

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education Utilization Committee met in Regular Session on Thursday, November 21, 2019 at 6:00 PM in the Library at Coginchaug Regional High School, Durham, Connecticut.

Committee members present: Mrs. Booth, Dr. Friedrich, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino

Committee members absent: Mrs. Geraci and Mr. Hicks

Other Board members present: Mr. Moore

Community members present: Mr. Giammatteo

Administration present: Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance

Guests: Mr. Warner and Mr. Bruzas

Dr. Taylor called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Public Comment

None.

Approval of Agenda

Dr. Taylor suggested striking item 7 from the agenda as there are no updates to report.

Mr. Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Booth, to approve the agenda, as amended.

In favor of approving the agenda, as amended: Mrs. Booth, Dr. Friedrich, Mr. Moore, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino.

Approval of Minutes - October 24, 2019

Mr. Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Booth, to approve the minutes of the October 24, meeting, as presented.

In favor of approving the minutes of the October 24, 2019, as presented: Mrs. Booth, Dr. Friedrich, Mr. Moore, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino. Motion approved unanimously.

Discuss pickleball at Memorial

Mr. Yamartino reviewed that Memorial currently has a tennis court and he would like to see that revitalized to include pickleball. He then showed a video of the national juniors playing and explained that it is a sport for people of all ages.

Mark Bruzas from Middlefield explained that most pickleball is played in teams of two and the team changes every time you play. It's a great way to meet new people in the community and socialize. At this point, there are approximately 3.1 million pickleball players and 60 percent of them are under 55. He reviewed that it is played with a ball and a paddle on a court that is 25 percent smaller than a tennis court. It's an affordable game that can be learned and played in a half hour. He started playing in July and there

is now an email list of 70 people that play in the area. They currently play in Wallingford or North Haven as there are no courts in the area. There are four tennis courts at Memorial School and two of them could easily be converted to four or six pickleball courts. Cheshire has just approved \$350,000 to construct 10 dedicated pickleball courts to be built in 2020. The costs here should be a lot less because of the existing courts. In 2013, the USA Pickleball Association identified 2,300 courts nationwide and by August of 2018, there were 23,500. He encouraged the committee to budget money to make this happen.

Dr. Friedrich asked if the courts can be dual use for tennis and pickleball and Mr. Bruzas explained that they can be dual use and that is what they plan on now. The courts are lined for both and the nets are adjusted accordingly. He did state that dedicated pickleball courts are the best so there is no confusion with the lines.

Mr. Yamartino felt it would be a good way to bring the community together and he has talked to the Park and Rec director in Middlefield and they discussed using the basketball court at Peckham Park for pickleball, but there is far too much usage of the basketball court. Mr. Bruzas also mentioned that some courts require you to bring your own net. Mr. Giammatteo felt that there must be a system available to make the courts dual use.

Mrs. Booth felt that the students wouldn't get a lot of use out of it with the limited recess time they have and encouraged everyone to ask the kids what they want if the district is going to put money into playground improvements. Mr. Yamartino also mentioned that the current condition of the tennis courts is a liability.

Korn School Update

A. Comments by Haddam Town Planner William Warner

Bill Warner had been the Director of Planning and Development in Middletown for 25 years, went to Farmington for five years and is now the Town Planner in Haddam. Mr. Bailey and Dr. Veronesi asked him to come speak to the committee because of his experience in Haddam. There had been three elementary schools in District 17, Killingworth Elementary School, Burr Elementary School and Haddam Elementary School. Last year, they voted to close Haddam Elementary School which created an uproar, especially with the parents of children in that school. Mr. Warner suggested to the Town of Haddam that they own the school once it's closed though most of the people in Haddam, including the First Selectman, did not agree.

Mr. Warner believes the same situation exists here in Durham and Middlefield. He began the process by doing a site and zoning analysis to talk about the current site and what potential there is. Mr. Warner noted that the school was essentially in Higganum center and is on a main road. They went through that process and the Board of Education made a formal offer to the town. It went through Planning and Zoning and they concluded that the town should own it in order to control the destiny of the property. The final presentation was very well-received and it then went to referendum on the same day as the school budget.

The school budget failed but the vote to acquire HES passed, with about 40 percent of the registered voters voting. Approximately 74 percent of the voters voted in the affirmative. Once the town owned the property, a survey was done via Survey Monkey and Facebook asking what people would like to see done with the building. They had a 10 to 15 percent response rate to the survey. Since then, workshops with about 300 people have been held to get feedback from the townspeople.

Mr. Warner then distributed some considerations for Korn School. With regard to zoning, the property can be immediately used for a public school, however a private school would require a special permit. Mr. Yamartino explained that the Town of Durham has made their decision by voting it down at referendum and the First Selectman has stated that she will not bring it up again. Mr. Warner reminded everyone that that was what Haddam said a year ago as well and that it probably failed the referendum because of the price. He felt that there were other ways to tell the town why they should own the property.

