

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education Utilization Committee met in Regular Session on Thursday, January 21, 2021 at 6:00 PM remotely. Committee members present: Mrs. Booth, Dr. Friedrich, Mr. Hicks, Mr. Moore, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino.

Committee members absent: Mrs. Geraci

Community members present: Mrs. Johansen and Mr. Giammatteo (arrived late)

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

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

Mr. Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Mr. Hicks, to approve the agenda.

Mr. Yamartino would like to add John Lyman School to the agenda. Mr. Hicks agreed to the amendment.

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

Approval of Minutes - December 30, 2020

Mr. Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Booth, to approve the minutes of the December 30, 2020 meeting, as presented.

In favor of approving the minutes of the December 30, 2020 meeting, as presented: Mrs. Booth, Dr. Friedrich, Mr. Hicks, Mrs. Johansen, Mr. Moore and Mr. Yamartino. Motion approved, with Dr. Taylor abstaining.

Planning around Korn

Dr. Taylor asked if anyone had any updates from the Boards of Selectmen or Finance from either town. Mr. Moore stated that he spoke with Laura Francis this week and she indicated that most of her boards have consensus that they want to take over Korn School, but they do not have consensus on how much they want to spend or how much it will cost. Mrs. Francis did indicate that some board members are working on it and she has another meeting scheduled for this Saturday.

Dr. Taylor felt that that throws a wrench in the process and asked for other's thoughts. Mr. Yamartino noted that Korn School has been closed for almost five years and that was preceded by several years of discussion and, over the course of the entire time, it has been in the forefront for Durham to take possession of the school. Now that the building is officially abandoned, Mr. Yamartino believes that they should ask Durham to commit to pay the costs of insurance to maintain the abandoned building and any

other associated costs in their upcoming budget. If they agree to do that, he feels that the district can let the building sit idle. Otherwise, he would be inclined to move forward with demolition.

Mrs. Booth agreed with Mr. Yamartino and thought that they had told Durham that they needed to make a decision by a certain date. She felt that Mrs. Francis made it sound like she wasn't sure that it would actually pass in referendum for the Town of Durham to take the building. Mrs. Booth reminded everyone that the longer the building sits empty, the more it's falling apart. She felt it would be a mistake for the district to sit on this any longer.

Mr. Hicks asked if the Town of Durham has been approached about taking over the costs of the building. Mr. Yamartino stated that he thought the board would be sending a letter to the Boards of Selectmen and Finance in Durham asking them to move forward with taking the building or the district will look to authorize funds for demolition. He believes that they had given the town a deadline of March 31st. Mr. Yamartino felt that it was time for the school district to stop absorbing the costs associated with this building and the town needs to step up and absorb the costs. Mr. Hicks agreed and wondered what happened with the plan that Selectman Eames developed to rehab the building. Mr. Hicks felt that Mr. Eames' plan was a good one and pointed out that many costs in the \$7 million plan were grossly overstated. Mr. Hicks felt, as a member of the Senior board, that it was time for the town to take the building.

Mrs. Johansen also felt that the town needs to commit as did Dr. Friedrich. He added that he thought that the district needs to make a plan to finance the demolition of the building and if the town asks them to wait and offers to pay the costs, that's fine. Dr. Friedrich felt that it is now time for action.

Mr. Yamartino felt that they need to get some firm estimates on the demolition costs in order to go to referendum. Mrs. Neubig stated that the original \$1 million estimate from Silver Petrucelli and they felt that was a solid number as recently as six months ago. She did say that they could have that looked it, if necessary. Mr. Yamartino felt that this committee should recommend to the full board to move forward with putting the demolition forward, pending Durham offering to pay for the ongoing operating costs. Mr. Moore added that Mrs. Francis did say they were hiring another estimator to come up with different costs. Mr. Yamartino felt, that from the district's perspective, it really doesn't matter what the costs are or what the town will use the building for. It's really a question of whether Durham absorbs the ongoing costs or the board decided to take the action they need to. He also reviewed all of the reasons that it doesn't make sense to put the building on the market.

