

MIDDLEFIELD BOARD OF FINANCE

405 Main Street

Middlefield, Connecticut 06455

Minutes of the February 4, 2021 Special Meeting via Zoom

Jim Irish called the meeting to order at 7:04 pm.

Attendance:

Members

Others

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

A=Absent

X=Present

Approval of the Agenda

Mary Wolak made a motion, seconded by Dave Lowry, to approve the agenda, as presented. Motion carried unanimously.

Public Comment

None.

New Business

- A. Discussion of upcoming proposed joint BOS/BOF meeting with new RSD13 Superintendent - Doug Schuch

Ed Bailey got confirmation that the meeting with the Board of Selectmen, Board of finance and the new superintendent will happen Thursday, February 11, 2021 at 7:00 PM. That will be the only item on that agenda. Mr. Irish also asked for a special meeting for Thursday, February 18th to conduct the board's regular business, including the review of the audit.

Mr. Bailey has given Dr. Schuch a tour of Town Hall and other facilities and has also met with Dr. Schuch and Laura Francis. Bob Yamartino has also met with Dr. Schuch a number of times.

Mr. Irish has drafted an agenda for the joint meeting and hopes to have Dr. Schuch discuss his background and goals after introductions. He felt they might want to discuss declining enrollment, Lyman School, Korn School and the fact that the Finance committee has no teeth. Mr. Irish does not feel that the Finance committee deals with anything of substance regarding financial issues. He felt that there are many people on the committee that could be of use. Mary Wolak felt that it would be a good idea to bring that up to

the board. Mr. Irish felt that Bob Moore doesn't want anyone stirring up the water and there are a number of people capable of doing that on the committee. He felt that Mr. Moore creates the agendas to include discussion and description of town issues rather than commentary on the education budget. Christine Geraci is the new chairman of the Finance committee.

Michael Skelps asked if the Finance committee is an issue for the Board of Education and Jim Irish explained that the board does not have an issue but the members of the committee wonder what they are doing. Mary Wolak asked where Middlefield's representatives fall on this issue and Mr. Irish explained that Bob Yamartino felt that there should be more done, but he wasn't aware of the other members' feelings. Mr. Yamartino has asked about the issue many times, but Bob Moore is the one who appoints the committee and structures the agendas. Mr. Irish agreed that it will be a decision of the full board.

Mr. Irish also suggested that they invite Bob Moore to join the joint meeting next week to be fully transparent. Everyone generally agreed to do that.

Dave Lowry asked if the district has had the audit done yet for last year and Jim Irish stated that it has been done and is on their website. Mr. Lowry felt that the members of the Finance committee should review that audit. Mr. Irish did a spreadsheet of the last eight years' audits, including budgeted amounts vs. spent amounts and he will forward that to Mr. Lowry. Mr. Lowry stated that his wife was disappointed because she thought that the Finance committee would have more of an advisory role.

Mr. Irish then reviewed the alternate options that Dr. Schuch has regarding district facilities in the future which would avoid almost \$2 million in capital expense. Mrs. Neubig will share the numbers with the board this week and they will then be available to the public. Mary Wolak noted that they are usually looking for ways to cut spending, however they want to maintain the quality of the education as well. She felt that the Finance committee could help with that as well and also noted that transparency has historically been the difficulty.

Jim Irish also asked if the Board of Finance wanted to divide and conquer on these issues with providing comments to Dr. Schuch. Mrs. Wolak stated that she would talk to him about Lyman and the fact that he needs to be able to sell whatever it is they want to do. Mr. Irish added that Dr. Schuch had reported that all of the school principals endorsed having eighth grade move to Coginchaug, from an educational standpoint as well as the interactions between students. Mary Wolak worried about the maturity level of the eighth graders and their safety. Mr. Irish summarized that this certainly isn't just an economic decision and it needs to be the right thing for the students.

Mrs. Wolak felt that sometimes the Board of Education isn't good at listening, and the issue with John Lyman is an emotional one and not a logical one. She felt that the idea of not having choice, that they felt that Middlefield was being taken over, and the curriculum were huge issues for people. Dave Lowry felt that the Board of Education should have settled the curriculum before anything else was even talked about. He felt that there was a lot of covering up about the difference between the two curriculums and the teaching level between the two as well as the testing that is done. He felt that the differences between the programs are night and day.

Jim Irish felt that Dr. Schuch needs to be made aware of why there was consternation, but the schools are moving forward with a single program and the choice aspect is becoming irrelevant. Mary Wolak felt that the message of using the facilities that we have right now will look better as well as not trying to close Lyman. Mr. Irish reminded her that option 3 does include closing Lyman. Dave Lowry also noted that there would need to be a \$4 million bonding just to keep Lyman open. He also mentioned that there is also not enough enrollment.

Mary Wolak asked if the district has a plan for what they will do with the Lyman building and Jim Irish explained that they are already looking at marketing options. He was also told that prospective buyers may even be touring the building now. Michael Skelps stated that he has heard some ideas about the

building, but nothing solid. Jim Irish added that the problem with doing anything with Lyman is that nothing can be done until September, 2022.

