized the savings. She does not consider over \$1.5 million in budget increases to be responsible. Mrs. Viola stated regardless of inflation, many school districts have

come in consistently lower. She does realize that it has a lot to do with non-regional districts because they are accountable directly to the town budget. Mrs. Viola stated Durham's mill rate will increase directly by 1.24 mills from last year as a result of this budget with Middlefield's mill rate is increasing by 1.05 mills. It looks like the governor will keep the ECS funding intact. The \$1,420 per student increase doesn't seem to directly impact the students and seems to be more of a result of contract negotiations for administrators, staff and teachers. Mrs. Viola doesn't see new books or extra programming for safety as she believes they have lost the resource officer. She would not want to see anybody in harm's way. Moving to the curriculum director's position being divided into two learning specialists, Mrs. Viola felt that it winds up being more costly than with just one position unless hours are removed. She would be interested in knowing what kind of stipends would not affect budgetary changes.

Roger Kleeman, from Durham, asked why the enrollment for 2022-2023 is not included as he felt they should know by this time of the year. He would be interested to see if enrollment is increasing or not. Mr. Kleeman asked about the \$60,000 increase for buildings and grounds. Mrs. Neubig explained the \$60,000 is not just for landscaping, but also includes repair of a stage curtain at Brewster, an increase in the energy lease, an asbestos consultant that is required every three years, tree trimming, trail repair and clearing at Brewster and Lyman, as well as water service for a full year in addition to a state mandate to provide feminine hygiene products for all girls' bathroom and one boys' bathroom for grades 4 and up at no cost to the students. Mr. Kleeman also asked for more details about operating services. Mrs. Neubig explained that the \$776,000 increase is because the district had three new students move to the district who receive specialized outplacement tuition and services which the district is mandated to pay. In 2022-2023, the district budgeted for five students and there are actually eight. That number includes the tuition and the transportation.

Rick Parmelee, from Durham, noted that the inflation rate shown didn't take into consideration that the population has gone down in the district. He has been to quite a few education meetings over the years and everything the town seems to do revolves around the school budget. They increased lot sizes to slow down building and to slow down enrollment. He would like to see more scrutiny of the 2 percent that is being saved for capital improvements. He felt that the Town of Durham operates on 20 percent of the money raised. He noted that they are not able to reduce any line items from the floor as they can with the town budget. Mr. Parmelee asked when John Lyman School will be closed. The majority of the people voted to close the school, but because Middlefield didn't pass it separately, it stayed open. He asked if the district went to the state capital to see if they could get this straightened out. Dr. Schuch explained that they did that last year, but the state did not follow through. Mr. Parmelee also doesn't understand why Durham has only four members on the board but pays more than 50 percent. He also asked about the cost of the football program and felt the tragedy is the head injuries that accumulate over the years. By continuing the program, they are continuing to endanger the safety of the students and he felt that the program should be done away.

Mr. Parmelee also felt that the budget should have to pass in each town and felt that the legislature should look at that. Going back to Lyman, he felt they should contact the legislature and the governor to close the building. He felt that the town is pretty frugal and sacrifices are made, but the district comes to the townspeople once a year for money.

Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that they did testify at a hearing about John Lyman School and the consensus was that the legislature did not want to step into a dispute between towns. They are still actively looking toward getting the school closed.

Mr. Parmelee concluded by asking if football can be ended by just not funding it or is there a contract that has to be honored. Mr. Parmelee also mentioned that he didn't feel that the Town of Durham taking over Korn School didn't seem to affect the school budget. He also noted that residents of both Durham and Middlefield use Pickett Lane. He added that if police are involved on the road, nobody should be made aware ahead of time, including staff

Carl Stoup, from Durham, stated that they are talking about the gigantic increase in operating services, but didn't hesitate to approve a storage building/fieldhouse. That will add tremendous operating costs to the budget, both now and in the future. If the district really wants to try to cut costs, that would be a place to start. He thanked the board for all of their time and effort.

Mary Ann O'Brien, from Durham, thanked Rick Parmelee for his efforts and questions. She asked about Memorial School and the money required to bring it to code or correct operating capacity. She wondered how that expense will impact the district's budget.

Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that they are doing studies to do a possible expansion, but not in this current budget year. They hope to have K-5 at Memorial with a renovate-as-new expansion onto the school. They are still trying to see if it will be feasible. Mrs. O'Brien recalled that the items in the estimate were fairly significant and important. She felt that if that project is passed, it will certainly add to the mill rate. She felt that \$1.5 million is a tremendous increase for a small town. Mrs. O'Brien asked what year they are projecting to do the Memorial project and when would they see another request for money. Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that any renovation at Memorial School would have to go through bonding and a referendum. Mrs. O'Brien again asked what the timeline would be for that project. Mrs. Petrella noted that no significant renovations are necessary at Memorial, but the large cost would be to add to the school in order to accommodate the students that are presently at Brewster and Lyman. It has not been brought to the community yet because of the cost as it is a lot more than they had anticipated. They continue to work on it to see if it can be done at a more reasonable cost, but they don't know how long that will take. John Lyman School does require significant repairs, but the bonding question for that did not pass. They continue to fix things as needed and hope to avoid any large failures.

Mrs. O'Brien didn't feel they were answering her questions as she would like to know the potential for more mill rate increases in the future. She would have been more comfortable if that could have been part of tonight's presentation and be more transparent.

