

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a public hearing on Wednesday, April 3, 2024 at 7:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

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

Board members absent: Mrs. Caramanello

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

Mrs. Dahlheimer opened the public hearing at 7:09 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

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

Mrs. Dahlheimer thanked everyone for attending the public hearing and reviewed that Dr. Schuch had presented a budget with a 4.48 percent gross and a 3.82 percent net increase. The net budget is what is charged to the towns. Dr. Schuch was able to reduce the net by applying the anticipated surplus for 2023-2024.

The Board of Education's proposed budget has a gross budget of \$40,879,195, which represents a 3.68 percent increase, and a net budget of \$39,297,814, which represents a 2.99 percent increase from last year. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that they feel this is a responsible and frugal budget while still supporting class sizes and programming as well as all five buildings. The budget is aligned with the grade reconfiguration for the Fall and also allows for the design and implementation of the career pathways at the high school.

Looking at averages of other districts, the average of reporting districts in the state is currently a 4.81 percent increase, regional districts average a 4.08 percent increase and the DRG C average is a 4.47 percent increase.

The towns' assessments are determined by the school population, with Durham at 65.65 percent and Middlefield at 34.35 percent. Durham's proposed allocation is \$25,779,015 and Middlefield's is \$13,498,799. They do not anticipate any changes in government grants and will be \$3,285,553 for Durham and \$2,118,766 for Middlefield. After grants are subtracted from the totals, Durham's proposed allocation increase is estimated at \$1,054,515 and Middlefield's allocation will decrease by \$148,951. The allocations tie very closely to the enrollment, with a 37-student reduction (10 from Durham and 27 from Middle field).

Mrs. Dahlheimer then reviewed the per pupil averages and highlighted that the increase is the lowest since 2020 and will be approximately \$316 this year. She then reviewed how much of a savings in the budget actually impacts the per pupil expenditure. A \$1.5 million reduction would put the per pupil expenditure around the average for regional districts and a \$3 million reduction would put the district below others. Those cost savings align with going from five schools to three schools, so they do expect to be far below the per pupil for regional school districts when they close two schools.

The biggest budget driver this year is salaries and benefits, which are all contractual increases. Purchased services has a savings of \$75,517 which was allocated to add an athletic trainer and a 1.0 increase in

maintenance. Facilities and grounds increased \$488,658. They are adding a 1.0 FTE at the middle school due to class sizes and a .60 FTE in math that the board allocated to support the math department at Coginchaug.

Mrs. Dahlheimer then reviewed mitigation strategies. A lot of districts are struggling with budgets due to ARPA funds being used to hire staff during COVID. She is incredibly proud that District 13 did not do that. They were able to take the bond premium from the \$6.9 million bonding to pay the debt service which reduced the budget by .84 percent. FTE additions were offset by a decrease in Purchased Services. Propane buses resulted in a reduction in diesel fuel and the buses are being leased. The district went from a 96.5 percent vacancy factor to a 98 percent vacancy factor. The 2023-2024 surplus carryover was originally incorporated into the superintendent's budget.

Looking specifically at salaries, Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that there has been a decrease of one kindergarten teacher due to class sizes. A middle school teacher was added due to class sizes in grade six. An athletic trainer and a maintenance person were both offset by Purchased Services. They added a .5 multi-language learner FTE due to increased need and a .6 math teacher due to class size. That results in a total increase of 3.1 FTEs.

Moving to capital reserve, Mrs. Dahlheimer reviewed that PA systems in the schools need to be upgraded. Unanticipated repairs and maintenance can occur in any of the buildings. They have included athletic field upgrades and chiller and roof replacement at Strong. Total in the capital reserve would be \$778,000 which represents 2 percent of the budget and is the maximum allowed. Glycol is at Coginchaug, Strong and Brewster and is over 20 years old. It is used in the heating and cooling systems.

Looking at debt service, Mrs. Neubig explained that this represents current debt service and has nothing to do with the school renovations. There will be no jump in debt service in 2025-2026, but does drop steadily in the following years. They do have money left in the bonding that still needs to be spent and using the bond premium helps them to get to the required 85 percent spending. Using the bond premium did bring the budget down by .84 percent.

Mrs. Dahlheimer then opened the meeting for public comment.

Roger Kleeman, from Durham, asked for an explanation on the conversion to propane buses. Mrs. Neubig explained that the state legislature had previously required all electric school buses by 2035 and this is a move to help the environment, but not have to go all electric. The buses are being leased and no property taxes will be paid on them. There is also a 30% residual value. The operating costs for the buses has only gone up slightly this year when other schools are seeing from 9 to 12 percent increases. At the end of the five-year lease, the district will own the buses and may possibly be able to run another five years or they can be sold. Mrs. Neubig explained that the district will own the buses, but Dattco will provide drivers.

Mr. Kleeman also asked what schools need the PA systems and Mrs. Neubig noted that all five schools need them. The systems are over 20 years old and there is a disconnect between digital and analog. The sound is very muddled, hard to hear and it is not safe. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that they would need to do all five schools because schools will be needed for swing space if the renovation project is approved. Mr. Roraback added that when they can't hear a lockdown, it's very bad and no one learns when they are afraid.

Mr. Kleeman asked if glycol can be sent out to a lab to see if it is good or bad. Mrs. Neubig agreed that they will have to do that. The \$50,000 is just a start to saving for that.

