

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a Special District Meeting/Public Hearing on Wednesday, July 24, 2024 at 7:00 PM in the Library at Coginchaug Regional High School, 135 Pickett Lane, Durham, Connecticut.

Board members present: Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. DelVecchio (remotely), Mrs. Hurlbert (remotely), Mr. Mennone (remotely), Mr. Moore (remotely), 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/Public Hearing to order at 7:00 PM.

### **Pledge of Allegiance**

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

### **Item 1**

A nomination was made to elect Norm Hicks as moderator. There were no other nominations.

Mr. Hicks asked Mrs. Petrella to read the warning of the special district meeting and return of the call into the record.

### **Item 2**

Mrs. Dahlheimer thanked everyone for their attendance at the meeting. She explained that the purpose of the meeting is to talk about the plan amendment. In June, both towns held a referendum on the plan amendment to reduce the amount of the district's schools from five to three, removing Brewster and Lyman schools and renovating Memorial to a preK-5 school. The vote passed in Durham, but did not pass in Middlefield. The board then went back and looked at next steps.

The board sent an email link to the public to gain some feedback. They received about 40 responses in writing and engaged a lot of the boards and commission from both towns. A lot of the feedback was that people were not aware that a vote was happening and didn't have the right or enough information. The board met on July 10<sup>th</sup> and decided to go back to referendum, knowing that it was close and they didn't do enough to educate the public. The board was shocked that people didn't even know there was a referendum.

Mrs. Dahlheimer then explained that they now have more financial information. She reviewed that the district's challenges include aging school infrastructure with rising maintenance costs, limited infrastructure funding, excessive operating costs with five buildings, higher than average per pupil expenditure, limited ability to expand educational opportunities, increased annual budgets and a financially unsustainable model.

Mrs. Dahlheimer then reviewed the conceptual drawing of Memorial on the same footprint as it currently is, with a second floor. There will be expanded parking and the original courts will remain in place. There is a separate entrance for preK and kindergarten. There is also a separate entrance for buses and cars.

Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that the board felt that by investing in a renovation and expansion of Memorial, the district infrastructure and programming challenges can be addressed. They can create the spaces to foster innovation, academic excellence, district community, collaboration of resources and long-term fiscal responsibility. This new building will provide state-of-the-art facilities, modern technology and flexible learning spaces to meet the needs of all students.

Mrs. Dahlheimer then reviewed the project timelines, beginning with a public hearing in July, 2024 and a referendum in August, 2024 for the plan amendment. A referendum for the funding authorization will occur after that. The design phase would start almost immediately after bonding is in place. Construction will start on Memorial School in June of 2025, ending in July of 2027. Memorial School will be open for use in August of 2027 and Brewster and Lyman schools would be repurposed in September of 2027. Brewster and Lyman would stay open during the construction as swing spaces.

Memorial School would also have the potential for future expansion and the athletic fields and playgrounds will be expanded. The school will also be fully ADA-accessible. The building will be future-ready and will provide efficient use of staffing and resources. There will be collaborative learning in preK-5 with enhanced learning spaces. Modern technology will also be available and, again, the school will be fully ADA-accessible.

Mrs. Dahlheimer then moved on to funding of the project, explaining that architects from QA+M and Arum & Associates put together the numbers. Total construction cost is \$76,130,000, with anticipated state reimbursement of \$37,196,500. The next cost to the district is estimated at \$38,933,500. The operational savings from the two building closures breaks even with the bonding at \$39,139,200 at about 13-1/2 years. To receive state reimbursement, the district will need authorization to borrow the full \$76,130,000, but will only need to actually issue \$39,000,000 in bonds and the referendum question will reflect the full borrowing amount. Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that there is a 20 percent contingency built into the total construction costs. Mr. Roraback added that the Building committee is quite hawkish on the numbers as well. Mrs. Dahlheimer then reviewed some of the projects the Building committee has worked on.

Mrs. Dahlheimer then reviewed the estimated mill rate impacts for both towns, noting that the projected increase for Durham is .26 percent or \$42.53 per year and Middlefield at .12 percent or \$28.63 per year, based on the \$38.9 million bonding. She also reviewed that the estimated mill rate impact for end-of-life system improvements at Brewster and Lyman (\$25 million bonding) would produce an increase of 1.34 percent or \$367.74 in Durham and 1.03 percent or \$246.53 in Middlefield. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that the \$25 million does not cover full ADA accessibility and these numbers are all outside of the annual school budget. She reviewed that the \$38 million also includes the operational savings generated by closing both Brewster and Lyman. Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that some of the \$25 million would be state-reimbursable such as code upgrades and roofs.

