

**MIDDLEFIELD BOARD OF FINANCE**  
***405 Main Street***  
***Middlefield, Connecticut 06455***

Minutes of the April 9, 2020 Regular Meeting  
Held via Zoom Video/Audio Conference

Jim Irish called the meeting to order at 7:02 pm.

Attendance:

Members

Others

X	Irish, Jim	A	Bailey, Ed
X	Kowal, Melissa		
X	Lowry, David		
X	Nick, Joel		
X	Skelps, Michael		
X	Wolak, Mary	X	Rusilowicz, Al

A=Absent

X=Present

Approval of the Agenda

Jim Irish explained that he modified the agenda slightly by adding an additional public comment section and revising the dates of the minutes to be approved.

Melissa Kowal made a motion, seconded by Michael Skelps, to approve the agenda, as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

Approval of Minutes from 2/13/20 Meeting and 3/12/20 Public Hearing

Jim Irish made a motion, seconded by Melissa Kowal, to approve the minutes from the 2/13/20 meeting and 3/12/20 public hearing, as presented. Motion carried unanimously.

Old Business

A. No real changes since last meeting - Al Rusilowicz

Al Rusilowicz explained that, with everything going on, he did not have a chance to prepare his normal summary, but he isn't aware of anything out of the ordinary.

## New Business

### A. Tax Suspensions - Anne Olszewski

Anne Olszewski explained that the suspense list is roughly \$5,000 less than last year, with the personal property list having a lot of home businesses that have gone out of business. Motor vehicle includes a number of people who have moved out of town, with a few that have passed away.

Melissa Kowal asked why some of the motor vehicle items have not been reported to DMV and the registrations canceled. Ms. Olszewski explained that registrations cannot be canceled, but the town can hold it up when they need to renew. The entire list gets reported to the DMV on February 3 and August 2. She added that DMV has now extended registrations to three years, rather than two. Ms. Olszewski explained that a tax bill is not removed until it is paid, even if it is on suspension. They will continue to get delinquent notices and are charged 18 percent per year.

Melissa Kowal then asked about Jimmy D's and Lake Side Day Spa. Ann Olszewski explained that she tried to work with the Health Department to get the spa's license pulled, but she didn't have an answer. As for Jimmy D's, that will be included in what goes to the collection agency. Ms. Kowal then asked if a lien could be placed on the properties and Ms. Olszewski explained that she can only place a lien on property, but not a business. That can only be done by the state with a UCC lien and only if the business is registered with the state. However, if the property owner tries to get a permit for any work on the property, the business bills have to be paid first. Al Rusilowicz explained that there is not a direct connection between the Land Use department and the Tax Collector. Ms. Kowal thought that the list could be provided to the Land Use office and they could look up the names. Ms. Olszewski stated that they could find the info on the website, however it will only show real estate. They would need to call the Tax Collector for any business tax information.

Jim Irish asked if the personal property list was higher or lower than last year and Anne Olszewski explained that personal property is \$5,055 and it was \$4,356 last year. She then realized that they are only \$1,000 less than last year, not \$5,000. Al Rusilowicz added that the town can take possession of personal property, but does not do that. Mr. Irish reminded everyone that the list is \$26,000 on a tax base of \$13 or \$14 million and is a very small percentage.

Mr. Irish also noted a recent letter to the editor concerning having a collection agency, and asked Ms. Olszewski if there had been any other complaints. She had not heard anything. Dave Lowry mentioned that when a person doesn't pay their taxes, their neighbors have to pick up the slack. There was some discussion about people "playing the game" and Ms. Olszewski stated that she cannot do payment plans, by state statute, but she can take partial payments.

Mary Wolak made a motion, seconded by Jim Irish, to approve the suspense list as presented by Tax Collector Anne Olszewski, consisting of \$5,055.63 Personal Property and \$20,658.17 Motor Vehicle, for a total of \$25,713.80. Motion carried unanimously.

### B. Tax Collector Department FY21 Budget Proposal - Anne Olszewski

Anne Olszewski explained that her budget is close to what it has been, with software going up a bit and decreases where she could. Salary for the tax collector is up 2.5 percent. Ms. Olszewski did increase the assistant's salary by \$500 as she had not increased it over the past two years. Al Rusilowicz mentioned that they do not want taxpayers to come into Town Hall to pay their tax bills, so they are looking at doing something with fees for electronic payment. Ms. Olszewski stated that they have no control over that, but

Mr. Rusilowicz stated that they will try to figure that out. They will also look into sending out envelopes with the tax bills with prepaid postage.

