

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a regular work session on Wednesday, February 21, 2024 at 6:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

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

Board members absent: Mr. DeVecchio, Mr. Mennone and Mr. Stone

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance, Mr. Brough, Human Resources Specialist, Mrs. Keane, Director of Student Services and Special Education, Mrs. Quarato, Associate Director of Learning, Innovation and Development, Mrs. Siegel, Associate Director of Learning, Innovation and Accountability, and Mr. Petronio, Athletic Director.

Mrs. Dahlheimer called the special work session to order at 6:03 PM.

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Approval of Agenda

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked to amend the agenda to add item 4, possible action to accept a \$5,800 donation from the Benchwarmers for the tennis wind screens.

Dr. Darcy made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mennone, to amend the agenda to add item 4, possible action to accept a \$5,800 donation from the Benchwarmers for the tennis wind screens.

In favor of approving the agenda, as amended: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella and Mr. Roraback. Motion carried.

Public Comment

A. In-person public comment

None.

B. Remote public comment

None.

Possible Action to Accept \$5,800 Donation from the Benchwarmers for the Tennis Wind Screens

Henry Bugai, president of the Benchwarmers, noted that they have made about \$3 million in donations to the district since 1966. The boys' and girls' tennis teams play about 18 times at home during a season. The girls' team has about 23 girls participating and the boys' team has about 12. The girls have gone to the Class S tournament the last two seasons and have a player who has won the Shoreline tournament the past three years. The existing wind screens have deteriorated due to improper maintenance and being left outside. These wind screens create specific advantages for the players and are not just aesthetic. These screens will have the Devil's logo on them. Mr. Bugai distributed information to each of the board members.

Mrs. Dahlheimer added that they look great and she was glad to see that the same logo will be used there that will be on the turf.

Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Dahlheimer, to accept the donation of \$5,800 for tennis wind screens from the Benchwarmers.

In favor of accepting the donation of \$5,800 for tennis wind screens from the Benchwarmers: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella and Mr. Roraback. Motion carried.

2024-2025 Budget Discussion

Mrs. Neubig reviewed that that the budget had been presented with a 4.48 percent gross increase and a 3.82 percent net increase. She proposed talking about salaries, capital and debt service at tonight's meeting. Salaries have increased by about \$1 million, however it is not all increases due to contractual obligations. Salaries make up 2.55 percent of the 4.48 percent gross increase. Mrs. Neubig explained that most districts do not budget a vacancy factor, but that decision had been made the first year she was in the district and they were able to use the fund balance to cover any extra. She explained that the fund balance is now very low and they are no longer able to do that. The district is currently over in the salary budget by \$285,000 or 1.25 percent. Mrs. Neubig reviewed that she has proposed to change the vacancy factor from 96.5 to 98 percent. That alone increases the total budget by .82 percent. The second part of the salaries increase is due to contractual obligations as well as administrative staff that are not in a union. The line item also includes 2.5 FTE staff member increases.

Mrs. Neubig reviewed that, based on class size, one FTE has been reduced at the elementary level and one has been added at the middle school. Mrs. Dahlheimer asked about the class size in sixth grade and, after researching it, Mr. Brough explained that the current sixth grade has 98 students and there will be 116 next year. That position should follow the class to seventh grade in the following year.

Additions include an athletic trainer which had previously been a contracted position. They could contract for \$78,000, but could hire a trainer for \$75,000. That would provide a full-time trainer who could possibly teach a pathway class. Mrs. Neubig pointed out that the position is actually budget-neutral because it would have to be in purchased services if not in salaries. Mr. Petronio added that the position could potentially be a 12-month position. Mr. Roraback noted that they do need to consider the cost of benefits for an employee and Mrs. Neubig explained that it could be anywhere from \$17,000 to \$30,000.

There is also a proposed 1.0 FTE in maintenance at \$65,000 and Mrs. Neubig removed outside contractors from purchased services in the amount of \$75,000. Benefits would possibly be included as well. She explained that the person in this position would be capable of doing a plethora of things, including preventative maintenance. Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if that position would be reduced if the district goes down to three schools. Mrs. Neubig didn't foresee a reduction because they would take care of things in real-time vs. playing catch-up. She added that Mr. Proia just can't get to everything himself. Mrs. Neubig emphasized that this position is not because Mr. Proia needs the help, but rather the district needs the help.