Mr. Moore added that, in addition to the operational savings, the bond repayment doesn't start until a year after the completion of the construction. That results in a year with no debt service payment. The debt service over the 30-year bond rises slowly and the average is about \$2.9 million.

Mr. Moore then reviewed the budget impact, noting the anticipated annual school budget with no renovations starting at around \$40 million compared to the budget with the design and construction of the expanded facility. By 2027-2028, the budget with no renovations will be larger than the budget with the

renovations. The debt service starts to come into the budget in 2028-2029, but is still lower than the budget without renovations. Mr. Moore explained that there is a savings to borrowing. He then explained the estimated increases to the budget, including estimated repairs of \$25 million. In summary, the cost of renovation remains lower than any other scenario, though all estimates include a 3 percent increase per year.

Mrs. Dahlheimer then reviewed the construction impact of renovate-as-new, with a total square footage of 105,270. Construction will happen with the building unoccupied and other district buildings will be used as swing space. Duration of construction is estimated at 24 to 30 months. Portables at Memorial will be demolished and Brewster and John Lyman buildings will be repurposed upon completion of the construction.

Mrs. Dahlheimer then went on to review the preliminary grade configuration during construction. PreK-1 will be at Brewster, 2-4 at Lyman, 5-8 at Strong School and 9-12 at Cuginchaug. Mrs. Neubig reviewed the numbers per year per grade.

Looking at next steps, Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that they created a document that was sent to all electors in both towns. She noted that the board's priority has always been a sale or long-term lease of Brewster and Lyman to an educational organization. Brewster School property is subject to a right of refusal in favor of the Town of Durham and Lyman School property has no restrictions. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that a group had been interested in Lyman and she believes they still are. Brewster could be leased out to a magnet/charter school that the district currently works with. The board will reach out to different organizations once they have approval to do that.

Mrs. Petrella added that they are having this vote so quickly after the last one because if they wait much longer, they will need to wait another year for reimbursement approval. This will cause the district to continue to pay for five schools and Mrs. Dahlheimer added that there will also be an escalation in the cost of the construction by 6 or 7 percent. Dr. Darcy acknowledged that it sounds like the board is trying to push and rush, however this has been going on for a long time. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that the operational savings will also allow them to concentrate more on programming.

Mr. Hicks then opened the meeting to the public for any questions or comments. He noted that the public also includes board members.

Roger Kleeman, from Durham, asked how many people are on Zoom tonight and Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that 15 people are logged in to the Zoom meeting, but they do not know how many are watching on YouTube. Mr. Kleeman asked if there is an estimated cost per student after the construction is complete. Mrs. Neubig explained that a \$5 million reduction in the budget would get the per pupil cost down around the state average. Dr. Schuch added that there will be an impact if the district continues to do nothing.

Rick Parmelee, from Durham, noted that he arrived tonight to find the meeting in progress, yet the town website said it started at 7:30 PM. Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that the board's special meeting does begin at 7:30 PM. He also noted that he has had difficulty hearing during the meeting. Mr. Parmelee asked about the state reimbursement and noted that he does not consider the state a reliable funding source. Mrs. Neubig explained that once the legislature approves the priority list of projects, and the construction grant is approved, the reimbursement rate is locked in. Prior to that, the state, while unlikely, is able to stop funding school construction or change the rates. The approval of the project would be an

approval of the project scope and cost and would not include a revised budget. Mr. Parmelee did not like the fact that the state can change their funding to the district after the towns have passed the school budget.

Janet Morganti, from Durham, asked about the expanded parking at Memorial and where the property is coming from. Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that the district does not need to purchase additional property for the current plan. Mrs. Morganti also asked if there will be a traffic study and Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that that would start once the project is approved. Dr. Schuch added that a traffic study is normally done during the design process. Mrs. Morganti then asked what would happen if there are issues with traffic flow. Dr. Schuch explained that a traffic study typically identifies any potential issues and choke points and provide recommendations for updates to existing intersections. He also noted that there is a traffic engineer on the Building committee. Mrs. Morganti asked if the state would still reimburse funds if the project did not pass and was put off until next year. Mrs. Neubig reiterated that the state can remove school construction reimbursement from their budget, but they have not done that since the program was started. There is also the possibility that the project does not get approved. Mrs. Morganti then asked if John Lyman was in good enough shape to house kids for the next couple of years and Mrs. Neubig stated upgrades were identified by QA&M to house students during swing space. There is money in the renovation budget to refurbish the portables and some smaller renovations in both Lyman and Strong. Mrs. Morganti added that the older folks in towns don't get notices from the district and hoped there could be a better way for communication. She missed the newsletter that Mr. Moore used to send out. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that they will be working on bringing back the newsletter soon. They also continue to communicate via technology. Mrs. Morganti admitted that she gets emotional when thinking about closing Brewster School and noted that she thought the family that donated the property had right of first refusal. Mrs. Neubig explained that the deed states first right of refusal to Durham for a price of \$1.50. If the town does not want it, the property can be offered to other people. The adjacent property is already owned by the town. Mrs. Morganti explained that she would have closed Lyman, fixed up and expanded Brewster, and left Memorial as is.