Mr. Irish thanked Ms. Olszewski on behalf of everyone for the fantastic job that she does. He did mention that they will have to talk about the collection rate at a later time and Ms. Olszewski reminded him that DMV registrations are now three years, instead of two years, and that will make a difference in the collection rate. She believes that that will lower the collection rate as more people will put off paying their taxes. Mr. Irish noted that Mr. Rusilowicz had made a comment at an earlier budget workshop that a third of property taxes are escrowed already. Ms. Olszewski will join the committee again in the next month or so to talk about the collection rate.

C. Discussion of support for Memorial School tennis/pickleball court reconditioning - Bob Yamartino

Bob Yamartino explained that District 13 had formed a subcommittee to study the playgrounds at all of the elementary schools and put together a 20-year capital plan. The most immediate need was getting some equipment at John Lyman for the Spring because their playground had been condemned, however that was put on hold with the corona virus restrictions. They also looked at the facilities at Memorial School and he showed a picture of the current layout. He reviewed that you can see cracks in the pavement on the satellite image.

Mr. Yamartino explained that they had a Board of Education meeting on Monday night (April 6th) and he presented their preliminary findings. Currently, there is a total of \$150,000 in the budget for playground equipment and court repair at Memorial. Based on bids that have been received, they will need approximately \$105,000 for the courts and \$70,000 for playground equipment. The Board of Education is on board with allocating that level of money. Mr. Yamartino had discussions with Ed Bailey, Jim Irish and Hannah Malcolm and the town budget is proposing to contribute \$25,000 to the court project as this will provide the town with an exceptional resource.

Mr. Yamartino went on to review the current court configuration which accommodates tennis for 16 people at a time. The new configuration would allow for one full-sized tennis court, eight pickleball courts, one full basketball court and three Four Square courts, all within the same footprint. There has also been discussion about having the pickleball courts be tennis courts as well. They are also hoping to make parking improvements when the school is renovated.

Bob Yamartino reviewed that with the courts costing \$105,000, Middlefield's share would be just under 50 percent if they contribute the additional \$25,000 (50% includes Middlefield portion of school budget contribution).

Melissa Kowal noted that the district had allowed the courts to fall into this disrepair and asked why they are not usable anymore. Mr. Yamartino agreed that the district did not maintain them, but explained that the taxpayers have refused to pass the school district's budget many times and always asked for the budget to be cut. Things like tennis court repairs were typically cut. There have, in fact, been many repairs made to the courts over time but the issue now is that the courts are 30-40 years old and the ground has shifted. There are now two options: one is to replace the entire facility at a cost in excess of \$300,000 and the other is to have the existing courts leveled and a new floating court surface installed on top of it which is what they are proposing.

Melissa Kowal also pointed out that there are large cracks in the parking lot as well. She also mentioned that the Board of Education has never come to the public to state that the courts were in disrepair, but cannot be done because of budget cuts. She believes that the district uses the money in their budget as they see fit and when asked to cut the budget, they find modest areas to cut something. Ms. Kowal asked what shape the facilities are in at the other schools and if they will be coming back for money in the years to come.

Mary Wolak asked if there was a capital plan moving forward and Bob Yamartino reiterated that they are looking to put together a 20-year capital plan for all recreational equipment for the entire district. He did note that the playground equipment at Brewster probably has 15 years left on it. The artificial turf at the football field is at or approaching the end of its useful life, but that money has been in the budget. Mr. Yamartino added that the school district does not have the ability to put aside capital like the communities do and they are limited to 1 or 2 percent of their budget to be held for capital improvements. Therefore, most of the district's capital improvements are done by bonding. (Note: Sec. 7-361 of state statues limits municipalities to capital/non-recurring fund yearly set-asides at 4 mills or ~ \$1.68M upper limit for Middlefield currently)

Melissa Kowal asked how much Durham was putting up for these improvements and Mr. Yamartino explained that Durham is not contributing anything from their town budget. And the reason that he asked Middlefield, and that he and Mr. Bailey believe this contribution should be supported is that this would be a resource that would be usable by the community as well as summer camp. He also mentioned that some of the members of the subcommittee had reservations that this would be used more by the community than the students because of the amount of recess time available. The superintendent has spoken to the principal, athletic directors and coaches and they say that they would love to put pickleball in as a sport to teach in gym as well as tennis. Alternatively, they talked about paving the whole area to provide more parking.

