

MIDDLEFIELD BOARD OF FINANCE
405 Main Street
Middlefield, Connecticut 06455

Minutes of the August 27, 2020 Special Meeting via Zoom

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

Attendance:

Members

Others

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

A=Absent

X=Present

Lucy Petrella was also present at tonight's meeting.

Approval of the Agenda

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

Public Comment

Ed Bailey reported that there have been no new cases of COVID-19 in town for several weeks. There had been a bump up to 20 cases, but some of that could be reporting. There have been no deaths in town. Hospitalization levels across the state are very low, with only two people from Middlesex County. They do anticipate seeing an uptick in late September with the change in seasons and more people gathering indoors. Mr. Bailey felt that the recent storm was actually a vacation from dealing with COVID-19.

Approval of Minutes from 6/8/20 Special Meeting

Mary Wolak made a motion, seconded by Joel Nick, to approve the minutes from the 6/8/20 special meeting, as presented. Motion carried unanimously.

Old Business

Al Rusilowicz reported that the audit has been started and is being done remotely.

New Business

A. Review of Middlefield Storm Isaias Recovery Activities - First Selectman Ed Bailey

Ed Bailey reported that at on Tuesday, August 4th, 91 percent of the town was without electricity. Minor restorations were made on Wednesday and tree crews arrived on Thursday, with restorations continuing. On Friday, outages were in the upper to mid 60s and Saturday, down to the 30s. By Sunday noon, outages were down around 10 percent and the town was 99 percent restored by Sunday night. The damage was not as extensive as the town has had in the past and he credits that to the strong tree management program that exists in town. There were only approximately 10 roads partially blocked and maybe four that were fully blocked.

Both Durham and Middlefield had excellent communication with the Eversource liaison who actually lives in Durham. Some responses were slightly delayed. Mr. Bailey believes that they could have been a little faster on that. He added that he listened to the hearing today and it was mostly politicians piling on Eversource about their response and rates. He does not feel that Eversource has decreased staffing. Mr. Bailey explained that crews that usually help Eversource were mutually affected by the storm, so they had to get help from Canada. He felt that the bottom line was any time you have above-ground wires with trees next to them, there will be problems and that should be expected.

Ed Bailey added that they have done an estimate for the State so that they can apply for disaster relief and it is close to \$56,000. This should cover the cost of overtime, equipment, brush removal and tree work. They will also add the WPCA bill which was \$5,000. The State has reported that they will likely receive a presidential declaration of a state of emergency which will allow for 80 percent reimbursement from FEMA.

Al Rusilowicz added that Public Works had anticipated to be done with brush pick-up tomorrow, but that is not likely. So far, there have been about 200 truckloads of debris brought to the staging area at Strickland Road. The biggest single item that the town will be reimbursed for is the use of equipment, which is paid by the hour and is approximately \$23,000. Overtime labor is reimbursable, but standard labor is not. Contracted services are reimbursable as well.

Mr. Bailey noted that there were a couple of instances of trees coming down, causing minor damage to homes. He did note that wind speed reached up to 67 mph which is the highest recorded wind speed since Hurricane Gloria.

Dave Lowry asked about the intersections of Route 66, with Jackson Hill and Baileyville Roads, and if there was any way to have a switching system to get the traffic lights working. Ed Bailey reported that this has been a frustration for quite some time and DOT has said that the traffic lights can be run by external power sources, but they will not give the town permission to do that. DOT feels there are too many locations and their generators get stolen. Comcast did have generators at some poles that were, in fact, stolen. Mr. Bailey also stated that putting stop signs at the intersections is not a practical solution on a four-lane highway. In the past, they had used electronic signs to alert people to a traffic light not working but they were unable to get any of those this time. The State Police have advised the town not to do anything at traffic lights as that will move the liability to the town in the event of an accident. Mr. Bailey does intend to send a letter to DOT to ask them to provide guidance in writing. He also reported that EMS responded to approximately 14 events during the storm. Mr. Bailey also noted that no burn permits have been issued.