Mrs. Neubig explained that while the athletic director was incorporated in the administrator union, the \$81,000 line item represents the newly proposed athletic trainer position, not the athletic director. The trainer position would not be certified at this time, but they would like to explore that further to teach classes.

There has been an increase in the number of multi-language learners and the district has not been able to provide the statutory service hours. Due to that, they are asking for another .5 FTE with an additional \$37,000. There are 21 students identified, with four of them entering the district speaking very limited English. Mrs. Keane explained that the current position is a Coordinator of Multi-Language Learners with very limited instructional time and they are finding that more instructional time as well as coordination of services is necessary. Seven of the 21 students are at level 1 (very limited proficiency in English), three students at level 2, eight students at level 3 and three students at level 4. The Department of Education has strong requirements for the lower levels, including four to five days a week of one-hour instruction per day. Mrs. Keane explained that the district does have to comply with those requirements. She added that there are also kids in the monitor stage that are not included in the 21. Mr. Roraback felt that would be a valuable asset for the district and students at the monitoring level can be great mentors as well.

Dr. Schuch asked if anyone had any objections to these additions. Mr. Moore felt that the trainer is very important. Dr. Schuch felt it was critical to have a consistent person who can build relationships. Mr. Petronio felt the consistency was important as well as so much of the position is to be preventative. Dr. Darcy would be in support, but would want them to work full-time and asked how they would be evaluated. Dr. Schuch assumed that Mr. Petronio would evaluate the trainer. Mr. Petronio explained that trainers are not teachers and he would have to look at how his colleagues are doing evaluations.

Mrs. Petrella felt it made sense to have a maintenance person on staff. She felt that the district has had issues trying to keep up with maintenance due to capital restrictions. Custodians are not considered maintenance, but do help out when they can. Dr. Schuch added that if this position is added, it would not guarantee that it stays in forever and they would reevaluate it once the district goes down to three schools.

Moving on to capital reserve, Mrs. Neubig explained that they have included 2 percent funding (\$778,000). Proposals include upgrades to the office PA systems which have become a security issue (\$116,000, including \$35,000 at Coginchau, \$25,000 at Strong, \$18,000 at Lyman, \$20,000 at Memorial and \$18,000 at Brewster), glycol replacement (starting to save a total of \$700,000 for all schools), unanticipated repairs and maintenance (an additional \$100,000), athletic field upgrades, including drainage at the softball and baseball fields, to start saving for replacement of the tennis courts (about \$215,000 total), the turf replacement and to continue saving for chiller replacement at Strong. The roof at Strong will be 20 years old soon and Mrs. Neubig proposed starting to save to replace it.

Dr. Schuch reviewed that this is a proactive strategy rather than waiting to have to bond when the issues become critical. Mrs. Neubig added that there is \$610,000 in capital reserve for the pump house and will probably only need around \$200,000. The board can vote to reallocate those funds for other projects.

Mrs. Neubig explained that a couple of bonds had been in place when she joined the district and they also sold the \$6.9 million bonding in 2022. With that, one of the bonds will be fully paid at the end of 2024-2025, decreasing the debt service by about \$338,000. Debt service is the interest and principal payments on the borrowed money. Mrs. Neubig noted that the debt service this year is about \$970,000 and she would like to use the bond premium and interest income in the capital reserve to pay \$334,000 which would level fund the debt service so that it will not increase in 2025-2026. Mrs. Neubig added that the district has three years to spend 85 percent of any bond money which they have not done because they have not spent the Brewster money. If that is not done, they will have to abandon the project and pay the

money back. She added that the district is earning 2.54 percent and paying 3.18 percent in compliance with arbitrage rules.

Dr. Schuch explained that they recommend doing this, but have not included it in the proposal. It will result in a .84 percent savings. Mr. Moore asked to see the charts with the numbers and felt that would bring the net budget increase down to under 3 percent. Mrs. Neubig added that the debt is falling every year until they do more bonding which would be at a higher interest rate.