Dr. Taylor agreed, but wondered if there were financing options other than bonding for the demolition. Dr. Friedrich felt that this is exactly where they were a year ago and felt that they needed to recommend to the board to go forward with a new estimate for the demolition costs and pursue the steps to get that done. The town can act up until the time a contract is signed. He added that he felt that possibly people will change their sentiment once it goes to referendum. Dr. Taylor explained that if they felt they could finance the demolition through the budget that would impact all other areas of the budget. Dr. Taylor emphasized that he is in full support of moving forward.

Dr. Friedrich agreed and hoped that the Utilization Committee makes the recommendation that the board plan for demolition, including financing.

Mr. Yamartino ascertained that everyone was in agreement with moving this forward. Dr. Schuch asked what the real difference is between asking the town to pick up the operating costs and actually taking ownership. He sees the difference as a matter of paperwork to transfer ownership where, if they are just picking up the costs, they can, in fact, decide to stop doing that at any time. Mr. Yamartino explained that in order for the town to take ownership, it would have to pass referendum to procure the property. He does believe that there are many in town who would not want to pick up the building, even for \$1.00, without a plan for how to utilize it. Mr. Yamartino added that there are two communities involved that are absorbing the costs because Durham hasn't moved forward with a plan. Dr. Schuch suggested they put a time limit on how long Durham picks up the costs vs. acquiring the building.

Mrs. Booth asked if they refer to the building as abandoned or vacant and Mrs. Neubig explained that the insurance company refers to it as vacant. Mrs. Booth added that there will be a mold problem once it starts to get warm. Mrs. Neubig stated that the chiller does work, but would increase the cost of keeping the building vacant. Mr. Moore mentioned that Durham's voting machines are currently in the building and they are working to get approval from the Secretary of State to move them. Mr. Yamartino hoped that they would get that done before the May referendum. Dr. Friedrich reminded everyone that the fire alarms are off and Mrs. Neubig confirmed that it is quite cold in there.

Mr. Yamartino summarized that the committee is in agreement to move this to the full board as a recommendation and Dr. Taylor asked that there be explicit language in an agenda item for a vote to authorize this to move forward.

Mr. Moore stated that they will need to discuss financing and felt that they will need to take a look at the budget to see if any of these costs can be handled there. Debt service is dropping off fairly rapidly and there are lots of things to consider. Mrs. Neubig stated that the district is allowed to save only 1% of their operating budget each year which would mean it would take three years to save for this as well as not saving for anything else. If they choose to put it all into the upcoming operating budget, it would be a 3-4% increase. Another option could be to issue a bond package to include other renovations. Dr. Taylor would be concerned with tying it in to other potential items. He also thought they could ask the town to continue covering the operating costs even if their referendum goes down which may help to sway the vote. Mr. Yamartino did feel that they could offer separate line items in a referendum.

John Lyman School

Mr. Yamartino asked to have this added to the agenda because he believes that timing is critical on this. Mrs. Neubig has provided information about cost savings, etc. He reviewed that the last referendum asked the towns to modify the documents that formed the school district so that they had the authority to close the school and that was voted down. This leaves the district with the only option of asking the taxpayers to close the school. He would like to put together a 10-year financial proforma that shows all costs of operating the school, with all necessary capital improvements. He would also like to show all capital improvements that will be necessary at Brewster and Memorial as well as additional costs those schools might incur. Mr. Yamartino would like to see a referendum question in May that asks the taxpayers if they want to spend X dollars over the next 10 years to keep John Lyman School open or Y dollars over the next 10 years with that school closed. He believes that this needs to be on the May referendum because there are budget considerations for next year and the district has no direction with regard to John Lyman. Mr. Yamartino added that he does not want to go into this budget season with no plan to invest the necessary capital for John Lyman to remain operational for the next few years.

Dr. Schuch asked for clarification on what Mr. Yamartino was looking for and Mr. Yamartino explained that he would like to see the full cost of operation of John Lyman, including capital, debt service, staffing and operating expenses, for the next 10 years. He also suggested using a 3 percent interest rate for any bonding. Mr. Yamartino reviewed that it would cost \$1.3 million to renovate Memorial and Brewster to accommodate the increase from closing John Lyman. Dr. Schuch confirmed that the closing would occur in the 2022-2023 school year and they would include any budget considerations next year to execute the plan. Mr. Yamartino added that Dr. Schuch has expertise in classrooms and class sizes and asked for any recommendations he may have. He would like to have these projected budget numbers available to discuss in February and suggested possibly having the Finance committee take a look at them as well. Mrs. Neubig agreed that she can do that and Dr. Schuch will look at enrollment projections as well though they can be difficult out more than five years.

