

Revised

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a public hearing on Wednesday, April 6, 2022 at 8:00 PM at the Robert O. Mason Library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Board members present: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone.

Board members absent:

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

Mrs. Petrella opened the public hearing at 8:01 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Mrs. Petrella thanked Mrs. Maloney for all of her work.

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

Mrs. Petrella explained that the proposed gross budget for fiscal year 2022-2023 is \$38,489,206, which represents a 3.96 percent increase from last year. The net budget is \$37,008,549, which represents a 4.34 percent increase over last year.

The towns' assessments are determined by the school population, with Durham at 64.5 percent and Middlefield at 35.5 percent. The allocation for Durham is \$23,870,514 and \$13,138,035 Middlefield. ECS grants are then subtracted from those totals, leaving \$20,695,788 for Durham and \$11,249,870 for Middlefield. Last year's net cost to Durham was \$20,507,377 and Middlefield's net cost was \$9,960,300. Mrs. Petrella reiterated that the percent of students in Durham has dropped and the percent in Middlefield has risen by 2.24 percent.

Mrs. Petrella then reviewed the average per pupil expenditure over time has been increasing, but even if the budget stayed at zero that cost will still go up as the number of students is going down. The district has lost students every year since 2019. The state average of students is higher than the district's in 2019 and 2020, but the district's average is higher than other regional school districts and the DRG.

Mrs. Petrella reviewed that the last update from Milone & MacBroom on enrollment projections was in 2019 and the district is either matching or slightly below those numbers.

The biggest budget driver this year is salaries. The average salary increases range from 2 percent to 2.5 percent. There was a slight savings in benefits. There is a slight increase in purchased services, building and grounds, operating services, supplies, dues and debt service which are all affected by inflation. Capital has had the second highest impact on the budget.

Going back to enrollment, the question has been if the district is losing students, should it be losing staff. Mrs. Petrella showed a graph from 2014 that showed that enrollment has been going down but certified staff has also been going down, though not as quickly as the student enrollment. She reminded everyone that the district does not lose all of the students in one grade level, therefore staff cannot be eliminated.

Looking at capital reserve, Mrs. Petrella explained that it had been capped at 1 percent in the past and that has been raised to 2 percent this year. The capital reserve being proposed represents about 1.3 percent of the budget. Items include turf replacement, unanticipated building maintenance, brick repair and replacement at Strong School and saving for paving of Pickett Lane which total \$518,250.

Moving to debt service, Mrs. Petrella noted that by 2025-2026, a portion of the debt service will be paid off. Mrs. Neubig reported that bond anticipation notes were issued to get the cash flow ahead of issuing bonds this year which produced the slight increase in this year's debt service.

Mrs. Petrella reviewed that the budget history from 2015 to today, noting that there was an increase one year, a substantial decrease, an increase, a zero budget, a decrease, a zero budget, a slight increase and then this year's increase. Overall, the budget has remained relatively flat since 2015. Comparing that to the rate of inflation, the rate of inflation basically follows the same pattern.

Mrs. Petrella then opened the meeting for public comment and explained that the board will not be responding to any comments.

