

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a Special District Meeting and Public Hearing – Plan Amendment on May 1, 2024 at 7:00 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. 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 7:00 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

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

Item 1

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

Mr. Moore explained that there are two hearings tonight as the amendment to the Plan of Regionalization requires a vote in each town whereas bonding for a project just requires a total vote. There are different electors for each of these subjects. In order to go for bonding, the district first needs to get approval for amending the regional plan on a referendum. If that passes, they will move on to a referendum on the bonding issue.

Mr. Moore explained that the second hearing will occur after all questions and concerns have been addressed on the first hearing.

Item 2

Mrs. Dahlheimer began by presenting the first rendition of a conceptual design of what Memorial will look like after the renovation. She reviewed the current challenges, including aging school infrastructure, rising maintenance costs, limited infrastructure funding, excessive operating costs of five buildings, higher than average per pupil expenditure, limited ability to expand educational opportunities, increased annual budgets and a financially unsustainable model.

Mrs. Dahlheimer showed the overall layout of the proposed Memorial School, with the fields and pickle ball courts staying where they currently are. The expansion is in the back and on the right side of the school. There will also be expanded parking, with over 65 additional parking spaces.

By investing in this expansion at Memorial, the district can address the infrastructure and programming challenges and create spaces that foster innovation, academic excellence, district community collaboration of resources and long-term financial responsibility. The building will be state-of-the-art with modern technology and flexible learning spaces.

Mrs. Dahlheimer went on to review the timeline for the project and noted they will schedule the referendum on the regional plan amendment in June. The referendum for the authorization will be scheduled after that, depending on the outcome of the first referendum. Construction will begin at Memorial School in June of 2025, with completion scheduled for July of 2027. Memorial School's first year of occupancy will begin in August, 2027 and Brewster and Lyman Schools will be repurposed in September of 2027.

The proposed project includes separate bus and parent circulation, designated preK- and kindergarten-only entrances, increased on-site parking, potential for future expansion, athletic fields and expanded playgrounds as well as a fully ADA-accessible building.

The building's education impact will feature a future-ready building, efficient use of staffing and resources from preK to 5, a collaborative learning environment, enhanced learning spaces, the availability of modern technology and fully ADA-accessible.

Looking at health and safety, the building will be fully accessible and code compliant, expanded safety and security measures including a new fire suppression system, enhanced HVAC system and improved natural light.

Mrs. Dahlheimer reviewed the changes to the Plan of Regionalization where they are recommending a reduction to a three-school model as a result of continued reduced student enrollment, excess building capacity, capital needs and associated costs. This would include a reconfiguration of preK-5 at Memorial School, grades 6-8 at Strong Middle School and grades 9-12 at Coginchaug Regional High School. Their intent was to make the plan amendment very specific so everyone understands where their children will be from preK through grade 12.

Mr. Moore asked the public for any questions or comments.

Carol Kleeman, from Durham, asked if they know if any subdivisions are planned in Durham or Middlefield which would result in increased numbers of students. Mrs. Dahlheimer suggested looking at the enrollment study. Mrs. Kleeman felt it was important for the taxpayers to know if this is really needed. She also asked if they have considered increasing the enrollment in each classroom, back to 23, 24 or 25 students.

Dr. Schuch noted that they did receive an enrollment forecast which looked at Planning and Zoning and anticipated growth within the towns. They are submitting this proposal to get 51 percent paid for by state reimbursement. In order to qualify for that, the district has to tie its needs to a valid enrollment forecast. They feel very comfortable that they are designing for what will be needed. In terms of class sizes, that is an educational decision that the Board can make at any time. There are currently guidelines that are part of the historical practices in the district, but the Board can raise class sizes to any level. They are trying to balance financial responsibility with what is best for children. This project has been designed at the current class size guidelines.

Mrs. Kleeman asked if the \$73 million project is at today's costs or projected out until 2027. Mr. Moore explained that it is projected out through the time period. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that Mr. Malik and Mr. Collier from QA&M are both present at tonight's meeting.

Mr. Malik explained that the state requires enrollment projections for every school project. In each analysis, they look at what the birth rates are, what's going on in the community, if there are developments coming along and ultimately provide an enrollment projection going out eight to 10 years. The state has a requirement of a minimum of eight years. The enrollment projections in District 13 are going up and show a fairly significant increase over time.

Mr. Malik added that, since they are working with an existing building, the goal was to utilize that building to its maximum capacity. They evaluated the educational program, looking at every grade level, special ed needs, and administrative needs. They then put an educational program and educational specifications together which are required by the state. That includes every educational program space that is defined, talks about what program will be in each space, and what support spaces need to be. The proposed building is very simple in the sense that, for the most part, it is classroom space being constructed while trying to repurpose the existing spaces for program support. The one other new space is a gymnasium. All of the existing building is utilized with the exception of the portable classrooms which the state would want to see removed. Mr. Malik added that they are within the space standards that the state requires. If they exceed those standards, there will be a penalty on the reimbursement.

Mark Simmons, from Durham, felt that the two-year timeline for construction seems very optimistic and asked if there was any plan if it runs over. He also asked what happens if the resolution does not pass and the district keeps five schools, specifically the programming. He asked if the 2-2-2 plan will stay in place or if it would revert to what exists now.