Joel Nick added that he researched pickleball and it is the fastest-growing sport in the country, especially for seniors. He felt that the social benefit would really outweigh the cost and he is in favor of the project.

Mary Wolak asked if this is going to become a trend, and Bob Yamartino stated that he could not speak for Durham. He did explain that someone had asked if Middlefield would be willing to contribute more than \$25,000 and he said no because that amount actually puts the two towns at an equal cost sharing.

Mr. Yamartino also explained that they had originally talked about pickleball courts behind the Community Center in Middlefield so that the town could control the use; however, the cost was very high. They also talked about installing them at Peckham Park, but the cost was high and they were not sure about the wetlands areas. The other issue with Peckham Park is that it would have to be open to everyone in the state. If it is on school grounds, it is only open to people from the district. Ms. Kowal asked how they intend to enforce that, and Mr. Yamartino explained that that has always been in effect. State Police can ask people to leave the area if they are not a resident just as they can at Lake Beseck.

Hannah Malcolm explained that the area would become a focal point for summer camp. Most activities take place in the cafeteria, so it would be easy for the kids to go out to enjoy that area. The tennis courts are currently not usable. She also believes that the townspeople would use the courts frequently as she has had many requests for that. Ms. Malcolm is also a certified health and physical education teacher and agrees that it is a piece of the curriculum. She believes this is a win all around, for the schools and for the town residents.

Mary Wolak felt it would certainly be more economical to pay the \$25,000 than to try to complete the project in any of the other ways. Bob Yamartino also explained that the new court surface would be porous and would be usable immediately after rain.

Jim Irish asked if there were pickleball courts in any of the adjacent towns and how much use they get. Hannah Malcolm stated that there are not very many, but she does know that Durham was also looking to install some, but have stepped back on that because of the price of the new surface. Ms. Malcolm felt that this option is a good choice. Mr. Yamartino thought there were some pickleball courts in North Branford, Wallingford and Meriden.

Mr. Irish also asked about the lighting and Mr. Yamartino explained that two of the eight lights still work and he felt that the others would if they replaced the light bulbs. He did ask Ed Bailey to ask the LED contractor for a cost, but he has not heard back yet so he is not including that in the budget. Mr. Irish stated that his understanding was that the town could offer the \$25,000 or zero, with nothing in between. Mr. Yamartino reviewed that the total cost is \$105,000 and the Board of Education had allowed for \$80,000. If the school had allowed for \$70,000, Mr. Yamartino would tell Middlefield to take it out of their budget and if Middlefield allowed for less than \$25,000, he would tell the Board of Education to take it out of their budget.

Melissa Kowal asked how many other recreation areas owned by the district are in this type of disrepair. Mr. Yamartino felt that the only other one in really bad shape was at John Lyman. That wood playground equipment had been installed 20-25 years ago by volunteers and was recently inspected and they were told it was no longer to code. The equipment was removed the following day which leaves John Lyman with nothing. Mr. Yamartino explained that there is also \$70,000 in the district's budget for playscape equipment at John Lyman. Brewster has a nice playscape that was fully upgraded five or six years ago, but they will be looking to add different items for kids with developmental disabilities. There are five tennis courts at the high school that are in very good shape as are the two basketball courts. The track is in good shape and the field will need to be replaced.

Ms. Kowal asked about spending money on the playground at John Lyman when it will be closed in two to three years. Mr. Yamartino stated that he was mistaken as it is \$50,000 for John Lyman, but there is no recreational equipment there at all. Ms. Kowal asked if they will get another opportunity to evaluate closing the school and Mr. Yamartino stated that they would but it probably won't be until November. Mr. Yamartino felt that the Board will ask the communities to give the board the authorization to ask the community to vote on a referendum to close a school. Ms. Kowal stated that she didn't feel they would see a return on the investment of \$50,000 for equipment at John Lyman when it is closed and she also wished that the district paid some kind of attention to the tennis courts. Mr. Yamartino explained that the courts were not totally ignored and had been repaired, but the underlying structure needs to be dug up and redone. Ms. Kowal felt that that would not be fixed with this new material. Mr. Yamartino explained that they will level the cracks and the new surface would float on top. If they were to resurface with asphalt, it would have to be dug up and replaced.

