

MIDDLEFIELD BOARD OF FINANCE
405 Main Street
Middlefield, Connecticut 06455

Minutes of the February 11, 2021 Joint Special Meeting with the Board of Selectmen
via Zoom

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

Attendance:

Members

Others

X	Irish, Jim	X	Bailey, Ed
X	Kowal, Melissa	A	Bufithis, Carol
X	Lowry, David	A	Yamartino, Robert
X	Nick, Joel	X	Schuch, Dr. Doug
X	Skelps, Michael		
X	Wolak, Mary	X	Rusilowicz, Al

A=Absent

X=Present

Dr. Doug Schuch, Superintendent of RSD 13, was also present tonight.

Public Comment

None.

Introductions and Discussion of Goals and Issues with New RSD 13 Superintendent - Dr. Doug Schuch

Dr. Schuch thanked everyone for the invitation tonight and explained that he officially started in the district on January 4th. He added that he had originally applied for the job last August and he was appointed at the end of October. He stated that he is in his 31st year of public service. In his first four years, he served as an officer in the Navy. He spent the last 26 years in public education in the State of Virginia up until now. He held a number of teaching and administrative roles in three different school districts, but was the superintendent of Bedford County Public Schools for the last 11-1/2 years which is a district of around 9,000 to 10,000 young people, spanning across 760 square miles. Dr. Schuch spent most of his years growing up in western Pennsylvania, so the weather is not foreign to him but it has been a while.

Dr. Schuch and his wife, Denise, have been married just over 26 years. They have a dog with him and two adult daughters, 19 and 22, who are both full-time college students in Virginia. Their oldest daughter is scheduled to graduate in May. Dr. Schuch and his wife are actively looking for a house in the area, but

there are very low inventories at the moment. Their goal would be to live in the district in a home that is acceptable to Denise who agreed to move here. Denise grew up on Long Island and still has quite a bit of extended family there.

Dr. Schuch added that Ed Bailey was one of the first people he connected with back in November and they have continued to stay connected through regular meetings. Mr. Bailey recently gave Dr. Schuch a tour of the town's facilities and a short drive through town.

Jim Irish explained that the Board of Finance is a group focused on maintaining and improving the quality of life in Middlefield. Everybody works in a nonpartisan basis with the best interests of the community in mind. Middlefield is a town of about 4,400 people and is about 60 percent the size of Durham. There are 1,700 households and offer about a third of the students to the district. The age distribution is about the same as Durham, with both communities getting a little older. From an income point of view, the mean household income in Middlefield is about 77 percent that of Durham's. About a third of the home sales in town were above \$300,000 and Durham had about two-thirds. The mill rate in Middlefield is currently at 32.23 and the Board of Finance has done their best to try to keep that constant. The town is fortunate to have a tax collection rate above 99 percent, mostly due to the tax collector's diligence. The town's budget process begins in the beginning of March, with the referendum being held one day after the district's.

Mr. Irish added that the school district represents 72 cents of every tax dollar spent in Middlefield. The 3.66 percent increase that was proposed in the district's budget last night would represent about 1 mill without considering the shift in enrollment.

Mary Wolak stated that she is a recreation therapist who works for the State of Connecticut at Connecticut Valley Hospital in the Addiction Services Division. She also has a background of two parents that were teachers and she had two children go through parts of District 13. Both of her children had learning disabilities, so she is also familiar with the special education side of things. Mrs. Wolak has been in Middlefield since 1986, but feels that she is still a newcomer.

Mrs. Wolak stated that there is a concern about some delays because of online learning and also mental health issues. She did not know if this is being seen in the district, but asked if it was a potential issue with the budgets to come. Dr. Schuch noted that he has worked in two districts through the pandemic and he thought it was fair to say that it goes back to the Spring of 2020. He didn't have any data that actually captures where the district is specifically but he does feel that the larger concern is social isolation and the mental health piece. He does not believe that anything in the proposed budget took those issues on in a serious way. The gross budget is actually 1 percent lower than last year and Dr. Schuch felt it was fair to say that they are still figuring out what they need to do. Some federal money may be available to assist with that. He added that there is also significant money being proposed by the Biden administration for school districts, but he is cautious about exactly what that would mean to the district. Dr. Schuch also stated that they have made a deliberate effort to focus on mental health as students return to school.