As a follow up to Mr. Kleeman's question, Mrs. Neubig then noted that the per pupil expenditure would go down \$3,650 with a \$5 million reduction in the budget. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that that would bring the district below the state average instead of way above. Mrs. Neubig explained that the per pupil expenditure in 2022-2023 was \$26,253 and she estimated 2023-2024 to be \$27,195. Average for regional districts is \$25,000, average in the state is \$21,000 and average for DRG C is \$21,000. She added that regional districts are usually higher than others.

Carolyn Kearns, a new member of the community, supports the project. She came from a district that a \$40 million bond paid off after building a new high and then bonded another \$40 million for glam projects. She loved hearing about the breakeven point.

Tressa Opalacz, from Durham, acknowledged that this is an emotional issue for many parents. She has heard a lot of complaints from parents who don't know what will happen with their kids in the next five years. She encouraged the board to get that information out quickly and let it be known that it is not going to be as difficult as people might think. Ms. Opalacz also felt that they really need to find out where Middlefield is really going with this. She has also heard a lot about Brewster and the ability to sell that property as well as the traffic around Memorial. Ms. Opalacz reminded everyone that every vote matters in this case and they need to get town officials to help spread the word. She added that she has trouble hearing everyone as well, even on Zoom.

Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that they have had a lot of great communication with both First Selectmen who have been very supportive. Middlefield has some projects they are working towards and that could be an issue with this project, but she hoped that everyone would look at how low the mill rate increase will be. Ms. Opalacz agreed, but felt they really need to communicate that information. She felt that doing nothing puts everyone in a worst situation, but she wasn't sure everyone understands that. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that she talked with seniors in Middlefield who feel like they don't have enough say in the district, but they did understand that this is the most equitable situation for Middlefield. Middlefield also doesn't have as high the tax burden that Durham does. Dr. Schuch added that the building should be designed to have some joint community use spaces in it. He felt that that would make the building a community asset that raises the level of the entire community. Dr. Darcy felt that there is an emotional connection to Lyman that some people will not let go of and Lyman is a financial liability. She added that Middlefield kids will have a much shorter commute to elementary school. Dr. Darcy noted that schools aren't buildings; schools are people and the people will be at Memorial. She also felt that Middlefield has a disproportionate say in the district.

Mrs. Caramanello added that they have had parents openly admit that they voted no on the referendum because they were upset with the board over the interim plan. She hoped that parents put aside their feelings about the interim plan and vote for what the vote is for.

A member of the public noted that they have talked about \$25 million for Lyman and Brewster, but Memorial has needs as well. She asked if there is a cost figure for what all three would cost to fix. Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that capital projects are included in the numbers and the systems at Memorial have been worked on.

(There was a break in the Zoom at this point.)

A member of the public felt that a lot of people missed the fact that the teachers and the students would all be moving together. The kids would not be going to a new school with new teachers and new friends.

Mr. Hicks then asked for online comments.

Mallory Castro, from Durham, felt that the board has done an incredible job of responding after the last failed referendum. She was disappointed to see so little engagement, considering the robust conversation on social media. She added that people thought they were impacting the interim plan by voting no and also found the referendum language to be confusing. She asked if there was a plan to make everything clear and concise. Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that a next steps flyer went out and speaks to the interim plan. That configuration starts in the Fall and everything has been packed and moved. The referendum vote has nothing to do with that plan. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that some families might have hoped that if the referendum failed, everything could have gone back to the way it is. She emphasized that they have to do what's right for both towns, the district and every single student. Mrs. Dahlheimer acknowledged that they will probably have to heighten communication during this process.

Mrs. Neubig explained that a lot of the explanatory text is legally required, however the manner in which it was presented could be clearer. She has already spoken to the district's attorney about that.