As for John Lyman School, Mr. Yamartino reviewed that they had not included critical items at John Lyman in the last bonding package because they were anticipating that it would be closed. They are now faced with replacing some of that equipment in this year's budget. Mr. Yamartino reviewed that the district is putting in money for the equipment at John Lyman as well as the court project at Memorial and playscape equipment at Memorial. Mary Wolak mentioned that they ran into this issue with the playscape equipment at Peckham Park as well. She also mentioned that the community could continue to use the playground equipment at Lyman even when the school is closed, but Melissa Kowal asked if they would

then have to continue to pay insurance on the property. Mr. Yamartino then mentioned that they do have a party interested in purchasing the school which happens to be a school itself. Ms. Kowal then summarized that they would be putting in a playscape that would get ripped out in a couple of years.

Jim Irish asked Dave Lowry and Michael Skelps for input and Mr. Skelps stated that Middlefield has a lot of great amenities, but not sidewalks or tennis courts. He does understand the financial impact of putting tennis courts at Peckham Park and felt that this option is much more amenable. He would be in support of this project. Mr. Skelps also noted that his father's community in North Carolina is restriping their tennis courts and turning them into pickleball courts.

Melissa Kowal did not want the board to think she is a naysayer on this, but she is just very disappointed that it came to this point in disrepair and is costing the town so much to upgrade it. Ms. Kowal hopes that the school district looks at other things before they get to this point. She does not feel that Middlefield shouldn't have this, but is just sorry to reach into taxpayers' pockets to fund it.

Mr. Yamartino also reviewed that Jim Irish, the chair of the Board of Finance from Durham, Ed Bailey, Laura Francis, Kathryn Serino and Bob Moore all met several weeks ago and talked about the upcoming budgets and they asked the school district to bring the budget in at a zero increase. The Board of Education is looking at that and there will be some cost savings because of the schools being closed.

Anne Olszewski asked if each of the courts will be enclosed and Mr. Yamartino explained that they would be. Hannah Malcolm added that the current fence will remain in place. Ms. Olszewski didn't see how the courts could be used simultaneously if they were not enclosed. Mr. Yamartino explained that the company did not advise to put a fence in between each court. Ms. Malcolm felt that they could co-exist pretty well.

Ms. Olszewski asked why Durham wasn't contributing to this project and Al Rusilowicz explained that Durham is already paying for two-thirds of it with their budget contribution. Bob Yamartino did ask Durham and the head of the Park and Rec department was in favor of it, but Laura Francis said that she had too many other priorities. Mrs. Francis did say that if the two towns were to ever put a fund together to support the two communities, she would be in favor of that. Hannah Malcolm added that signing up for court times could be done through Park and Rec and would be available for only Middlefield and Durham residents.

Ann Olszewski also had a problem with the children playing on the playscape at John Lyman for years and then, all of a sudden, it was no good. She wondered why it wasn't inspected every year. Bob Yamartino stated that they are inspected and the inspector said, this year, that it didn't pass inspection. Dave Lowry and Mary Wolak both noted that laws were passed and regulations have changed. Ms. Olszewski then asked when the installation of the courts and playground equipment will happen if the budget passes. Mr. Yamartino anticipates that it could be as early as September.

Melissa Kowal felt that the Lyman equipment feels like punishment because the towns did not vote to close the school. Mr. Yamartino reviewed that there are several hundred students with nothing to do at recess.

At this point, Jim Irish asked to close the discussion on this subject. The board will take up the capital plan at the workshop next Tuesday night. Bob Yamartino stated that he had asked the Board of Education to give him their level of support and they were all in favor of it and he is confident that that money will

be in the district's budget which will be finalized before the end of April. He then asked the Board of Finance if he had their support to move this forward.

Anne Olszewski commented that the courts are an awesome thing to have and, for \$25,000, Middlefield will get a lot of use out of it. She would just be concerned that the district would not keep them up. Melissa Kowal agreed and added that they are just not sure what kind of taxes will come in in July and January because of the current situation with people losing their jobs. She felt that this was a very difficult year to be adding something like this. Ms. Kowal hopes that the Board of Education can show them a plan for maintaining their facilities. Mr. Yamartino reiterated that the district is not allowed to carry a capital and non-recurring plan. Once they complete a plan, he will come back to the towns to ask for them to carry a capital line item of XYZ to start reserving for those items. An alternative would be to do bonding more frequently.

D. Budget changes and corrections since March public hearing - Al Rusilowicz

Al Rusilowicz had prepared a document showing all of the changes that have been made and he will forward that to Jim Irish for the board to discuss at Tuesday's meeting. Mr. Rusilowicz had also provided an updated Grand List.