Michael Skelps, chairman of the Middlefield Board of Finance, read a prepared statement from his board. "The members of the Middlefield Board of Finance do not support the proposed budget for Regional School District 13 for fiscal year 2023. This budget increase would add \$1.3 million to the budget of Middlefield, with a school-related increase of \$594 per year to the average household. We view the 3.96 percent increase in the gross school budget as unacceptable and we believe that the Board of Education has not taken all the necessary steps to control spending in the face of declining enrollment. The Board of Education has a responsibility for education, but it also has a fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayers and we feel that is not being sufficiently considered. The Middlefield Board of Selectmen and Board of Finance have worked tirelessly to hold the line on expenses while providing essential services to our community. Middlefield town leadership continues to seek better and more efficient ways to ensure public safety, public works services, community services and capital investment. For 2023, we anticipate municipal spending to be within 0.2 percent of the current year. We do not sense that same commitment to fiscal responsibility from the Board of Education, as reflected in the proposed school budget. As we just saw from the school year 2019, student enrollment has dropped about 20 percent yet the gross school budget is being proposed to increase by 5.14 percent during that time and the cost per pupil has increased by 27.4 percent. These increases are in stark contrast to Middlefield's municipal budget which has held flat for the past eight years. This year's proposed school budget is the biggest increase of the past decade. In this, the eighth consecutive year of declining enrollment, any increase in the school budget could be questioned, let alone the largest increase in recent memory. Staffing levels have remained flat for the past four years, again while enrollment has declined, driving the per pupil cost for the district to its highest level ever, now approximately \$26,000 per student. And that figure is higher than 84 percent of the school districts in Connecticut. The Board of Education appears reluctant to right-size staffing levels in the district without getting approval to close John Lyman Elementary. In this period of declining enrollment, we believe it is not appropriate for the district to tie staffing level adjustments to the closure of a school. Without substantial restructuring of the school budget to bring it in line with declining enrollment, we cannot support this budget and we expect it to receive strong opposition from town residents and likely defeat at referendum." Submitted by Lee Matteredazzo, Kevin Boyle, Melissa Kowal, Mary Wolak, Dave Lowry and Michael Skelps.

Carl Stoup, from Durham, echoed Mr. Skelps' comments and supported them 100 percent. He brought up the proposed building across from the high school which has had various labels, including storage building and shell of a building. He believes there is excess space in both the high school and Korn School that could be used for storage. That building has also been referred to as the field house and high school stadium project. The goal for the building is to become a fully functional field house, with electrical systems, plumbing and heating. Mr. Stoup felt that the maintenance and custodial staff for this building will add substantial fixed costs to all future budgets, yet contain the same facilities that are in the high school. He felt that the building of this structure should be considered a want, rather than a need. Pickett Lane needs to be completely rebuilt and any money allocated to the building should be allocated to that. As far as slab protection, Mr. Stoup believed that can be done with a sealer for \$2,000 to \$4,000. A structure will cost \$350,000 to \$450,000 or more which does not include any bathrooms, heating or electrical systems. Mr. Stoup felt that once the building is in place, the goal would be to install field lighting to facilitate the playing of four or five night games of a sport that RSD 13 has to depend on other schools to have enough athletes to play. Per pupil costs are some of the highest in the state and one of the reasons for that is excess space in the buildings. One of the reasons for the proposed closing of Lyman is to save costs associated with maintaining a structure that is considered excess space, yet this field house is duplicating what is already in the high school. Mr. Stoup noted that these costs, along with declining student enrollment, will make the per pupil costs even higher. He recommended that the board delete the proposed expenditure for the building across the street from the high school.

Mariah Roy, from Durham, echoed the two speakers before her. She doesn't believe that the board was thinking about the people in Middlefield when they proposed this budget. She doesn't believe that will promote keeping students in the district if taxes are increased that much. Mrs. Roy was surprised to see the \$13,250 for the turf replacement and was curious when it was originally installed and why it needs to be replaced. She was also curious about the \$180,000 for the field house which seems to just scratch the surface of the overall cost of the project and asked how many bids were received for that project. Mrs. Roy felt that it would be fair for the public knows what the total actual cost will be.

Mrs. Neubig explained that the turf replacement has been in the capital reserve budget for at least seven years, with a portion of the funds being saved each year. The total saved is over \$550,000 and she felt that that would be close to what is needed. The district has not gone out to bid for the field house as bids aren't solicited until it is actually going to be built. The \$180,000 was based on a quote that the Building committee received for a shell. Mrs. Neubig can't commit to the \$180,000 being enough to cover the whole project and explained that it would just be a structure over the slab. Mrs. Booth added that there have been discussions about having booster clubs pay for portions of what will be inside the building. She added that the slab will only last so long. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that the sealant would go on after they rip out all of the piping.

