

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a Special District Meeting and Public Hearing – Bonding on May 1, 2024 at 7:30 PM in the Julian Thayer Auditorium at Coginchaug Regional High School, 135 Pickett Lane, Durham, Connecticut.

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

Board members absent: Mr. DeVecchio and Mr. Stone

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

Mrs. Dahlheimer called the Special District Meeting and Public Hearing to order at 7:50 PM.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked Mrs. Petrella to read the district warning of the special district meeting and public hearing into the record.

Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Petrella, to elect Bob Moore as moderator of the Special District Meeting and Public Hearing.

Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that this district meeting and public hearing is about the bond authorization, but offered to take any questions or comments on the plan amendment as well.

Mrs. Dahlheimer began by reviewing the construction costs of \$76,130,000 with a projected state reimbursement of \$37,196,500, resulting in a net cost to the district of \$38,933,500. The 13.5-year operational savings for the two building closures of Lyman and Brewster Schools is \$39,139,200. Bonding is needed to fund this project. For the district to receive state reimbursement, authorization must be received to borrow the full amount of the project but will only need to issue \$39 million in bonds. The referendum question will reflect the full amount to meet state requirements.

Mrs. Dahlheimer then reviewed the five-year budget impact, both with and without renovations. The assumptions for the budget without the renovation/expansion project include a 3 percent yearly escalation and does not include funding for end-of-life systems, safety and security or ADA upgrades. Assumptions for the budget including the renovation/expansion project show 2027-2028 as the first year of realizing the savings from closing the two buildings at \$2.89 million. 2026-2027 would be the first year of the bond repayment, estimated at \$500,000.

Moving on to the 10-year anticipated budget, there are three scenarios. One includes no renovation/expansion or existing facility infrastructure needs, one with the Memorial renovation/expansion and one assuming bonding for existing facility infrastructure upgrades only with no renovation to Memorial. The assumptions include a 3 percent yearly escalation. The budget steadily increases with infrastructure-only bonding. The operational savings is not realized as all five schools would be open. That scenario is higher than the renovation/expansion scenario.

Moving to construction impacts, this is a renovate-as-new project with a total square footage of 105,270. The construction will happen while the building is unoccupied. Use of other district buildings as swing space would include Strong School and Lyman. The duration of construction is 24 to 30 months. Portables would be demolished and the repurposing of Brewster and John Lyman would happen upon completion of the Memorial School project.

Next steps will include a referendum vote in early June on the proposed amendment to the Plan of Regionalization, followed by a referendum on proposed funding upon successful referendum of the amendment.

Mr. Moore opened the hearing to questions and comments.

Chuck Stengel, from Durham, asked what the repurposing of Brewster and John Lyman entails. Dr. Schuch explained that that has not been determined yet. At this point, the question for the community is whether or not it makes sense for this project to move forward as proposed. If that is successful, they will then have up to three years or longer to determine what the repurposing could be. In his experience, repurposing can be a lot of things, all of which would have to be approved by the relevant authorities. It could be a sale, it could be repurposed for an educational purpose either for the district or other entity, it could be repurposed for use by one or both towns and probably a whole lot of other things. Dr. Schuch felt that it would be premature for them to solicit any potential repurposing when they don't know if the project will move forward. Mr. Stengel then assumed that the repurposing is not included in the \$39 million and Mr. Moore confirmed that it does not. Dr. Schuch stated that there is typically not a cost for repurposing unless it is by the district itself for another educational reason. He is not aware of any suggestion to that end. The savings that Mrs. Dahlheimer articulated are being realized because the district will not be using the buildings for educational purposes. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that there will also be a reduction in possible administrative costs and salaries with closing those two buildings. She added that another very viable option would be a long-term lease to an educational facility that the district has worked with or has alliances with.

Mark Simmons, from Durham, thought there was talk about an allocation in the numbers for demolition of the buildings and asked if that was still included. Mr. Malik explained that this budget does not include the demolition. Mr. Simmons also asked if there was a long-term plan so the district doesn't end up in the same situation with schools that are years and years overdue with maintenance. He would not want to end up 20 years from now where they haven't kept with maintenance again. Mr. Simmons also asked about the potential savings with this project and he would like to see the Board commit to putting that savings to good use in the schools which would include a fully-funded school district without fundraisers, paying for lunches, paying for field trips, paying for preK, etc.