Jim Irish showed the multi-year spreadsheet of the budget and explained that he will continue to update this spreadsheet.

E. FY-21 budget adoption timing - Jim Irish

Mr. Irish explained that they will meet with Rebecca Adams-Rieder about the Inland Wetlands budget next week and also discuss the capital plan. He reviewed that Ed Bailey's proposed budget did represent a reduction in the mill rate, however the capital plan is up \$120,000 over last year. The board has been asked to have the budget vote on June 8, 2020, which would mean a public hearing on May 21, 2020. Mr. Irish felt that the proposed budget should be finalized and published on the town's website for the public to review prior to the public hearing. He asked if the board would like to have a second public hearing earlier than that.

Dave Lowry stated that the Berlin Board of Finance is taking emailed questions about their budget and discussing the questions on Zoom as a form of a hearing. He wondered if that would be something that this board could do. Jim Irish felt that that could certainly be done and they could provide the log-in credentials as well for Zoom. He felt that the easiest way might be to send an email out to both political parties and they can spread the word as well as posting it on the town's website. Joel Nick liked that idea and hoped that one session could be by email and another one live.

Al Rusilowicz noted that the Town of Cromwell had an issue with a Zoom hacking and developed a protocol for receiving and responding to emails. He will try to locate that and forward that information.

Mary Wolak asked if slides will accompany the budget and Jim Irish explained that he was thinking of posting both the budget and the slides, then go through the slides during the second live public hearing.

Al Rusilowicz would like to push the revenue part of the budget off until the very last minute. Mary Wolak stated that the district's budget is supposed to be finalized by the end of April, so that will be helpful. That would leave the board a good amount of time. Mr. Irish thought that they could even just post the expense side to see if that generates any feedback.

F. Board of Selectmen meeting update

1. Resolution for BOF to determine Middlefield FY-21 budget

Mr. Irish reviewed that the Board of Finance has the authorization from the Board of Selectmen to make the final decision on the town's budget.

G. BOE Budget Updates

1. Discussion review from April 6 BOE meeting

Jim Irish reviewed that the Board of Education has been looking at ways to try to come in with a zero increase in net budget. One way would be to take more money out of next year's budget and another would be to apply savings from this year. Both of those options were talked about on Monday's meeting.

Looking at ways to reduce the budget, Dr. Serino met with her administrative staff and identified about \$200,000 of potential savings. Mr. Irish stressed that this information is preliminary and the Board of Education will adopt a budget number on either April 22<sup>nd</sup> or April 29<sup>th</sup>. The second area is to carry over this year's surplus into next year's budget and Mrs. Neubig has identified areas where there will likely be surplus, totaling nearly \$800,000. However, there will also be a loss in revenue of approximately \$110,000 associated with the school closure as well. The net surplus could be potentially around \$680,000. Normally, any surplus goes into the district's undesignated fund and is applied two years out.

Mr. Irish also noted that the Board of Education has already removed the \$120,000 for the field house storage building. That means that the Board actually has more than enough in surplus + reductions identified by Dr. Serino to get to zero, and still have money left for their undesignated fund. Several BOE members asked in the budget discussions if additional staff will be needed next year to help catch up from distance learning issues. The next Board of Education meeting is on April 22<sup>nd</sup> and will be held via Zoom.

Al Rusilowicz pointed out that the district has always carried a fund balance from two years prior for purposes of cash flow. Mr. Rusilowicz does not feel that that way of doing business is appropriate and this will be a complete change from that. Melissa Kowal stated that it is a little unnerving that people don't get to vote on the district's budget this year. Mary Wolak felt that it was probably unnerving to the board members as well.

Jim Irish added that Bob Moore is accepting email questions and comments about the school budget. Dave Lowry felt that the towns need to pay special attention to state revenues because something very bad could happen with that. He specifically mentioned ECS funding and the teachers' pension. Al Rusilowicz added that the employee pension plans could be down \$1 billion due to the stock market plunge, and they (the state) will come back to the towns for increased contributions. There was then some discussion about unemployment in the state.

Jim Irish asked if everyone has a spreadsheet program or if they would like to see the capital plan on PDF. Everyone agreed that Excel would be fine. Al Rusilowicz has a pared-down version of the spreadsheet that he offered to send out.

Public Comment

None.

Adjournment

A motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting. Motion was carried unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 9:13 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz  
Alwaz First