Mrs. Neubig then moved on to answering board member questions from the Google doc. Mr. Moore was concerned that they are paying more for music at Strong than they are at Coginchaug. He felt that most music activity is at the high school and asked if they could get more at the high school. Mrs. Neubig explained that the adjustment was to properly reflect Mr. Fisher's time to his actual. The budget was prepared before the time allocation was changed. Mr. Moore also noted that they have lost two really good math teachers over the past three years as well as a part-time person. He felt that they are not funding the pathways in engineering, science and health as well as STEAM at an appropriate level. He added that the math department is not funded as well as English and other departments and the math scores at the lower levels will not continue at the higher levels. He felt that the half position should be restored and didn't see how a \$60,000 cut in the math budget is cost effective. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt it would be hard to approve a budget when they have concerns about the program levels and would like to see both math and music numbers justified. Dr. Schuch reviewed that department heads are now teaching more than they had before. Mr. Moore asked to get more information from Mrs. Stone.

A question had been asked about track and cross country uniform replacement and Mrs. Neubig explained that indoor track and baseball are scheduled for 2024-2025 and are in the budget. That budget could be used for a different sport, if needed. Tennis has moved to an annual uniform purchase as of this year. Mr. Petronio explained that they went to an annual budget to allow individuals to have more than one set. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that they want to make sure track has uniforms as athletes can be disqualified if they are not wearing the same uniforms.

Mrs. Neubig explained that she reduced supplies by a straight 25 percent and a comment was made that some staff are concerned that they are not getting the supplies they need. She did poll the principals who were also unaware of that. She clarified that no one is ever told no for necessary and appropriate instructional supplies and staff is authorized to purchase what they need. Looking at historical data, some areas do not fully expend their funds while others spend all of their budget. Mrs. Neubig added that it is a specific strategy to avoid a surplus. Mr. Roraback wondered if the teachers just don't have the time to complete a list. Mrs. Neubig added that could be the case, but it is certainly not an issue with supplies being restricted.

There was a question about cost savings of about \$125,000 by having one Director of Learning, however that would greatly diminish current support for learning. The prior position of director and a teacher plus 10 that had supported the learning instruction team is now divided by these two positions.

Another question asked why John Lyman's increase was so much higher than the other schools and Mrs. Neubig explained that it had to do with students that are placed outside the district follow where their grade is in the district. A question was asked about the purchased services reduction in athletics and that was due to the reallocation of the athletic trainer, but it was only \$44,000 for this year. The line item includes concussion management, CPR, first aid certification and physicians' services.

The Finance Committee also submitted some questions. One question was regarding equipment expenditures for this year of \$7,000 for basketball and \$5,000 for outdoor track and those included the shot clocks for basketball and outdoor track high jump and vault covers. Another question was about the \$5,000 equipment expense for football which was a two-man sled. A question was asked about the large increase in leases and Mrs. Neubig explained that they are moving from diesel buses to propane buses with a municipal lease. According to the Uniform Chart of Accounts, leases are classified under the 400 series, Facilities and Grounds, so there is an increase in that area and a decrease under Operating Services where transportation is reported. The lease for Special Ed is that portion of the bus leases.

Property insurance had an increase because they had under-budgeted that for this year. They have also added the field house to the policy and the buses also need to be insured. The policies went up 10 to 15 percent this year. There was an increase at Brewster and Lyman for equipment and capital because the district was budgeting at the district level rather than building level. Brewster is also requesting some cameras and smart boards. The district bought a dishwasher for the high school this year and will buy one for Brewster next year.

Mrs. Neubig answered a question about how the budgeting is done and explained that it is zero-based budgeting. The administrators do submit proposals which are vetted by the entire administrative team, but the majority of them don't make it into the budget. It was agreed to leave the other questions until the next meeting. Mr. Moore asked Mrs. Neubig to clarify the staffing numbers a little more for the next work session. Dr. Darcy asked if any of the staffing positions were covered by ESSER funds and Mrs. Neubig explained that they are not.

Mrs. Dahlheimer encouraged everyone to keep submitting questions and comments to Mrs. Neubig for discussion at the next work session.

Possible Bus Lease Resolution

Mrs. Neubig needs authorization for the municipal lease for the propane buses and had distributed a resolution to authorize her to enter into that lease on behalf of the district. If funds are not appropriated for the lease in any given year, the lease is null and void. It was agreed to waive the reading of the resolution.

Dr. Darcy made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Dahlheimer, to authorize the Director of Finance for execution and delivery of a master governmental lease-purchase agreement.

In favor of authorizing the Director of Finance to execute and delivery a master governmental lease-purchase agreement: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella and Mr. Roraback. Motion carried.

Adjournment

Dr. Darcy made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to adjourn the regular work session.

In favor of adjourning the special work session: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, and Mr. Roraback.

Meeting was adjourned at 7:29 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First