Joel Nick asked if Mr. Bailey or Mr. Rusilowicz could report on how Durham did with the storm. Mr. Bailey stated that they had 20-plus roads blocked. He felt that Durham has a much bigger tree problem than Middlefield and he credited Bruce Villwock, our tree warden, for that. He also credits Jon Brayshaw for stepping up the tree care program in town after the storm in 2011.

Al Rusilowicz also mentioned that two people wanted to file insurance claims against the town's policy because trees that they believed belonged to the town fell onto their property. The town's insurance carrier stated that the responsibility lies with the owner of the property where it falls, regardless of who owns the tree.

Mr. Bailey commended both the fire department and the public works department for their terrific work as well as emergency management and the team at Town Hall. They have come up with three pages of ideas of things to do differently next time. Lucy Petrella encouraged Ed Bailey to not be shy about using the emergency notification system. Mr. Bailey explained that communications were down as well.

B. Review of RSD13 Opening Plans and recent district planning efforts - BOE Member Lucy Petrella

Lucy Petrella reviewed that the superintendent and administrators have been doing a yeoman's job since March. All learning was switched to online in March which included finding computer programming, upgrading computers and training, how to handle grading, sports, graduation and transitions. They also provided meals for students in need. The bus contract needed to be renegotiated; plays and performances needed to be canceled, all while keeping parents informed. Union contracts needed to be renegotiated.

The focus then shifted to the end-of-year activities, summer school and the next school year. They have been in constant contact with the State Departments of Health and Education as well as receiving all of the governor's orders. The State has issued detailed guidance on every possible scenario involved in reopening school. They had to consider the role of nurses and how to handle related arts instruction, including music and physical education. The administration continued work throughout the summer. School officially started for teachers today and the students return next Thursday.

Mrs. Petrella reviewed the three options of reopening which included full, hybrid and distance learning. The district will reopen with the hybrid plan, consisting of two cohorts. Cohort A (A-M last names) will attend school on Mondays and Tuesdays, Cohort B (N-Z) will attend school on Thursdays and Fridays. Students will be home working online on the days they are not in school.

The district had been approached by Dolphin Days with an offer to provide before- and after-school programming which will be fully paid by the parents who take advantage of the service. They will be using Brewster School for that program. The YMCA has also offered to provide a full-day childcare program, primarily for the children of staff. This is contingent upon having enough students in the program.

Mrs. Petrella noted that they are talking about doing live broadcasts from the classroom for the children who are at home.

Cohorts will be kept together as much as feasibly possible to make it easier to identify who has come in contact with anyone infected. There are protocols set for when, and if, a case is identified and when, or if, school will need to be closed. Data is based on counties, not the entire state and will be available every week.

Students who are staying at home will have an intense and focused program. Testing will be done as it has been in every other year. The hybrid model will be reevaluated within a month to determine if that continues or if the district transitions to a full opening.

Mrs. Petrella then went on to review the issues surrounding sports at this point, with the ever-changing information.

As for financial issues, Mrs. Petrella explained that Kim Neubig is phenomenal and she and Dr. Serino have a sharp eye on everything. Mrs. Neubig renegotiated with the bus company and got 20 percent back for last Spring. Mrs. Petrella believes the district will be getting approximately \$380,000 from the State for COVID-related expenses, like PPE, cleaning supplies and staffing. They also just increased the pay rate for substitutes. Tents have been rented so students can be outdoors as much as possible.

The district is in the process of updating many policies and the superintendent search continues. The district needs to use up all other resources before applying to FEMA and have been told it will be at 75 percent reimbursement. They will focus on getting reimbursement for the meal program. Lunches will be available on the days when students are home as well.

The Board of Education has been meeting every week since July and may have a special meeting to talk about the recent CIAC decision. The superintendent, administrators and teachers deserve kudos for the phenomenal job they have done and are still doing.