Mrs. Wolak also wanted to be sure Dr. Schuch understood that there are a number of people in Middlefield that do not want John Lyman School closed. A vote was taken last year and it did not pass in either town. Mrs. Wolak felt that it was logical on the financial side to close the school, but the residents of Middlefield were concerned about only have one school in town. They were worried that that would lower property values, etc. The other thing that came up was the two-curriculum choice that the district had and how things were done differently at John Lyman. She does understand that the curriculum has now been melded into one. She felt that the marketing for closing the school needs to be done a little better, and it might go easier this time because of the curriculum change. Dr. Schuch has met with over

100 people now, asking them about strengths, challenges and the future direction of the district. It may not be surprising to anyone that this exact issue has come up in every single conversation. Dr. Schuch knows that it is a stumbling block to moving forward. What has concerned him the most is what he heard from a group of half a dozen realtors that work in the area that felt that the uncertainty of that is playing a role in families' decisions to buy homes here. Dr. Schuch also mentioned that, as this situation lives in limbo, some necessary maintenance to John Lyman has been deferred and he believes that they will begin to see a very clear picture of what those investments will cost and to ask the communities to either keep the school open for a long time and invest in it, or move in the different direction. He added that keeping the school open long-term will have some very interesting effects on the mill rates. Dr. Schuch also believes that timing on this could be as early as late Spring of this year.

Dr. Schuch was involved in closing two community schools in his prior district and he is well aware of how it tears the community apart. He has great empathy for a community that identifies with a school and the emotional loss that comes along with that. Mrs. Wolak stated that it is an emotional issue, but she can see both sides. She encouraged him to be sure to cover the emotional points as well as the numbers. Dr. Schuch explained that one of his mantras is that he likes to make all decisions based on the impact to the learners, and he is aware there are two sides to closing a school. In his experience, the children have zero problems making the adjustment. He added that if budgets are tight, it ultimately comes down to redirecting resources and putting that money into teachers and programs rather than into buildings. He also noted that they would gain some efficiencies as well and, due to declining enrollment, that would be responsible government. Dr. Schuch did agree that convincing the adults would be difficult, but uncertainty can be even worse. He does believe it's time for the Board of Education and the voters to make a decision.

Melissa Kowal noted that she has been on the board for three-and-a-half years. She agreed that children are highly adaptable and that the parents are highly emotional. She felt that emotion needs to be removed from all important decisions. Mrs. Kowal is a third-generation owner of the family farm in Woodstock, but lives in Middlefield. She works as a territorial sales manager for Linemaster Switch in Woodstock. She does believe she offers Yankee common sense to the board. Mrs. Kowal would like to see Dr. Schuch and his team work on a comprehensive facilities audit, which she believes will help prove the point that Lyman is in disrepair and that money is necessary to repair it. She believes that the pandemic has taught everyone that their jobs can be done from home, and children can learn at home, which shows that it is more about the curriculum than the surroundings. Mrs. Kowal stated that she would not be against closing John Lyman if that is in the best interest of the district overall. She felt that if the district paid closer attention to the facilities, some of the major repairs may be able to be held off.

Dr. Schuch explained that he was part of two facility audits in his last district, and the challenge became that the taxpayers did not like the number that came back as to what they should be investing. He does feel it would be a good exercise here in the district.

Michael Skelps welcomed Dr. Schuch to the community and noted that they have a lot in common. They both spent more than 20 years in Virginia. Mr. Skelps grew up in Clark County and attended a school system very much like District 13, with a graduating class of a little over 100. Both of them graduated college in 1990, both were Naval officers, both of their wives are from Long Island and both of their last names start with an S, have six letters and one vowel. Mr. Skelps raised two children that both went through District 13, with one being special needs. They support the district and recognize the importance of it. He noted that there has been declining enrollment over time and he would love to see that reversed at some point. Even with a flat budget, that comes out to mean a higher cost per student, and everyone feels that. Connecticut has some of the highest tax burdens, including sales tax, property tax, gasoline

tax, etc., and Middlefield is not quite as affluent as Durham. Mr. Skelps agreed with spending money in a smart way, on teachers and programs. He explained to Dr. Schuch that he will see the pressure from the voters when the budget comes to a vote. Mr. Skelps wished Dr. Schuch well and agreed that he wants a good, high-quality education for the students, including all aspects, with the financial piece just behind that.