Mr. Moore explained that the annual meeting on Monday night will address the budget and those issues. Mrs. Neubig agreed with Mr. Simmons that they would want to do preventative maintenance on the new facility. This board has been committed to saving the funds that they can for capital reserve for those things. The district is bound by the State of Connecticut to only be able to save 2 percent of the total budget for nonrecurring expenditures, such as the roof or a chiller. That puts the district behind the eight ball because there could be a time when they need something and just don't have enough saved. Mrs. Neubig added that the district's buildings are very well cared for in terms of how they are cleaned and maintained, but many systems are at the end of their useful lives, they do not need to be replaced due to lack of maintenance. If they hadn't been maintained as well as they have, they would not still be running as some of them are 10 years past their useful life.

Dr. Schuch felt that doing exactly what Mr. Simmons suggested is more practical when there are only three buildings, especially since one of them will be state-of-the-art, newly renovated and expanded. He hoped that they could dedicate the savings to the middle school and high school to stay on top of that.

Mr. Roraback added that 2 percent is peanuts when it comes to upgrading the five buildings and it is a state legislative issue. He encouraged people to talk to their state legislators about that.

Mrs. Neubig added that Memorial will have new equipment, but Coginchaug and Strong still have significant end-of-life system needs, both of which have a roof replacement that is coming up soon. She noted that, even if this passes, it doesn't mean they have met all the capital requirements for the district.

Katie Reddick, from Durham, stated that she has gotten to the point where she was ready for the plan and was all for it. She is more worried about the immediate impact of the plan on the current learners and staff. Today was the first time she heard that fifth grade will move to Strong and she believes that will definitely create new needs in the building. There will be third graders going from John Lyman to Memorial and back to John Lyman. That is a lot of movement for students who were most impacted by COVID-10. She wasn't sure that those discussions have been had. Mrs. Reddick is also very concerned about the staff and noted there is a teaching shortage in Connecticut right now and felt that if they are going to continue to shuffle teachers around, the students won't have the excellent teachers that they have become accustomed to.

Mr. Moore noted that it was a concern that they all have and they have looked very carefully at swing space. He felt that the educational issues that Mrs. Reddick raised will need to be addressed in detail.

Sam Eidinger, from Middlefield, thought that there were a lot of questions that remain unanswered. She again asked what would happen if this doesn't pass and reiterated Dr. Schuch's response to that. She felt that staffing concerns, what happens to the buildings, and property values are all different questions that have been flying around and are unknown. She appreciates the budget forecasts, but didn't see any forecasts of the logistics of what will happen for the kids and the staff. Mrs. Eidinger understands that there is no definitive answer but felt that they were asking people to vote with only half of the information. She asked if there could be any other information to help inform people as to both sides of the vote.

Dr. Schuch assured Mrs. Eidinger that whatever direction this goes, the district is going to plan for the best possible educational experience for children. There is no question that the temporary relocation is less than ideal, but the question that needs to be answered is is that an acceptable temporary solution, knowing that they can guarantee safety and security and educational quality for the next 20, 25, 30 years. Dr. Schuch also felt that if this isn't the way to go, they can accept that but he did not feel it would be acceptable to keep going in the same way. He does not believe it's the best educationally and it's certainly not the best financially.

Dr. Schuch could not comment on property values, but having worked in previous districts that had a regular renovation or new construction cycle, he felt that it really improved property values. A new or newly-renovated school provides a sense of pride for the community. He suggested that people talk to local realtors about this issue.

Eileen Buckheit felt more at ease now that the board has brought up the high school. She believes that the high school is the calling card of the district. When she moved here in 2002, she looked at the high school, what classes were offered, SAT scores, graduation rate, colleges that students were accepted to and that was one of the reasons they moved here. Ms. Buckheit does not feel that Coginchaug is in the greatest condition. She noted that the play was canceled due to flooding and it has flooded multiple

times. She believes that it is hurting the district and a lot of her daughter's classmates have left the district. She felt that they need to bring those kids back and lot of it has to do with the high school. She hoped that this plan can bring everyone together for K-5 and allow them to turn their attention back to improving AP classes at the high school and creating an honors' program.

Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that Mrs. Buckheit made a really good point that they will continue to have to sink money into infrastructure if they keep five schools operating instead of diverting the money to programming. She added that no one can guarantee what that programming would be, but she would guarantee that it will be better. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that they need to look at tech programs and high-achievement classes and create opportunities for students.

Richard Parmelee, from Durham, stated that several years ago they had to approve an over-expenditure on the librarian's salary of about \$1.00. He reiterated that the Board of Education does not get the scrutiny that others do. Mr. Parmelee felt that the savings always seems to be more money out of his pocket and less scrutiny. He felt that the towns work hard to oversee their money, but can't hide behind the kids like the school system can. Mr. Parmelee also noted the deed restrictions on Brewster School which will present a very limited resale value whereas Lyman probably has a greater resale value. If those buildings are liquidated, he would like to see the money returned to the municipalities instead of being dumped into the school budget where they have nothing to say about it.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, stated that in his experience with projects like this with a total cost of \$76 million, the bond had to be for the full amount but sees only \$39 million being bonded here. Mr. Moore explained that the referendum has to authorize the full \$76 million for the project, but the bonding would only be the district's share after reimbursement from the state. Mr. Stoup thought that the state required that the district bond for the full amount before any reimbursement. Mrs. Neubig explained that the state requires an authorization of the total amount, but how the funds are borrowed is up to the district.

Mary Ann O'Brien, from Durham, asked if there has been any discussion with the financial people in the town regarding the potential increase to the mill rate. She noted that she has been retired for a long time and there are a lot of retirees in town who haven't been chased out yet. She asked what they thought would be to the average homeowner in terms of mill rate, whether it costs \$36 million or \$76 million. Mrs. Neubig noted that she reached out to the towns with the debt service schedule and they hoped to come up with an estimated mill rate. She added it was a deliberate decision not to include the mill rate as she did not feel they would be reliable numbers as there are too many variables and it is very early in the process.

Mr. Moore added that they have tried to show the budget impact and estimated a 3 percent increase with no capital improvements over the next five years. The year that the school would open would see about a \$2.9 million reduction in administrative and operating costs. The first debt service payment would be \$500,000 which would gradually increase over the years with an average bonding cost of about \$2.4 million. He thought Mrs. O'Brien could probably figure out the mill rate by taking the \$40 million and added 3 percent a year, provided there is no increase in the town budget. Mrs. O'Brien stated that the Board of Education has already presented a \$1 million increase this year, not related to this.

Mr. Moore explained that, if this gets approved and moves into construction, the Building committee will manage the project, not the Board of Education. They are very lucky to have residents from town willing to work on the Building committee who bring a ton of experience to it. Mrs. Dahlheimer then noted that

the Building committee members' names and their qualifications are in the pamphlet and presentation. The Building committee includes Howard Weissberg, Darin Overton, Nick Faiella, Bob Moore, John Cross, John Giammatteo, and John Mennone. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that the board is incredibly thankful for each and every one of them and are fully confident with their work on this committee.

Paul Van Steenberg, from Durham, asked if there has been any study on the impact to the neighborhood with the increased traffic. He noted that there is a lot of drop-off and pick-up in the early grades and he could see Cherry Hill Road being a nightmare. He felt that a traffic light may be needed. Mr. Moore asked Mr. Weissberg for his input on this. Mr. Weissberg noted that the Building committee raised that issue as well and they are working with a traffic engineering firm to address issues at the access point and two critical intersections to understand what types of impacts there may be and what mitigations could be. He did not feel that any of these are deal-breakers, but mitigation may be needed including possible left turn access into or out of the school and possibly intersection enhancements at Cherry Hill and down by the dump. They do want to maintain appropriate levels of service and safety due to the increased traffic and will include whatever mitigation is necessary.

Hearing no further comments or questions, Mr. Moore closed the public hearing.

Mr. Mennone made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Dahlheimer, to close the public hearing.

In favor of closing the public hearing: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanella, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella and Mr. Roraback.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

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Alwaz First