Mrs. Booth asked if the document would still need to be amended by referendum and Mr. Yamartino felt that it would not as they would be asking the voters to make the decision. Mr. Moore agreed that the charter would not need to be amended unless they want to create a procedure for how to close a school and that procedure could be to do that by referendum. Mr. Yamartino interpreted that that would mean two referendums, one to approve the process and another to close the school, which would add a year. Mr. Moore didn't suggest that that needs to be done now, but could be done in the future.

Dr. Taylor asked if it's possible to approve hypothetical numbers in a referendum, but he realizes that any budget is just a projection. He felt that the lawyers should take a look at that. Mr. Yamartino suggested that the wording be to approve the \$4.5 million for renovations to the schools, resulting in X dollars in expenditures over the next 10 years or to approve \$1.2 million for renovations to the schools, resulting in Y dollars in expenditures over the next 10 years. He felt that that was a concrete bonding question. Mr. Yamartino felt that, aside from fixed contracts, everything in a budget is an estimate.

Dr. Taylor asked how much is needed in capital improvements at Lyman and Mrs. Neubig reported that the number totals \$4.5 million. Dr. Taylor liked the idea of the full projections, but reminded everyone that this has never been just a budgetary question. He felt that nothing different has been done since the first vote was voted down and thought there are other avenues that may help assure this process. Dr. Taylor felt that if they had proposed two K-5 schools with no change in program that would have been approved a long time ago. He reminded everyone that people in Middlefield were upset about losing an elementary school and they have done nothing to address those concerns and no compromises were made. Dr. Taylor stated that if the public votes to keep John Lyman open, everything else they have planned, as far as grade configurations, etc., get thrown out of whack.

Mr. Yamartino reminded everyone that the board voted down the two K-5 schools scenario as it was more costly. Dr. Taylor felt that they have still not figured out what it looks like on a daily basis to be in a K-2 and 3-5 school and there had been concerns about that. Mr. Yamartino stated that the vote would be a budgetary question and would be done by majority of the full district, but Dr. Taylor felt it would need to be by town and would be happy to have a lawyer weigh in on that. Dr. Taylor emphasized that he is just trying to cover all the bases. He stated that he has heard people say they would vote against anything that would close the school and he would like to ensure that they are able to close the school as he feels it is the right thing to do. Dr. Taylor is concerned about the time frame not being long enough and thought they would get more voters in November.

Dr. Schuch asked if anyone objected to them doing the 10-year analysis so that the committee and the board can see the numbers, regardless of the timing of a referendum. Everyone felt it would be a good thing to have that information.

Mr. Moore also agreed that the other issues should run parallel to this so that everyone has a good understanding. Mrs. Booth felt that their jobs, as board members, is to represent the people of the towns and she feels like everyone is not listening to the people who want an elementary school in Middlefield. She also added that the townspeople never had the opportunity to vote on two K-5 schools. Mrs. Neubig explained that she has to submit any project applications by June 30th and they have until November 15th to provide referendum results to the state, however that narrows the district's ability to apply for projects. She explained that it would then take a full year to find out if they are approved and construction can start after that. Dr. Taylor also explained that the Brewster/Memorial renovations will total \$2.4 or \$2.5 million before state reimbursement. Mrs. Booth noted that she will fight for Brewster to get a separate cafeteria and gym if they are going to move forward with that plan.

