

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education Utilization Committee met in Regular Session on Thursday, February 25, 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.

Board member present: Mrs. Petrella

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. Hicks made a motion, seconded by Dr. Friedrich, to approve the agenda, as presented.

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

Approval of Minutes - January 21, 2021

Mr. Hicks made a motion, seconded by Dr. Friedrich, to approve the minutes of the January 21, 2021 meeting, as presented.

In favor of approving the minutes of the January 21, 2021 meeting, as presented: Mrs. Booth, Dr. Friedrich, Mr. Hicks, Mrs. Johansen, Mr. Moore, Dr. Taylor and Mr. Yamartino. Motion approved unanimously.

Discuss next steps

A. Korn School building

Dr. Taylor listened to the Board of Selectmen meeting on 2/22/21 and asked if anyone else had any further information. Dr. Schuch stated that he and Mr. Moore are scheduled to meet with Laura Francis tomorrow afternoon. Dr. Taylor noted that there was a lengthy discussion on this topic at the Selectmen's meeting, but they seemed to struggle with what would be feasible to put in the town's budget at this point and how they would get approval. Dr. Taylor felt that the Board of Selectmen were overall in favor of moving forward and felt that they may ask for an extension of the timeline. They felt that they needed some type of financials for what it would take for them to have at least some functionality to it. The general feeling was that they needed to get a better handle on the financials before moving to a town meeting. Dr. Taylor felt that they have abandoned the idea of a full-scale renovation and that it would be more of a staged process moving forward. Dr. Taylor felt that the question for the district would be if they are willing to extend the timeline.

Mrs. Neubig spoke to the bond advisor today and when the first payment would be due depends on how the bond is structured. The financing can be structured to have the first payment 12 months out. Mrs. Neubig gave the example of the referendum in May, the bond being issued in July 2021 and the first payment being due in July 2022.

Mr. Yamartino noted that there would still need to be legal notices ahead of the May referendum so they would need to know in March or April. He felt that they should take the date of the referendum and back it up in time for the legal notice and public hearings and that would be the latest date for the Town of Durham. An alternative to that is to use capital reserves for the demolition which could be done in two additional years.

Mrs. Neubig stated that they would need time to have public hearings and legal notice and felt that April 1st would be the latest date for an answer from the town. It would be even better if this discussion could be part of the April 7th public hearing.

Dr. Friedrich stated that if the referendum approves the bond, the district is still not required to take it. That would mean they could still negotiate with the town after the referendum. He did not feel that the timeline for the town's decision should be linked with the referendum and that the district should hold the referendum and then figure out when they would want to go to contract.

Dr. Taylor feared that they would get a vote from the towns to fund the demolition of the building and then they hold a town meeting to fund the building. He felt that there would be a lot of the public that would not be happy with that. Dr. Taylor would like to see the town wrap up its issues before the referendum vote. Dr. Friedrich feared that if they wait, they would end up in the same position they are now. He felt that the only way the town would be pushed into making a decision is if the district has made a decision and taken action.

Dr. Taylor did feel that the March 31st deadline is the right timeline and he hoped that the town would hold their town meeting before the referendum vote. Mr. Moore mentioned that Durham's annual town meeting is after the district's budget is complete. Mrs. Neubig reminded everyone that a special referendum can be held for this issue, but there would be costs associated with it.

Mr. Yamartino noted that there is over \$50,000 in the budget to maintain Korn School and if Durham has no intentions in taking over those costs, the district needs to keep that in the budget and a possible \$25,000 additional to insure against vandalism and fire. He felt that they need to know if Durham intends to take over funding the building with the plan to eventually it over or not. Mr. Yamartino reminded everyone that the Town of Durham has had five years to consider this and the district voted last year to move forward with demolition of the building. Mr. Yamartino stated that if the town did not put the \$75,000 in their budget this year, he would cast his vote to move forward with a referendum or alternate means to demolish the building.

Dr. Taylor added that he did not hear the Board of Selectmen mention covering the costs in the upcoming year. He suggested that Dr. Schuch and Mr. Moore discuss that with Mrs. Francis tomorrow. Dr. Taylor summarized that the committee's intent would be to continue to move forward with a deadline of March 31st for any town decision and move toward the referendum in May. Mr. Yamartino explained that two-thirds of that cost is already in Durham's budget and the question would be if they want to absorb the other third of it.

Mrs. Booth asked if Durham has Mrs. Neubig's list of expenditures that would be necessary for the building. Mrs. Neubig explained that they do and it was from the feasibility study by Silver Petrucelli. Mrs. Booth felt that the town does know how much it will cost. Dr. Taylor thought they don't know the bare minimum costs to get them in the building and some people felt there was wiggle room in those numbers. He felt that they wanted to say that either way the town would be spending \$700,000, whether it be from updates to the building or demolition. Dr. Taylor added that they did not even throw out any hypotheticals at their meeting.