Dave Lowry explained that he has been on the board the longest, coming up on 10 years. He and his wife have been in town for 30 years and have raised four children and still has one son at Xavier and his daughter at Coginchaug. He has been very happy with the school system and all of his kids went through the Lyman program. Mr. Lowry explained that there is a lot of high-tech manufacturing in the area and they may be able to contribute to some type of specialty school at the high school. Other schools with declining enrollment have done that, and actually built wings on their high schools and brought kids in from other communities. Mr. Lowry felt that that could help with diversity, but would also bring new talent and a reason for people to want to be at the high school. He felt that this may be a real opportunity for Dr. Schuch to do something really special. Mr. Lowry explained that he is a 35-year Teamster and his wife is a director of auditing and is on the district's BOE Finance committee.

Joel Nick explained that he is a long-time educator and teaches AP Economics at Farmington High School. His wife is a high school math teacher. They have two children in the district and have been pleased overall with their education. He is also the debate team coach for District 13 and his wife runs the ski clubs for the schools and is a math tutor as well. Mr. Nick asked about organizational change, and noted that he agreed with Mr. Lowry about Shepaug High School being a success story. Dr. Schuch explained that he is in the transition phase and can't be sure how he will do things yet, but he is a big believer in strategic planning. In a past district, they did three major organizational changes as a result of the strategic plan. He is an advocate for learner-centered education and is very active in Education Reimagined and the National Superintendents Association. He has visited quite a few transformative learning environments across the country. Dr. Schuch felt that the current educational systems are rooted in a model from more than 100 years ago that was trying to prepare kids for assembly line jobs, and that is not the current workforce. He believes it will have to begin with a culture change because it can't be mandated by a Board of Education or a superintendent, and will require buy-in from all stakeholders. Dr. Schuch felt that he can't do the work without the support of the younger learners and the teachers. Without teachers buying in, it won't go anywhere. He does feel that it will take a while to get off the ground, as he needs to build relationships first and beat down the traditional hierarchies. Dr. Schuch feels that the children see a bunch of adults that care about them and aren't wrapped up in titles or responsibilities. He added that everyone is a learner and they can all learn from each other. He also noted that people will not want to talk about this work until some of the big hurdles are overcome, including the Lyman closure, and added that that work will not cost more. The role of the teacher will change from being the context expert and instructor to more of the coach or facilitator of the learning that is initiated and owned by the learner themselves. That also means that administrators, superintendents and board have to give up some of their power for that to happen.

Jim Irish then explained that he retired from United Technologies six years ago and has been a member of the Board of Finance for about as long as Dave Lowry. Mr. Irish started his post-graduate career as a strategic planner for General Electric. He felt that Dr. Schuch has provided excitement to the board about the opportunities for transformation in the district. Mr. Irish is also a member of the Finance committee and felt that they haven't been as engaged as they could be. He noted that there are some pretty strong folks on the committee that could help Mrs. Neubig to evaluate some of the opportunities that come up, in terms of gathering information, vetting the information, and helping to sell the decisions to the communities.

Ed Bailey stated that Bob Yamartino sends his apologies for not attending the meeting tonight and Ms. Bufithis was under the weather. He invited Dr. Schuch to attend a Board of Selectmen meeting to meet Ms. Bufithis. He felt that all of the comments from the Board of Finance were very much on point. Mr. Bailey also noted that their relationship with the school district has been excellent and grown stronger over the years.

Al Rusilowicz reported that he has been the Finance Director for four-and-a-half years now. He has been a CPA for 41 years and was the auditor for Middlefield for about eight years. He does his best to stretch every dollar possible for the taxpayers of the town. Mr. Rusilowicz invited Dr. Schuch to give him a call, should he ever need any financial information from Middlefield, and noted that he works closely with Mrs. Neubig and Beth Moncata in Durham.

Mr. Irish thanked Dr. Schuch for his time tonight as well as his insights, and Dr. Schuch stated that he is looking forward to working with everyone.

Adjournment

Mary Wolak made a motion, seconded by Melissa Kowal, to adjourn the meeting. Motion was carried unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 8:22 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First