

REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 17
BOARD OF EDUCATION
SPECIAL MEETING
Community Input on the 2015-2016 Budget
March 17, 2015

A meeting of the Regional School District No. 17 Board of Education was held on March 17, 2015 in the Central Office Gymnasium. Board of Education Chair, Sue Twachtman, called the meeting to order at 6:32 PM.

***Members Present:** Kathy Brown, Becky Valenti, Karen Perry, Dan Chase, Susan Dean (arrived at 6:33), Michele Amendola (arrived at 6:38), and Sue Twachtman*

***Members Absent:** Joel D'Angelo, Amy Jacques-Purdy, Jeannie Young and Brian Gamache*

***Also Present:** Superintendent of Schools, Howard Thiery, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Dr. Holly Hageman, and Director of Fiscal Operations, Martha Vaughn, and Board Clerk Larissa Johnson*

***Visitors:** Approximately 75*

Call to Order/Opening of Meeting

Board of Education Chair, Sue Twachtman called the meeting to order at 6:32 PM. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Public Input on the 2015-2016 Budget

Aydin Caginalp of Haddam addressed the Board. He asked about the budget allocations between the three elementary schools compared to their enrollment and asked the Board to look at the discrepancies between the three elementary schools.

Sabrina Houlton of Higganum addressed the Board. She said that she is a parent of students at BES and HKMS and that she wanted to come out to show support for our schools and for the Board of Education.

Lily Bucko of Higganum addressed the Board. She is a student at HKMS and she spoke a little about herself and about how HKMS is setting her up for success and said that she felt that education is worth the money and is fortunate to attend a school that provides so many opportunities.

Erica Fleig of Higganum addressed the Board. She is a parent of students at HKMS and HKHS and said that she has a lot of respect for the challenge that lies ahead of the Board of Education and acknowledged that it is not an easy job. She says that she sees this year as a transitional year and she suggested that the Board consider leveraging risk control professionals to see if they can improve upon the current insurance situation. She echoed previous speakers in their support for our kids and said she is encouraged by the forward-thinking ideas being put-forth in the budget.

Aydin Caginalp addressed the Board again. He asked about the Special Education budget and the significant increase for non-public tuition and Special Education salaries and paraprofessional salaries. He reviewed the salary lines for Special Education teachers and paraprofessionals for KES, BES, HES, HKMS and HKHS. Superintendent Thiery explained that BES now has three Special Education programs in place which are district-wide programs: a preschool (which is programming required by the state of Connecticut), a Learning Center and a new BCBA program. Superintendent Thiery also explained that as kids get older, some do not need as much assistance which results in a lower cost for Special Education at the middle school and high school levels. Aydin Caginalp asked about how much is reimbursed and Superintendent Thiery responded that there is a federal grant, IDEA which gives some reimbursement based on district size and ability to pay,

and a state-funded Excess Cost Grant (ECG) which reimburses 70% of any individual Special Education student costs that exceed four and a half times the per pupil expenditure in a district.

Arthur E. Collins of Higganum addressed the Board. He shared the experience he had with his child's learning disability and expressed his appreciation for the District's excellent Special Education program. He asked about the bus transportation negotiations and how the transportation renewal will affect this budget. He also said that he felt that learning world languages from a young age is very important and that the best time to learn language is at the elementary level to be competitive globally.

Earle Decker of Higganum then addressed the Board and suggested that the Board consider working with a consultant to look at the declining population and building use and track enrollment over the next few years.

Peyton Frolich of Haddam, an HKMS student, addressed the Board. He said that education is a vital part of knowledge, which tax dollars support. He said that education develops our minds and prepares the next generation for success in the world. He said that schools enlighten the imagination and help students to innovate the world and that by supporting our schools, we are devoted to the welfare and success of students and give them the opportunity to do something big.

Sabrina Holden addressed the Board and asked about whether the ninth grade level math instruction for eighth grade students could be offered at the middle school, rather than bussing students during the day to the high school for instruction.

Jeff Lord of Higganum addressed the Board and said that his family does not have children in the District, however he feels that the schools and students are an important asset of the town and it makes the town and community thrive. He said that the District has great Special Education programs and that all kids deserve to have what is necessary for them to learn and also that World Language is important and that he wishes it had been available to him at a younger age. He also encouraged the Board to consider using technology to create efficiencies within the District and save money.

Caryn Luneau of Killingworth addressed the Board and suggested that the District should keep the World Language program at the elementary level to stay competitive with Top 20 schools which have language programs at the elementary level. She said that she called several area schools as well as some leading school districts in the state to confirm that they still offer world languages at the elementary level. She also mentioned that perhaps world languages could be offered as an extra-curricular or for a trimester. She added that world languages are more than just communicating, they bring a sense of cultural diversity as well.

Michael Kelly of Higganum then addressed the Board. He said that there are many areas where we can consider being more efficient with spending, however he felt that one of the last places to cut is in the school district. He said that one of the key components to his decision to live in town was the school system and that it is something that most people consider highly when moving to a community. He said that the towns would have a smaller tax base if schools were less competitive or attractive to newcomers as the school system attracts population.

Jen Maxwell of Haddam addressed the Board. She said that she is an HK grad and chose to stay and raise her children in town because of the school system. She is concerned about elementary school teachers and paraprofessionals being cut as well as about class sizes and student-to-teacher ratios.

Steve Craig of Haddam addressed the Board. He thanked the Board for their hard work and said that the school district is a major attraction for moving to town. He encouraged the Board not to become too concerned with external pressure and tax issues. He said that he feels that the town is not getting its fair share under the Excess Cost Grant (ECG) and that members of the community need to help Selectmen and State Representatives to petition the state to increase educational reimbursement because the formulas calculating ECG reimbursement haven't been corrected. He also suggested that there needs to be action taken to raise the tax base in town, which he said was the way to improve our taxes. He said that parents are very interested in the Board not cutting funding and that education is critical. He said that the Board should be prudent about cutting schools and leery of looking too closely at a downward population trend and speculative about where the trends are heading long-term. He said that a lot of parents do not want tax issues to be addressed strictly through the Board of Education. He also said that the issue is not about cutting costs to save taxes and then see education decline. He said we have to be a lot more innovative and have more innovative solutions.

Carrie Howes of Higganum addressed the Board. She is a parent of three students in the District and an HK graduate. She thanked all of the Board members and said that it is a hard job and that Board members do not hear praise from the community as much as they should. She said that she is proud to be a Higganum resident and that the School District is excellent. She said she knows the task of setting the budget is very hard and that she hopes they can get creative in how to cut spending and that education is one of our most important expenses. She added that taxpayers need to know what their money is supporting.

Aydin Caginalp addressed the Board again. He said that concerned taxpayers do not want to impair education, but want to maintain quality of life. He said the number of business opportunities in Haddam are limited and there are very little opportunities to cut expenses in Haddam, where the budget will be hit hard. He said he is searching for answers and that hopefully through this process, we can come up with the best answer.

Michael Kelly addressed the Board again and said that the town should look at increasing the tax base and that we don't want to diminish the public school system, which is what attracts people to town and that it is our one marketable asset.

Erica Fleig addressed the Board again. She expressed concern regarding the proposed cut of the late bus at the high school and students hanging around in the school after hours, particularly Freshman and Sophomores.

Superintendent Thiery announced that he will be doing Budget Presentations at each school across the District, giving the public an opportunity to come and learn more about the budget.

Adjournment

Board Chair, Sue Twachtman called for the meeting to adjourn at 7:26 PM.

Respectfully submitted,



Larissa Johnson
Board Clerk

Approval:  Date: 4-7-15
Becky Valenti, Secretary