Dr. Schuch felt that the two-thirds/one-third argument that Mr. Yamartino mentioned really is the argument to be made with the taxpayers. He added that if the district said they would remove the \$75,000 from their budget, that might be attractive to the towns. Dr. Schuch felt that that would buy the town some good faith with the district. He felt that if the town couldn't pay the additional \$25,000, then they will be having the same discussion in five years.

Mr. Yamartino is not inclined to put \$25,000 in insurance toward a building that has no use for the district or the Town of Durham. If the town were to pay to maintain the building, they would need to be sure the building is insured as well. The full amount would be more like \$90,000, and Durham would be paying \$60,000 of that anyway. Mr. Yamartino would also want Durham to commit to holding a referendum during the same year to move forward with transfer of ownership. He added that they could also take ownership of the building without putting any money into it for another 10 years.

Dr. Schuch felt that the cleanest way would be for the town to take ownership and then, by default, the town would have to pay to maintain it and insure it. Mr. Moore felt that Durham's share of the debt service will be about \$50,000 a year anyway. Mrs. Neubig added that debt service on \$1 million with interest is \$87,900 per year.

Dr. Taylor again summarized that the district should not move any timelines and go to referendum in May. He felt it was quite clear that Durham did not want to take over the building without being able to present numbers to the public. Mrs. Neubig reminded everyone that if the building remains in the district's ownership, that could have a negative effect on any state funding for school construction projects.

Mrs. Petrella agreed with Mr. Yamartino and suggested that Mr. Moore and Dr. Schuch remind Mrs. Francis that the town is already paying anyway and it's just a matter of the remainder. Mrs. Neubig added that the district can redirect the capital reserve funds, however it would be an uphill battle to do that.

B. John Lyman School

Mr. Yamartino wanted to get an idea of the capacity at each of the district's buildings and how they would change. He felt that Dr. Schuch's suggestion to move eighth grade or preK to the high school was an excellent one. Mr. Yamartino would like to know if it's feasible to move both to the high school. That would leave the only remaining capital question to be the expansion of the cafeteria at Brewster to accommodate assemblies. He would also like to see the costs associated with just that as opposed to adding eight classrooms. Mr. Yamartino felt that the committee needs to start nailing all of this down to move forward in May. He felt that if it was delayed until November, that would delay the closing for

another year. He noted that the Meriden Hills Baptist Church is interested in taking over John Lyman School and utilizing it for a K-12 school which would meet all zoning requirements. If it is delayed for another year, their board has authorized them to move forward with another school.

Mr. Yamartino felt that the committee needs to settle on what they think is the situation to provide the best classroom experience for the students and the best environment for the teachers with all of a single grade under one roof.

Mrs. Booth reminded everyone that many people were highly against moving eighth grade to the high school. She felt that if you make enough people angry, they will not vote for the budget. She personally likes the idea of having preK in the high school, but wondered if it would make more sense to putting seventh and eighth grade at the high school. Her concern was about speech, OT and PT for the preK. Mrs. Johansen added that there would also be special ed preschool kids at the high school that would have to readjust to Brewster for kindergarten. Mrs. Booth added that the numbers from Silver Petrucelli are from 2018 and the cost of construction has really gone up.

Dr. Schuch felt that the preschool decision does not have to be made in the same timeline and reiterated that there would be a slight cost associated with moving it to the high school. As far as seventh grade moving, they did discuss that with the principals and it is probably feasible, however Dr. Schuch did not feel it was as clean and you would then run the risk of parents fearing six grade levels in the same building with the other six grades between three buildings. All scenarios include four buildings. Dr. Schuch reminded everyone that eighth grade at the high school was not his idea, but he does support it and believes it is a viable educational opportunity. Dr. Schuch does agree that kindergarten transition is a very difficult one, especially for children with disabilities.

Mrs. Neubig stated that they do have an estimate for bathrooms if they wanted to move preK to the high school and could get a quick estimate for a playground.

Mr. Yamartino would be fine with leaving the preK where it is for the reasons stated and he always wants to put the learning of the children as the number one priority. He feels that they would need to be sure to communicate the advantages to having eighth grade at the high school and that it's not just dollars and cents. He felt that it would allow eighth graders to take high school classes and that students can participate in band, chorus, theater, and sports. He also reiterated what Dr. Schuch had previously stated about the fact that it may encourage eighth graders to stay at Coginchaug rather than going to a private high school. He summarized that he would like to see the numbers for moving eighth grade to the high school with expansion of the cafeteria at Brewster.

Mrs. Neubig noted that the gym floor needs to be replaced at Brewster as well, currently at \$72,000. She also compared the options of six classrooms with no cafeteria to eight classrooms and a cafeteria, she would safely estimate that it would be about \$2.6 million for a cafeteria and 53 percent reimbursement. She would be willing to reach out to Silver Petrucelli for an estimate on a cafeteria only and agreed that the construction numbers are definitely going to change.