Mr. Yamartino felt that they heard very loudly and clearly from the taxpayers and he felt that the Durham voters felt that the charter changes were a power grab by the board and the Middlefield voters felt that the board was eliminating the K-5 school in Middlefield. Dr. Taylor stated that there was no way to know the actual reasons for why people voted as they did. Mr. Yamartino felt that, regardless of what the reason was, the board does not have the authority to close a school and if they believe it is the right thing to do, they need to pass that onto the taxpayers. If a decision to close Lyman is not made in May, Mr. Yamartino felt that it will be open for at least two years and he cannot, in good conscience, go two years without doing the necessary capital improvements. Mr. Yamartino reminded everyone that they got a lot of grief for putting a new playscape at Lyman when they were planning to close the school. Mr. Yamartino understands what Dr. Taylor means by the day-to-day life in K-2 and 3-5 and felt that Dr. Schuch could make that work if they were to close the school.

Dr. Taylor summarized that they all agreed that something needs to go to referendum, either in May or November. He felt that the odds are more in their favor if they wait until November. Dr. Taylor doesn't feel that the public has a lot of trust in the Board of Education because they have made some big mistakes in the past few years. He thought that they should look to the full board to bring forward some type of time line at the next meeting.

Mr. Yamartino felt that they either need to offer the choice to the taxpayers in May or just come forward with funding the improvements at John Lyman. Dr. Taylor stated that there was nothing in the minutes from the last meeting that stated there are millions of dollars of expenses at Lyman in the next year. Mrs. Neubig reviewed that the list of improvements was from the study that was done by Silver Petrucelli and noted that most of the equipment at Lyman is already past its useful life. Mr. Croteau has done an amazing job keeping it running, but it could fail at any time. She added that it won't be long before they are no longer able to get replacement parts and this could become emergent pretty quickly.

Mr. Moore reminded everyone that they deliberately did not include the costs of improvements at John Lyman in the last bond issue. The capital needs at Lyman are real, but no one knows how long the equipment can actually last.

Dr. Taylor asked if the referendum can have more than one choice, i.e. two K-5 schools, and Mr. Moore felt all of the language would be tricky for a bond question and they will have to have the bond counsel

take a look at it. Mr. Yamartino reviewed that he did not support two K-5 schools due to splitting the staff and separating the students. He believes that if Dr. Schuch says it would be a better program if the kids were under one roof, the board should go with that.

Mrs. Booth reminded everyone that Dr. Serino would have loved to have been able to knock down Korn School and put up a new K-5 school so that all of the district's schools are on the same campus, however that would have been near \$35 million.

Mr. Yamartino felt that the Utilization Committee should have some recommendation for the full board by March or April so that a referendum question can be put forth. Dr. Schuch would be hesitant to recommend anything that went to the voters that tied grade level configurations to buildings and felt that the board would always want to be able to maintain the ability to do what's best for kids. He would prefer it be referred to as two elementary schools and not tie grade levels to that. Dr. Taylor did state that Middlefield voters felt that just having a 3-5 school did not mean they had an elementary school.

Mrs. Johansen agreed that she'd like to see the 10-year plan and Mr. Giammatteo would also like to see the 10-year information. He felt that the November time frame makes sense in terms of getting a wider response from townspeople.

Dr. Taylor reviewed that space is available in the high school to accommodate 7th and 8th grade, if necessary, and they could close a school without any budgetary increase. He did note that people were not in support of that in the past, but wanted to mention that that was available. Mr. Yamartino asked if Dr. Schuch has had any experience with that in the past and Dr. Schuch felt they would want to look at all options. From his experience in two previous districts, if you talk about moving 7th or 8th grade to the high school it becomes an emotional issue for families. In his previous district, all 7th and 8th graders were in the high schools and it is working because the students are separated. He does feel it's important to put all of the options out there, whether he recommends them or not. Dr. Schuch would always argue that if you have good teachers and a good plan, you can do anything but you do want parents to feel good and safe. He added that there may also be opportunities for additional savings by combining classes, offering upper level courses to younger students and extracurricular activities as well. Dr. Schuch would want to get everyone's input about those issues.

Mr. Moore reviewed that there had been a survey done with a lot of various options and Dr. Schuch could take a look at that. Mr. Yamartino also commented that people like the interaction of older grades with younger grades (i.e. third and fourth grades together at John Lyman), so he would think moving seventh and eighth would be falling in along those lines.

Public Comment

None.

Adjournment

Mr. Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Mr. Hicks, to adjourn the meeting.

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

Meeting was adjourned at 7:40 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First