Mr. Giammatteo stated that one of their concerns was the fact that the school is a standalone school in the center of the school campus. Mr. Warner felt that there had been no real thought as to what could be done with the property. Right now, probably 50 different uses are being talked about for Haddam Elementary.

Mr. Warner reviewed demographics and mentioned that by 2030, 33 percent of the households in Durham will be 65 years or older. The sharpest decline will be in the most productive working age group, 30 to 60. The population is projected to drop by 700 people in the next 20 years. Building permits in Durham went from an average of 50 to 70 new homes per year in 1990 to 2007, but after 2008, that has dropped to roughly five to 10 per year. That is a huge loss to the Grand List.

Wetlands is also a consideration for the property. Flood plain is also a big issue. The septic system capacity and reserve area is another consideration as well as the status of the well.

Mr. Yamartino added that the district does not have an A-1 survey on the property and it would be a problem to subdivide it.

Mr. Warner went on to review further considerations including operating costs, capital costs and current zoning. He went over some of the issues that are allowed in the current zone, but they are all by special permit except for public schools. This means the use would be completely under control of the town. Under State building code, there are use groups and if that group is changed, the building would have to be brought up to current building code and the cost is about \$200 to \$250 per square foot for the conversion. He doesn't really see a potential to rezone the property, but a text change could be possible.

After looking at all the considerations, is there any land left that's buildable? Is there an ability to subdivide? You would need two acres and lot coverage would be a problem. That would all mean variances would be required, but again the town has control over that.

Demolition would lead to fields, courts or parking. Haddam has been spending approximately \$60,000 to keep the temperature in the building at 50 degrees and the building reasonably maintained. Demolition would probably be \$1 million and would it make sense to tear it down. The building itself has significant value and Mr. Warner feels it would be foolish to demolish it. Commercial kitchens are really taking off now and the EPA even has a program to build and refurbish commercial kitchens in rural areas. Health code requirements require any food to be sold is prepared in a commercial kitchen. There is a place in Rhode Island that has a commercial kitchen as an incubator for almost 60 businesses. That would not require a use change if they were to still use it as a commercial kitchen.

Dr. Taylor noted that if the district continued to own the building and use it as a commercial kitchen, it would still have to have some educational purpose and that might be a hard sell. Mrs. Neubig agreed that is according to the corporate purpose of the district as well as the bond.

Mr. Warner stated that Haddam has a pop-up market using their multipurpose space and travel basketball and indoor soccer use the gym. Mr. Warner feels that the town should take over the discussions, meeting with people to try to find a way that the town could use the building. He felt that, similar to Haddam, there really is no retail or office market but there is a market for housing for baby boomers who want to downsize and stay in town. Mrs. Booth noted that Middletown converted one of their high schools into housing.

Mr. Moore stated that the study that the town did evaluated a series of options, but they used the approach of fixing everything now at a cost of \$7 million and it failed the referendum. Many of the options Mr. Warner is discussing were included in that study. Dr. Taylor stated that Mrs. Francis has told them definitively that the town is not interested in purchasing the property and he felt they needed to operate under that assumption. He felt that the issues now are because there are a lot of educational constraints, its location and the fact that it has significant capital needs coming up. Dr. Taylor felt that they needed to decide how viable the space will be as a rental in the community, knowing that the district would still have to own it and cover the operating costs. He stated that the district can't keep the building open unless there is a further plan down the road.

Mr. Warner was not aware that Mrs. Francis felt so strongly about it, but if that is the case, he would recommend that the district tear it down. He felt that Planning and Zoning would probably deny anything the district proposes because it's not hurting them to leave it as is. Mr. Moore reminded everyone that Mrs. Francis did say the town would use it and pay rent, including moving the activity center to Korn School. Mr. Moore felt that if the activity center is moved, other uses would be generated and then maybe the town would eventually want to look at purchasing the building. The problem, however, is that the operating costs are \$80,000 and the rent from the town would be nowhere near that.

Mr. Yamartino asked how the district could find out the viability of the options. One of his thoughts is a nonprofit that could do things like the commercial kitchen. Mr. Moore stated that he spoke to Laura Francis this week and the Coginchaug Valley Education Fund came up. Dr. Taylor did not feel they would have the capital for that. The other thing Mr. Moore and Mrs. Francis talked about was meeting with Middlesex Community College to see if there were programs that could be run out of the school, however that would still leave it to the district to maintain. Mr. Giammatteo noted that if there were several groups paying, it might make it possible to hire somebody to manage the building.

Dr. Taylor wondered how much effort they should put into it and how long it should take because the clock has been ticking for some time. The school has been closed for almost four years already.