Rick Parmelee, from Durham, felt that the regional district budgets don't get the same scrutiny as budgets at the local level. Mr. Parmelee thought that the district has a slush fund that has now been increased for capital projects, but felt that once it is voted in, they never see the money again. He felt that each project should come before the voters. He also mentioned year-end transfers being made in committee and not before the entire board. He felt that it needs more oversight, more explanations provided and more accountability. Mr. Parmelee then commented on cumulative head injuries caused by football and felt the district needs to get rid of the program. He felt that the district is headed down the wrong path bringing other schools in just to keep the program alive. He asked what those fees are and felt they need to be raised. He also asked what fees the Town of Durham pays the district for use of facilities. Mr. Parmelee recounted some events in the 70s between the district and the towns. He added that he has benefitted greatly by living in Durham and believes he will never be able to pay back what he has taken out of the town, but he will not lay down and get run over by an overpriced education system. Mr. Parmelee did feel that the community has an obligation to provide an education.

Mr. Parmelee felt that they need to watch things closer. Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that the district made a huge effort this year to engage the towns. The budgets were sent to both Boards of Finance and they were asked to provide any questions or concerns. Mr. Parmelee noted that townspeople can decrease any line item they want in the town's budget, but cannot increase anything. The district just spends big money and there needs to be more accountability.

Mrs. Neubig stated that football costs about \$1,300 per student, depending on how many play. The co-op students pay \$650 a year, but a lot of the cost is for things the program would need anyway. She also noted that she is not aware of any line item transfers during her time at the district. That can happen, by state statute, but it has to be reported to the board. Mrs. Neubig explained that the district does not have a slush fund. The capital reserve account is a savings for future expenditures and voting on the projects is done at budget time. Projects can be abandoned by board vote and the money can go back to the general fund. Mrs. Neubig also explained that local Boards of Ed follow just about the same process as regional boards. Local Boards of Ed do not have to go back to the Town Council to spend money. Mrs. Neubig added that the district charges a \$25 application fee for nonprofits for the entire year, but there is no charge for the facilities rental. There is a charge for custodial.

Carol Kleeman, from Durham, asked what the board is planning to do with Brewster School which can only be used for education purposes. She asked if there is a cost projected for the addition to Memorial School. She also asked if the board knows what the poverty rate is in Durham and Middlefield right now.

Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that Mrs. Kleeman's first two questions are not tied to the budget at all. Mrs. Neubig noted that there is a cost proposal available on the website. They have had a series of meetings and public forums. Cost is shown with the reimbursement and the net cost as well as the decrease in operating costs from closing two schools and an increase in debt service. Mrs. Neubig stated that the net cost is \$37 million. The district will have to have authorization to bond the full amount, but will actually bond the \$37 million. That will be offset by \$2.9 million per year savings from closing two schools. Those numbers will be outdated should they miss a year to begin construction. Mrs. Kleeman asked

about the time frame and Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that they are looking to hold a referendum in June for a plan amendment and bonding.

Mrs. Dahlheimer added that the board has not gotten to the issue of Brewster School yet. Mrs. Kleeman felt that would be important to know before the vote. Mrs. Kleeman again asked if the board knows the poverty rate and if they took that into consideration when doing the budget. Mr. Roraback added that he is aware the budget is a lot of money and the per pupil is high, but it is not a valid measure of what is being done here. It is because there are not enough kids for the facilities. Mr. Roraback agreed that the budget is high, but felt they have no choice other than cutting educational programs. Mrs. Kleeman felt that there are a lot of extra people employed by the district that could be cut. She stated that Durham has a 20 percent poverty rate and Middlefield has a 30 percent poverty rate. She hoped that the board will take this into consideration and go back to the drawing board.

Mrs. Dahlheimer felt it was important in how they talk about the \$3 million in cost savings in reducing from five schools to three. If the board is going to do justice by the taxpayers, the educational programming and buildings, the only way to do that is to reduce the number of buildings from five to three. One school will no longer do it.

Mrs. Petrella added that they showed how much the budget would have to be cut to reduce the per pupil cost. It can only be accomplished if they go down to three schools as building maintenance is a big cost. Staff and administration will also be decreased. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that they are all frustrated with the situation and are working to lower the budget. Mr. Roraback added that the poverty rate is shocking and they hope to take the children growing up in poverty and give them the opportunity to become productive citizens.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, felt that it was nice to have the field house, but he would like to know the true cost that it added to the budget. Mrs. Neubig explained that no additional costs have been added for the field house and they are still working on the lights and bathrooms through the state grant. It is a very low maintenance building, but there will be fees associated with the lights which will be budgeted in the following year. Mr. Stoup understood, but felt that every little bit counts. He felt that it's all coming to a head right now. Mr. Mennone added that revenue will be generated by the field house and the field itself once the lights are installed. Mr. Roraback mentioned the morale building coming from that field and noted that they cannot lose more students from Coginchaug. Mrs. Dahlheimer mentioned events that generated revenue in other towns. Mr. Mennone added that the events are not all athletic events.

Rick Parmelee felt that athletics are an important part of the educational program and mentioned that the three highest paid state employees are coaches at UCONN. He felt that the state is going down the wrong road looking for revenue from gambling, cannabis and the lottery. He also mentioned the Town of Durham taking over Korn School. He reiterated that there is not a lot of good oversight in the district.

Roger Kleeman asked why there is a dumpster at Brewster School. Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that they are purging instructional materials, etc. for the move for the reconfiguration. She explained that the board suspended a policy to allow teachers to purge some of the things in their classrooms and there are dumpsters at Brewster and Lyman.

Adjournment

Mrs. Petrella made a motion, seconded by Mr. DelVecchio, to close the public hearing.

In favor of closing the public hearing: Ms. Betty (remote), Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. DelVecchio, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First