Dr. Schuch explained that the costs are unknown, as are the significant savings by closing one or two schools. Once they know those numbers, they will be very up-front and clear with the public. He reviewed that anything they do will have to have permission from the voters for bonding. They are also seeking to have the state reimburse expenses at 52 percent.

Mrs. Neubig thanked Mr. Parmelee for his patience and explained that the total cost of the football program is budgeted for the 2023-2024 year at \$52,272. That includes uniforms, stipends, transportation and officials. Offsetting that number are the co-op fees at \$650 per student that another district would pay for them to participate. The \$52,272 represents \$38.86 towards the per pupil cost in the district. If the program was to be discontinued, it would drop the total budget by .133 percent.

Donia Viola, from Durham, thanked Mary Ann O'Brien for bringing up the renovations at Memorial School because it is out there and she is very concerned about K-5 being at Memorial. She would like to know why they would empty Brewster to accommodate just a preK program which she thinks is ludicrous, extravagant and uncalled for. Mrs. Viola would also like an answer about the curriculum director's position being split into two learning specialist positions and what stipends would not affect budgetary changes. Mrs. Viola added that the Town Times report about a large crowd at the hearing was a joke since there were maybe 14 in the room and a handful online. She also felt that the 3.98 percent is deceptive since the towns pay at the 4.72 percent. She felt that the board may not want to be devious, but it does appear that they are not transparent and it's time to ante up. Mrs. Viola felt that the bottom line is she will never support this budget and is an insult to her intelligence. It's time that the board becomes responsible and accountable. She wished that the Finance Committee would take it seriously that it is incumbent upon the district to profess actual numbers and not have recurring surpluses. She noted that the board is there to represent the townspeople and they should start now.

Dr. Schuch explained that the curriculum director position did not actually become two positions. The Director of Curriculum retired at the end of the last school year and that position was eliminated as well as another FTE and created these two positions. These positions now have different names and there was a cost savings because they are much lower paid than the curriculum director. They are all union members and the benefits are comparable.

Donia Viola added that the paper reported lesser revenues because of attrition for many of the teachers and staff. She felt that the graph showing that positions correlate to declining enrollment is quite accurate because circumstances have changed and lay-offs would be another story. She also asked if stipend positions are noted in this budget and if there was any impact from that.

Mrs. Neubig explained that there are stipend positions included in the teachers' contract that did increase, but those stipend positions can be filled or not filled at the superintendent's discretion. There are academic and athletic stipends and stipends for after-school clubs. Stipends in the teachers' contract went up by the GWI increase in the contract.

Mrs. Neubig also explained that enrollment was 1,355 in March and 1,367 on April 1st. Mr. Roraback added that it is true that they do not know exact numbers at this point and it is difficult to forecast. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that magnet schools accepted students this week and they still don't know the numbers.

Roger Kleeman, from Durham, summarized then that enrollment is actually down from last year and Mrs. Neubig agreed. He understands that enrollment fluctuates. Mr. Mennone added that they are still operating five schools and they are trying to reduce that, but that is extremely difficult to manage without support. Mr. Mennone felt that nothing will change monetarily until the number of schools is reduced. Mr. Kleeman felt that Mr. Mennone's crystal ball did not say that enrollment will increase, yet houses in town are selling to young people. Closing two schools without building a new one might not be the answer.

Mary Ann O'Brien stated that there had been a lot of conversation on Facebook and other areas last year about students that were going to private schools out of the district. She would like to know if the district keeps tabs on the numbers going to private schools and how quickly that is included in the plans. Mrs. Neubig explained that when students transfer out, say from eighth grade to high school, they do know

where every student is going. It's the kindergartners and students who start in private schools that make it more difficult to track.

Rick Parmelee, from Durham, noted that there was no minority representation on the Board of Education. The last he knew, the budget was based on a number from the state for funding. A few years ago, Governor Malloy pulled the money from the municipalities and the district was locked in at the number that was voted on. Mr. Parmelee tends to find that the Board of Education distances itself from its constituents.

Mrs. Neubig explained that the hold-back did happen under Governor Malloy, however the legislature has put in safeguards that that will never happen again. The governor has proposed the current ECS, but that could change as the budget has not been approved yet. Mrs. Neubig doesn't see the number going lower, but it could certainly go higher.

Mary Ann O'Brien asked if the school year is started, a budget is planned and then they find out that a number of students aren't coming back, what is done about the budget for the savings of \$27,000 per student. Dr. Schuch reviewed that the budget is set on what they anticipate, so if fewer students show up, class sizes will be slightly lower and would be slightly higher if more students show up. Because most funds are in people and those people are contracted through the budget, there is very little that can be substantially changed. Corrections would typically show in the following year. Dr. Schuch felt that the hardest class to estimate is kindergarten and is projected based on birth rates.

Mrs. Neubig added that it would be great if the district actually saved \$27,000 times the number of students that leave the district, but that isn't the case because the same amount of buildings, electricity and staff are still there. Dr. Schuch added that they would also not be paying \$27,000 more for every student that comes in.

At this point, hearing no further comments, Mr. Hicks thanked everyone for attending tonight. He declared the meeting adjourned until 6:00 AM tomorrow morning. Voting will take place from 6:00 AM until 8:00 PM at the Durham Community Center for Durham voters and at the Middlefield Community Center for Middlefield voters.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First