B. Annualized expenses

Mrs. Neubig explained that it would be about \$85,000 a year, just to keep the temperature even, grounds maintenance and insurance. If the district wanted to open the building, the operating costs would go up to \$141,000 per year because of the increase in electric, fuel, repairs and maintenance and a potential part time custodian. If the building needs improvement to come up to code, an additional \$1 million would be needed in order to open the building.

The bond of \$222,000 would also need to be paid. If the district decided to open the building in 2021 for full functioning, \$1.397 million would be needed. In the next five years, another \$6 million of capital improvements may be necessary. That would mean about \$1.4 million until 2026 and then it would go down to about \$300,000 for operating costs, with a \$50,000 capital reserve.

Dr. Friedrich commented that this information makes tearing it down look like a good idea and others agreed.

Mr. Yamartino asked what the town had last offered for the building and Mrs. Neubig stated that she did not think there was a sale price, though there would have been a payment to Middlefield to cover the remaining debt on the bond and a trade of land at Brewster.

Mr. Warner summarized that though he can see a number of possible uses for the building, it would have to be Durham that does it and it should not be the Board of Education. Mr. Warner also stated that Haddam had hired a commercial broker and they advertised their building for six months and had one person from Middletown that was interested in it. The Town of Haddam paid \$450,000 for the school.

Mr. Giammatteo wondered if it would be possible to go back to the Town of Durham to see if they'd like to buy the building outright and spend \$100,000 a year to keep it open until they find uses. Mrs. Neubig explained that if Durham were to own the building, they would not have the educational component requirement

Mr. Yamartino summarized that Mr. Warner was saying to make a formal offer to the town if they don't want to see it torn down. Mr. Yamartino would not want to see costs come back to the district to provide the property, etc., but Dr. Taylor felt that it would save the district the added expenditures. Dr. Taylor felt it would be better to give the building to the town than it would to keep spending \$80,000 or more a year for upkeep and Mr. Giammatteo added that it would be better to do that than to spend \$1 million to tear it down as well. Again, Dr. Taylor felt that there has been no expressed desire from the town to bring this issue back up in any way, shape or form. He would be fine with offering it one last time to the town and if they say no, then to tear it down.

Mr. Warner explained that before the town can acquire any property, they would have to go through Planning and Zoning. He thought that they could go to P&Z to let them know the district is considering deeding it to the town or tearing it down and ask for their advice. He did not feel it should be just the Board of Selectmen to decide.

Mr. Moore explained that the last proposal was basically free, except for paying off the debt to Middlefield which has already dropped. Mr. Yamartino reminded everyone that the vote was on a \$7 million community center, not just acquiring the building. Mr. Moore also mentioned that there is also a new Board of Selectmen.

Mr. Giammatteo also mentioned that Middlefield has stated that they have no interest in Lyman.

Dr. Taylor asked if the committee members can agree to bring this up at the next full board meeting as a vote to make a final offer to the town, with the contingency that it will be torn down if not accepted. The committee was in favor of that.

Mr. Warner encouraged them to think through on how the offer is presented, outlining the issues and explaining that it will be torn down if the town doesn't want it. Mrs. Booth felt that it would be fabulous for the town to have the building, but the big \$7 million number scared a lot of people away. Mr. Yamartino felt that this committee and the Board of Education could state that they spoke with a planning professional about the options and given the constraints, the options are limited. He added that the available options would have to be done through the community or a private corporation, both of which have to go through Planning and Zoning. He reviewed the district's options which would be to operate

the building possibly at a loss, raze it for \$1 million or convey it to the Town of Durham. It was also noted that the possible \$60,000 to \$80,000 loss per year would be equivalent to another teacher for the district.

Dr. Taylor felt that the taxpayers of Middlefield would not want the district to keep the building open only for Durham to acquire it in the future. Mr. Yamartino would be interested in pursuing a formal offer to the town, but felt that the Board of Education would have to present it in a letter to the Board of Selectmen, Board of Finance and the Planning and Zoning Commission of Durham. Mr. Giammatteo wondered if it should also be published to the townspeople to let them know what the district is offering and several people agreed. Mr. Yamartino also felt it would be important to notify Middlefield as well.

Mrs. Booth asked it would have to go to referendum to raze the building or done as a budget item. Dr. Taylor would want to see it in capital expenses which would be voted on in the budget, rather than a separate vote. Mr. Yamartino also noted that if the town is to acquire a piece of property, it would require a town meeting. He asked if the amendment to the Regional Plan would give the district the right to raze the asset, but felt they should make people aware of the issues. Dr. Taylor felt that the district could raze the building whenever they want to.