Ed Bailey noted that storm reimbursement may be at a different percentage than the COVID-related expenses. He also noted that he has been on three conference calls this week with the superintendent, the health district, Laura Francis, the superintendents of Plainville and Southington schools as well as the town managers from Plainville and Southington. Mr. Bailey felt that Durham may be wanting to join the Health District at some point. He then went on to review all of the ways that the Health District has helped during this pandemic.

Melissa Kowal asked how the district is determining how much the students lost over the Spring and if the grades have all potentially fallen behind a half a year or a year. She asked if they will be able to accelerate the learning programs and/or identify areas of weakness. Lucy Petrella stated that they discussed that in the Spring and they decided to hold the normal summer school program and not require it. However, they will be hitting the ground running and will re-institute testing to find out exactly where the students are. They have also specifically designed a math curriculum for the district. Mrs. Petrella also stated that she has sat in on some lessons and has looked at the learning platforms as well. Mrs. Kowal noted that some parents that she works with are worried that their kids are not getting the benefit of the education that they would get if they were in the classroom. Mrs. Petrella also noted how important the IT department is now.

Michael Skelps expressed his appreciation for the Board of Education and the administration. He asked how the decision will be made as to what happens next. Mrs. Petrella felt that a lot of it would be determined by the State and the numbers at the time. The numbers will dictate which level the risk is. She believes that the reason they will look at it in October is to be sure people know that it will be constantly reevaluated. The push will obviously be to try to reopen the schools to be as normal as possible, but the safety and health of the children and the staff is paramount.

Joel Nick added that he knows that West Hartford, Wallingford and Farmington are also doing the hybrid model and will evaluate in early October. He does believe there will be a gap and one way to measure that will be to look at the October PSAT and SAT scores. The question will be how much of a decline

there will be. Mr. Nick added that they were very impressed with the online opportunities that the district's teachers gave to their kids. He does believe that a lot of kids checked out due to a lack of structure. Mr. Nick added that there is pressure on teachers with young families as well. His district has a lot of teachers who are taking leaves of absence and Mrs. Petrella stated that there were not a lot of staff members doing that in District 13. She also mentioned that there are not huge numbers of students staying home either.

Joel Nick also mentioned that he was in Avon the weekend after the storm and they still did not have power because of trees being down.

Mrs. Petrella stated that they examine test scores three times a year and compare them to previous years and other similar districts. She does believe there will be an effect from this going forward because nothing is as good as in-person instruction.

Al Rusilowicz stated that he heard just today that drug abuse, alcohol abuse and domestic abuse are up 20 percent nationwide because of the pandemic. He knows that that will flow down to the kids. Mrs. Petrella agreed and noted that a lot of parents just can't home-school their kids. She reiterated her respect for Dr. Serino and her administrative team for the whole restructuring of the education of the kids and the amazing system that has been put in place.

Ed Bailey explained that the school district is looking for a new superintendent and there is a link on the town's website to a survey. He added that he asked for a clone of Dr. Serino and Mrs. Petrella noted that she felt exactly the same. Mrs. Petrella added that Dr. Serino will stay until the end of December, but Mr. Bailey stated that he has had a conversation with her and she will not abandon the school district if a replacement has not been found.

Jim Irish thanked Lucy Petrella and Ed Bailey for providing all of the information tonight. Melissa Kowal also thanked Mrs. Petrella for her dedication.

C. Other Discussion Topics

Jim Irish congratulated Michael Skelps on his victory in the primary and wished him the best in the general election.

Mrs. Kowal also mentioned that she will not be at the September 10, 2020 meeting.

Dave Lowry mentioned that DMIAAB has had a large influx of waste and they shouldn't be surprised to hear that the tonnage has gone up. Jim Irish also noted that they may want to have a discussion with Kim Neubig about expenses as well.

Adjournment

Michael Skelps made a motion, seconded by Joel Nick, to adjourn the meeting. Motion was carried unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 8:55 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz
Debi Waz
Alwaz First