David Lowry, the longest-serving volunteer in Middlefield, thanked the board members for their service. He understands that the last two years have been a challenge for everyone. He felt that \$26,000 per student is out of line and noted that his son will probably attend college for less than that, including room and board. Durham's enrollment is down almost 80 in this year's budget which calculates to a \$2 million savings based on per pupil costs, yet their portion of the budget is up by \$188,000. Mr. Lowry believes that previous administrations and Boards of Education have kind of kicked this down the road for the last five years. He felt that there should have been a plan, along with the enrollment projections, to contract the labor number. It is a hard sell to be down over 300 students, with no reduction in labor. Mr. Lowry explained that too much staff makes it hard to fund a field house or needed maintenance. He also felt that

each grade should be under one roof and the district cannot support two separate elementary systems. Even now, people wholeheartedly believe there are still two programs and noted that he has never been favor of having two programs. Mr. Lowry explained that he cannot sell a \$600 property tax increase to his neighbors when they are worried about affording heating oil next year. He added that the Board of Finance is of one mind and he would rather not have a referendum fail before doing something.

Rick Parmelee, from Durham, noted that he and his wife, along with their children and their fathers, went through the Durham school system. He thanked Mr. Skelps for representing his constituents well. As far as the field house, Mr. Parmelee reviewed that it had been indicated that someone might have possibly funded that project but he would not be in favor of that. He recalls when the budget was going up because enrollment was going up and other years when the budget went up anyway. He does not see a lot of oversight on the finances of the district. Mr. Parmelee asked when the culvert replacement will take place on Pickett Lane and Mrs. Neubig explained that it will start this summer. He felt that no paving should be done until that project is complete. Mr. Parmelee has also heard that the board has authorized administrators to make expenditures up to a certain amount without going to the board and he would like to see that reverted back to a lower number. He also asked about the finances from the state and Mrs. Neubig explained that there was a year when the governor was allowed to do a hold back, however that has been eliminated. The ECS money in the budget is guaranteed and the governor has actually increased it slightly in his proposed budget. Mr. Parmelee is worried what would happen if that amount was cut because they tend to give mandates without funding. He would also like to see some restrictions based on the fund balance. Mr. Parmelee was extremely personally insulted by the fact that the district included parking agreements at Korn School and he couldn't image the Town of Durham telling the school system that they couldn't utilize those spaces, without it being part of the agreement. He felt that was a good deal for the district, but not for the town. Mr. Parmelee was also not happy with the district going to the legislature years ago about funding. He concluded by saying just because you don't support the budget doesn't mean you don't support education.

Andrew Taylor, from Durham, spoke about process and priorities. He felt that there wasn't a lot of process to the current budget process. Two of the last meetings were canceled which did not allow for public comment and the fact that a vote came out of a work session was pretty shocking. Dr. Taylor noted that the high school student population has dropped about 25 percent over the last few years, going from 430 students down to about 370, without a single staffing cut at the high school. He felt that staffing cuts need to be made to make things efficient. He also mentioned the field house and felt that there is a long trajectory to the intended goal which will push \$500,000 to \$1 million. He recalled that the motivation was always to put lights on the field to have night games. If is intended only as storage, as many people have mentioned, the district has plenty of storage. Dr. Taylor would be willing to lose the money that has already been spent because the upcoming expenditures would be a lot more. He reminded everyone that this project has already gone to referendum and was shot down. Dr. Taylor felt that if it was going to be done, it should go to referendum again and not be slipped into the budget process. He felt it was very disingenuous for the board to put money into the budget which will not even cover the full costs. He noted that the original company who bid on the project is no longer able to do it and the total cost will be much higher. From a priority standpoint, Dr. Taylor has heard a lot about Reimagining Education, but yet he sees nothing in the budget to accomplish those things. He feels it is a substantial recommendation and would be a fundamental difference in the way the school runs. Multiple people will be necessary to get that done, yet there has been no talk about that. Dr. Taylor recommended that the board cut the field house, cut at least two staff from the high school, cut an administrator from the high school and cut the SRO. He felt that the board could then look at prioritizing things to move forward.

Rick Parmelee noted that football is one of his pet peeves, with not enough enrollment to support the sport. More important than the cost are the head injuries that are cumulative. He believes that athletics have also gotten out of hand at the college level.

Adjournment

Hearing no other public comment, Mrs. Petrella declared the public hearing closed at 8:55 PM.

Ms. Adams made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mennone, to close the public hearing.

All in favor of closing the public hearing: Ms. Adams, Ms. Betty, Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

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Alwaz First