Mr. Yamartino felt that if they were to move forward with this plan, they should, at a minimum, have a public hearing explaining the offer that was made to the town and the fact that the building will be razed if the offer is not accepted. Dr. Taylor would be fine with the public knowing, but it would be up to the town to have a public hearing. Mr. Yamartino felt that if the Middlefield voters do not want their asset razed, they should have a voice as well. Mrs. Booth wondered if it would change the board's position if they were to hold a public hearing and Middlefield said they didn't want it torn down. Dr. Friedrich felt that the district should let the townspeople know their thoughts as to how they can best serve the children, but agreed that they cannot speak for the town.

Mr. Warner suggested that they could reach a lot of people through Facebook to get the word out. Mr. Yamartino also mentioned that the Town of Middlefield may not agree with a zero-dollar transfer, so the question to Middlefield would be if they want to continue to pay \$30,000 a year to keep the building.

From a logistical standpoint, Dr. Taylor would like to formalize the letter, send it out and hold a public hearing. Dr. Friedrich felt that the letter needs to inform the various town entities that the district's position is to make a final offer and the town will either take the offer or the building will be razed. He felt that the final offer must be decided after the public has had an opportunity to comment. Mr. Yamartino would propose that the board goes into the public hearing with a preliminary offer.

Mr. Yamartino proposed that he and Dr. Taylor sit down with Mr. Moore to draft a letter and bring it to the next full board meeting as a proposal. Dr. Friedrich suggested a draft letter to make people aware of the process and a preliminary offer as a second document. Dr. Taylor felt it would be important that the intent will be to raze the building if the offer is not accepted is included in the letter. There was discussion about the means of distributing the letter.

Mr. Moore stated that he is not really in favor of this because he doesn't feel the town will vote for \$1 million to take the building down and they will look to the district to use the building for something in the future. Mr. Warner felt that the numbers should speak for themselves. Mr. Moore would go ahead with the letter, but did not feel it will happen. He also felt that there would have to be some kind of vote on the \$1 million to raze the building. Mr. Moore also felt that there was public attachment to the building that will override any costs.

Mr. Yamartino also asked if the district needed the additional land at Brewster to do what they wanted to do there. Mr. Moore stated that it was offered because the town didn't need it and the district does not need it for the expansion.

Everyone thanked Mr. Warner for attending and sharing his information with them. Mr. Moore added that Durham and Middlefield have made an offer to someone for the shared Town Planner position. Mr. Warner ended by saying he did not feel the Board of Education should keep the building, but that the town should because it has value and there are absolutely things that could be done with it. The committee also thanked Mrs. Neubig for her information.

Brewster/Memorial project application status

Mr. Moore stated that the application has been withdrawn and will have to resubmit once the referendum on the amendment to the Regional Plan is approved. That will hopefully be done at the May referendum with the school budget. The submission to the State would be in June and Mrs. Neubig explained that the earliest the construction could start would be July 1, 2021, with a projected construction time of one year. Mr. Moore reminded everyone that the work that is included is just to facilitate the implementation and not to improve the schools.

Mrs. Neubig felt that construction could happen on sections of the building at Memorial during the school year if certain grades were moved. Brewster would likely have to be done during the summer. There would be a timeline for when the construction would have to be done.

Mr. Yamartino felt that the committee needs to discuss at the next meeting these projects and talk about what would be done in phases as well as the playground equipment. Mrs. Neubig stated that a consultant will prepare a report as to what playground equipment may be able to be installed and then moved. Mr. Yamartino reminded everyone that Middlefield Parks and Recreation runs their summer program at Memorial for the kids from both towns.

Public Comment

Kim Johansen explained that the kids have been complaining about recess time and her daughter saw a gaga pit while camping. She agreed that pickleball might be something that would take off if the kids were playing it in gym. Her daughter then asked 50 kids what they wanted and they wanted the baseball field cleaned up, more balls, a gaga pit, more of a jungle gym, a Ninja course and more swings. Only one kid wanted a slide. She felt it was important for the board to think about what the kids are looking for on the playground.

Carl Stoup thanked Bob Moore for mentioning the shared planner between the two towns. He thought they should give that person some time to work something out. Mr. Stoup also felt that one of the reasons the referendum failed was because of a real negative letter that went out prior to the vote and that individual has since softened his stance and has indicated he'd like to try to work to find a use for the building.

Jim Irish, from Middlefield, asked if the \$222,000 of bond payoff is due whether the district closes the building or gives it away and Mrs. Neubig stated that it was. Mr. Yamartino thought that if it was conveyed for community use, the debt was forgiven. Mrs. Neubig explained that that was the state

reimbursement which has already been forgiven. Mr. Irish is happy that the committee is aggressively taking this on.

Adjournment

Dr. Friedrich made a motion, seconded by Mr. Giammatteo, to adjourn the meeting.

In favor of adjourning the meeting: Mrs. Booth, Dr. Friedrich, Mr. Moore, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino. Motion passed unanimously.

Meeting was adjourned at 7:44 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First