Mr. Yamartino felt it was important to stress to Silver Petrucelli that they don't need a whole new cafeteria, but just an expansion of what is there. Mrs. Neubig explained that the cafeteria and gym are the same space at Brewster. Dr. Taylor reviewed that they felt the extra space was necessary for full-school assemblies and enough cafeteria space for the expanded number of students with preK-2. If the plan is

only preK-1, Dr. Taylor wasn't sure the additional space would be needed. He does believe it makes sense to move eighth grade into the high school, but isn't sure that would play well in the community, especially associated with closing Lyman School. Dr. Taylor felt that they could always move to that configuration if the student population starts to increase again. Dr. Taylor felt if they wanted to get the closing of Lyman School passed, they should not try to move eighth grade into the high school because of all the push-back. He also felt that they should get this done in May, but the question would be the same about whether people want to close Lyman School or not.

Dr. Schuch reviewed that if eighth grade was not moved to the high school, all of the second grade would have to be at Brewster and expansion would be required. He wondered if the group opposing the eighth grade moving is a stronger force in the community than the group that would oppose a capital project at Brewster that, by capacity, isn't really necessary. Dr. Schuch liked the idea of more cafeteria and assembly space, but isn't sure what voters would think about it.

Dr. Taylor felt that the numbers could be reworked to make moving eighth grade to the high school more palatable. He reiterated that he fully in support of moving eighth grade to the high school, but he agreed that it would be a big PR issue.

Mrs. Petrella felt that one of the biggest ways to convince people of a particular scenario is the cost. She agreed that some parents will look at eighth grade, but money talks and if people are aware of the cost of each scenario, it will be a huge selling point. Mrs. Petrella also asked what they thought the referendum question would be in May.

Mr. Yamartino agreed about moving toward a single question for the referendum and explained that it had not been settled yet. He explained that it has to be an up or down question. One of the scenarios would not require any bonding and just allow for the closing of John Lyman School. A different question could be if they want to bond X dollars to close John Lyman and expand school B. There could also be a question regarding the board's authority to close a school. Another issue would be if the referendum needs to pass in each town or on a district level.

Dr. Taylor liked the idea of a very clean question of do you want to close Lyman School, with potential savings explained. He would be in favor of moving that forward to the full board. Dr. Schuch felt that that is the most prudent way to do it. He felt that the more complicated it is, the less likely it is to pass. Decisions about other scenarios can be put off and the question could just give the board the authorization to close the school, with the timeline to be determined. He noted that he had been trained that boards should be careful not to compel future boards to a decision that they don't execute. Dr. Schuch would like the most flexibility possible.

Mr. Moore felt that the simple question of closing the school would be the cleanest decision and everything else can happen at a later time. They can support that with financial information and he will ask the attorney if it has to be approved by both towns or not. Mrs. Petrella reminded everyone of the emotion attached to last year's vote and cautioned that it may feel to some people like a sneaky way to get around the original agreement between the two towns.

Mr. Yamartino felt that the question last year was about granting the board authorization to close schools, not a specific school. The towns said that the board didn't have the right to make that decision even though the board had already voted to do so. With this new question, they are, in fact, honoring the voters' request by asking if they want to close a specific school.

Mrs. Johansen agreed that it should be a simple question and not a bunch of different options. She added that she does not agree with eighth grade at the high school and the cost would not change her mind. She felt that some of the eighth graders are just too young to be in the high school.

Mrs. Booth asked if Mr. Ford got any push-back about the single grade configuration and Dr. Schuch stated that Mr. Ford was shocked at how little he got. Mrs. Booth wondered if the hard-core Lyman families are gone now that maybe don't know the history. Mrs. Booth recalled a meeting last year where some older people from Middlefield stated they didn't care how much it cost to keep an elementary school in town. Mrs. Booth also stated that she was shocked at the capacity at Memorial and wondered if there were empty classrooms there. Dr. Schuch wasn't sure about an exact number, but felt that none of the district's buildings feel like they're empty but none feel very crowded either. He stated that the principals are very comfortable with three grade levels at Memorial, but didn't feel there could be a fourth. Mrs. Neubig added that there are no classrooms in the portables at Memorial now. She noted that there is a lot of room at Memorial, but the decision was made to keep third and fourth at Lyman and sixth grade was moved to Strong.

Dr. Taylor wondered if it makes sense to combine some of these grades at Memorial in the future. He summarized that the committee will bring their recommendation to the full board to move forward with a simple referendum question of yes/no, do you want to close the school and be sure to do all due diligence of promoting why that would be a good thing. Overall, the committee members agreed. Mr. Yamartino also asked if there was money in the budget for a PR firm and Mrs. Neubig explained that nothing was specifically earmarked for that, but there is a potential surplus in the Purchased Services line which could be redirected administratively. She did budget \$15,000 for 2021-2022 for a public relations firm which could be removed. Dr. Taylor suggested that they have the board agree to pursue a PR firm.

Public Comment

Jen Cassillo tries to be open-minded and knows that the potential grade configuration may be in the distant future, but she feels that the more public relations and more focus groups, the better it will be. If this happens in the immediate future, it will have an effect on the contemporary kids who have been moved around a lot. She agreed that the less complex the question, the greater chance of approval.

Adjournment

Mr. Hicks made a motion, seconded by Mr. Yamartino, 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 7:23 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz
Alwaz First