Mrs. Wolak summarized that she would give a history and some of the pitfalls about Lyman and be sure that they emphasize that the curriculum has not been lost. She added that the issue was defeated in both towns, not just Middlefield. Dave Lowry felt that that was because of the curriculum. Mrs. Wolak also wondered if a lot of students are behind because of remote and hybrid learning and Mr. Irish stated that he has not heard any discussion about that at board meetings.

Mr. Skelps wondered what would have attracted Dr. Schuch to the district in the first place, with declining enrollment and looking to potentially close a school. He also noted that education is costing more per student and the taxpayers are feeling the financial burden. Mr. Skelps would want to emphasize that, with all the priorities that Dr. Schuch has to juggle, cost control is huge. Dave Lowry added that it is getting to the point where graduating classes will be under 100 kids, but Mary Wolak added that that can be attractive to people coming into the district.

Dave Lowry thought that the district could do something more specialized at the high school that might attract students from other towns. With enrollment declining, there is a limit to what classes can be offered. He also felt that it might also benefit Coginchaug to bring in kids from under-privileged communities to help offset costs. Jim Irish felt that these kinds of ideas would be music to Dr. Schuch's ears. He noted that Bob Yamartino had mentioned revenue from Middlesex Transition Academy at the retreat and these other ideas could be equally opportunistic, given that space is available.

Dave Lowry stated that he got in trouble about 10 years ago when he commented that the Board of Ed's budget wasn't creative, and explained that he meant that they never thought out of the box. Mary Wolak mentioned that they will have to think out of the box as far as the new curriculum that will be required, including African American and Latino studies. Mr. Lowry wished that they could be ahead of those kinds of things. Michael Skelps wondered how Middlefield and Durham can attract more families with kids which would help with enrollment. Mary Wolak added that, for years, the towns have worked to not get additional kids in which would increase the cost. Mr. Skelps asked if he was wrong in thinking that if they got 10 percent more students, the cost per student would go down. Mr. Lowry didn't think costs would go up dramatically and Mr. Irish added that they are easily 10 percent below the recommended class level.

Mary Wolak explained that people are afraid that more kids means higher cost, and Michael Skelps stated that he was always baffled by that. Mrs. Wolak explained that Middlefield has a higher poverty level than Durham. Jim Irish will try to get data to share with Dr. Schuch about the population and population trends, number of families with kids, average income, etc. He explained that the district intends to propose a zero-dollar gross expenditure increase, but there is no proposed buy-down from a surplus or fund balance. That would result in roughly a 5 percent net increase to the two towns, which would mean 1.38 mills to Middlefield with the average taxpayer being taxed an additional \$222 or \$4.25 per week. Mary Wolak added that a revaluation is coming up next year, but Dave Lowry felt that that would result in a drop in the mill rate.

Dave Lowry added that Middlefield could probably go back up to 99.5 percent tax collection rate which would result in \$270,000. Michael Skelps asked where everyone went to school and Dave Lowry, Mary Wolak and Michael Skelps stated that their kids all went to Coginchaug. Mr. Skelps went to high school in a very small town in Virginia, with about 113 in his graduating class. He noted that he felt like he got a very good education and he is all about supporting a small school with a quality of education and experience. Mrs. Wolak stated that a lot of students leave the district, particularly in high school. Dave Lowry added that the district is not going to be able to compete with Choate.

Jim Irish stated that Bob Yamartino had also stated that, because the cost per student is so high, a town can offer a stipend to families to send their student elsewhere and reduce the town's overall education

cost. Dave Lowry added that he knows that Bob Moore is aware of the fact that kids are leaving the high school, but Mr. Lowry doesn't feel that they should discourage students from pursuing trades or other schools.

Mary Wolak asked if anyone would mind if she asked Dr. Schuch about any delays in learning and Jim Irish felt that she could certainly ask, but he may not have the full answer. Mrs. Wolak also felt that the mental health issues are huge.

Jim Irish reminded everyone about the partnership with China and how those sorts of things are great exposure and experience for the students. He felt that the Board of Finance should let Dr. Schuch know they are behind him on things like that as it will improve the marketability of both the schools and the communities. Mary Wolak added that Dr. Serino had done a lot with STEAM and also felt that more could be done to help students find a job.

Mr. Irish summarized that Mrs. Wolak will talk a bit about Lyman, Mr. Skelps will talk about enrollment and cost control and Mr. Lowry will talk about opportunities for revenue enhancement, including approaching local businesses to help enhance the curriculum. Mr. Irish added that he will explain that the people on the Board of Finance have the best interests of the community at heart. He felt that their mission is to maintain and improve the quality of life in Middlefield. Mrs. Wolak also mentioned that the district doesn't send any students to Thomas Edison anymore and maybe the district could concentrate on math and science. Jim Irish added that Dr. Schuch's philosophy is learner-centered education and felt that there is a lot of opportunity in the community.

Jim Irish asked everyone to think about keeping their remarks to five to seven minutes. He will reach out to Mrs. Kowal and Mr. Nick for their thoughts as well. Mrs. Wolak appreciates the fact that Dr. Schuch is going to meet with them.

Adjournment

Dave Lowry made a motion, seconded by Mary Wolak, to adjourn the meeting. Motion was carried unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 8:24 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First