Nate Kirschner noted that he had arrived late to the meeting as he was at a Planning and Zoning hearing and asked if consideration could be given to scheduling meetings when there are no town meetings. He felt that the board needs to solve the interim plan to gain the support for the final product. Mr. Kirschner is in engineering and construction and felt that no one would approve a construction plan for a building that big without knowing how it will affect things in the short-term. He admitted that he went through the district and changed schools every few years without a problem, adding that it was actually quite advantageous. He cannot support a project that puts a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade student on a bus with a 10<sup>th</sup>-grade student. Mr. Kirschner felt that a lot more thought needs to be given and a lot more information shared about the interim phase so that parents can get behind it.

Mrs. Neubig explained that a 5<sup>th</sup>-grader would go to Strong for the two years during construction. They have talked about having the younger students sit in the front of the bus. Nate Kirschner stated that that doesn't work. He emphasized that they have to get the parents with kids that will be impacted by this on board. Mr. Kirschner felt that the ultimate goal is admirable and should be supported, but a lot more information needs to be considered and shared. Mrs. Neubig added that they are potentially looking at a different bus run for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders as well but nothing is set yet.

Mrs. Caramanello stated that her prior comment was that parents had specifically told them the reason they voted no and she felt that was unfortunate because that's not what was being voted on. Dr. Darcy was also talking about the interim plan that begins in the Fall which is separate from the transitional plan once construction starts. Mrs. Neubig suggested they stop calling it an interim plan. Mr. Roraback noted that the board has had a goal to limit transitions, but they also agree that it's not necessarily harmful. From an operational and teacher collaboration point of view, the kids will build lifelong, rich associations.

Hearing no other comments online, Mr. Hicks invited Rick Parmelee to speak again.

Rick Parmelee explained that he looked at the calendar on the town's website and the correct meeting time was listed there. He asked if this project has been reviewed by the land use board and Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that it has been sent out to all boards and commissions in both towns. Mr. Parmelee asked if she has received feedback from Middlefield Planning and Zoning and Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that she has not heard any negative feedback or questions. There had been questions about purchasing the property next to the school, but that was all she has heard. Mr. Parmelee added that the community has a responsibility to provide an education and felt that he will never be able to pay back to the Town of Durham what he has received in benefits. For many years, there were four members from each town on the Board of Education, but Durham had a bigger share of students and financial burden. As to the bonding amount, Mr. Parmelee noted that they cannot exceed the amount that is approved nor can they spend the balance if the project comes in under budget. Mr. Parmelee felt that the board needs to be more open with the people who pay the bills.

Mrs. Dahlheimer added that she met with the seniors at the senior lunch and at their exercise group. She also talked with the town committee about the project. The board is trying hard to communicate. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that, after tonight, the board cannot use district resources to advocate for or against this. The board members can talk with people as personal citizens and she noted that most of the board is open to engage with anyone.

Roger Kleman confirmed that the public hearing is just to revise the regional plan and the presentation tonight had nothing to do with that. He summarized that the plan amendment is to give the board the

authority to close two schools. He does not believe that anyone has the original regional plan and asked for a copy in writing. He asked the board to find the original plan, not the revised plan. Mr. Kleeman asked why the Town of Durham was not given right of first refusal on Korn School, if that's what has to happen with Brewster School. Mrs. Neubig explained that that is what is in the Brewster land deed. Mr. Kleeman stated that it is also in the regional plan. He emphasized that Korn School was not offered to the town in the beginning.

Dr. Darcy noted that the regional plan does not identify specific schools, but states how many schools are included in the district. She noted that today's presentation was setting the stage as to why this referendum is necessary. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that they needed to explain why they want to close two schools. Mr. Moore stated that the plan the board is working with is the one that was approved by the State of Connecticut in 1967. That plan lists the schools that were in town at the time, including Center School, Lyman with a different name, Brewster, Korn and the proposed site for the high school. The proposed amendment is to change the set-up of what schools are listed in the plan and to allow the district to build a K-5 school. In summary, they will build a K-5 school and close two schools that were named in the approved plan.

Roger Kleeman noted that the annual budget includes \$30 million for labor out of a total \$40 million. He asked how they are saving \$5 million by closing two schools. Mrs. Neubig explained that they will save an estimated yearly \$2.6 million by closing two schools.

Mallory Castro asked if the towns will put out some kind of physical notification about the next referendum. Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that that was the consensus from the leaders of both towns.

Hearing no further comments, Mr. Hicks closed the public hearing.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz  
Alwaz First