Mr. Malik reviewed that Memorial School will be unoccupied during construction which allows for the two-year time period. They got a third-party opinion on both the cost and the timeline. This will be a 55,000 sq.ft. addition on a roughly 50,000 sq.ft. existing building which has good bones. Mr. Malik stated that the 24-month timeframe is actually a little longer than the construction company told them.

Dr. Schuch explained that the Board made a decision in September to reconfigure the grade levels for next Fall which will be folded into this timeline if both referendums pass. A failed referendum would need to return to the Board for its consideration. Dr. Schuch felt that it would depend on how the numbers stacked up and they would need to figure out why it didn't pass. They would then need to consult with people. Dr. Schuch felt that they have done a very thorough analysis of the fact of maintaining and sustaining five buildings is not in the best financial or educational interests of anybody in the community. They have had community forums on this subject and the overwhelming consensus was that three buildings makes sense. If it is not this plan, then he would like someone to show them an alternative. Dr. Schuch also acknowledged the Building committee who have brought a lot of expertise to this issue. Getting back to the question, Dr. Schuch did not believe it would revert back to how it is currently. They intend to execute the plan this Fall, regardless of how the referendum turns out unless otherwise directed by the Board which he does not anticipate.

Katie Reddick, from Durham, asked if the preK spaces anticipate the possibility of mandatory preK in the state. She also asked what kind of construction will happen at John Lyman and Brewster Schools to fit the students who are currently at Memorial.

Dr. Schuch reviewed that it is a two-year construction period that would ideally kick off at the end of the 2024-2025 school year and, in consultation with the administrative team and Mr. Malik and his team, the plan is to send the fourth graders to John Lyman and the fifth graders to Strong. For those two years,

Lyman would be a 2-4 school and Strong would be a 5-8 school. They have done an analysis of the existing spaces and feel that it will be tight, but doable. The purpose is to allow the potential construction to go on in a very rapid, efficient and safe manner with no one occupying the building. They have also talked to the principals at Lyman and Strong about leveraging existing spaces during those two years. Dr. Schuch reiterated that this will only be for two years or maybe even less.

Mr. Malik explained that there is a plan for additional space, not just for preK but even in the future. The state gives an eight-year window for reimbursement. In terms of the swing space, that is being utilized early on in the enrollment projections as the highest enrollment is in the eighth year. The longer it is deferred, the more difficult it would be to accommodate everybody. Dr. Schuch added Mr. Malik also budgeted anything at Strong or Lyman in the construction costs.

Rick Parmelee, from Durham, explained that he has been going to district meetings for almost 60 years and he is very interested that the reimbursement from the state is 51 percent. The incentive for regionalization in the early years was that reimbursement was 80 percent. He wondered how solid that figure actually is.

Mrs. Neubig explained that as soon as a grant application is submitted and approved by the Department of Administrative Services, the rate of reimbursement is locked in. Year over year, they don't necessarily promise to fund programs, but once the application is approved, it is locked in.

Mr. Parmelee noted that a regional system is different than conventional systems and once the budget is passed, there is no wiggle room from Town Hall. He also felt that state funding is not particularly reliable because the district budget is finalized before the state budget. Mr. Parmelee remembered a comment that Dave Webster made that there is life after District 13.

Mrs. Dahlheimer invited Bill LaFlamme to speak, but he did not have any public comment.

Mary Ann O'Brien, from Durham, asked about the timing of the submission of the grant proposal and what happens if the grant is not approved. She asked when they would apply for the grant, what the expectation is in terms of a response and what happens if they don't get it. Mrs. Neubig explained that state school construction grants are only accepted once a year and are due by June 30th of each year. They review the applications and prepare a priority list to go to the legislature in December who then decide what projects get funded. The district will know by December if they have been approved or not, but no construction or bidding can start until the following July 1st. Mrs. Neubig explained that if the project does not get approved by the state, the district can reapply for a different project. She does not believe that cost would be a reason for denial, but if that were the case, the project would not move forward in that state. The district could apply for a modified version the following June.

Emma Quick, from Durham, asked what the administration of Memorial might look like in terms of still having it feel like a school community with events and family involvement with a population that large. Mr. Moore reviewed that preK, K and first grade are all in one part of the building and the higher grades are in the two-story addition in the back. There will clearly be some definition and separation of the students. Mrs. Quick explained that she was asking about holding events with the entire school population and community events. Dr. Schuch explained that there is no generally-accepted ideal size for an elementary school. They may not do school-wide events the same way they do now, however that doesn't mean they will be of any less quality or engagement. He felt that if you can combine the

resources of what currently exists in three separate PTOs and have families who can engage and invest in a school, the continuity and quality of the events are only enhanced and become better. Logistics will need to be worked out and they may not do as many all-school events on the same evening. Dr. Schuch added that there are things that very small schools can do differently than larger schools, but he believes that there are way more pros to this project than cons.

Mr. Malik added that there are many schools in Connecticut that are preK-5 as well as preK-8. It all comes down to how the space itself is designed and it is zoned. It is critical to make sure that there is a separation but to provide the large amenities as well.

Roger Kleeman, from Durham, asked what has been expended to get this far in the project without even bringing this forward to the public. He also noted that the public didn't show up again. Mr. Kleeman did not see the learners getting anything out of what has been spent for this. Mrs. Neubig explained that they issued a purchase order for \$20,000 to QA+M to do this work.

Hearing no further comments, Mr. Moore closed this part of the hearing.

Mr. Mennone made a motion to close this hearing and open the next.

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

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

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Alwaz First