

A Special Meeting of the Regional School District 14 Board of Education was held Monday, May 9, 2016 in the café at Nonnewaug High School, 5 Minortown Road, Woodbury, Connecticut.

Present: Board members George Bauer, Carol Ann Brown, John Chapman, Charles Cosgriff, Michael Devine, Janet Morgan, Mary Ann Van Aken and Pamela Zmek. Also present were Region 14 administrators, faculty and staff, including but not limited to: Dr. Anna Cutaia-Leonard, Wayne McAllister, Alice Jones, Eric Bergeron, Susan Ruddock, Holly Wrenn, Kim Culkin, Michael Rafferty, Christina Fensore, Bill Nemece, Susan Greene, Pamela Sordi, Jodie Roden, Katie Yocis, Maria Duncan, Amy Perras, Janet Hampton, Wendy Yatsenick, Jane Martellino, Phil Pagano, Joy Geraci, Maggie Gildea, Donna Marcinek, Doriene Wester, Debbie Massimin, Tricia Dannenhoffer, Kate Aseltine, Melissa Colby, Kathy Grillo, Tim Zeno, Leeza Desjardins, Sharon Gomes, Sandy Snabaitis, Don Marsh, Christy Koukopoulos; also, Bethlehem Selectman David Deakin; Woodbury First Selectman William Butterly and Board of Finance Chair Alex DeSorbo; about fifty additional members of the community, and board clerk Deb Carlton.

Mr. Bauer called the meeting to order at 7:32 pm and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

The meeting began with a discussion of BoE correspondence. Mr. Bauer expressed he was disheartened by the letter to the editor from the Bethlehem Selectmen urging a “no” vote on the referendum and wanted to discuss a Board of Education response to it. He reviewed facts related to the budget referendum as to the statutory timing of it, the district’s inability to postpone it, and the other rules governing how the budget referendum takes place annually. He reviewed the factors that were considered prior to adopting the budget, including the likelihood that the final Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) grant amounts would be known before the referendum. He asked the Board to weigh in.

Mr. Cosgriff stressed that the BoE is a subpart of the state legislature, and that all the regulations must be followed for such things as our annual budget referendum.

Ms. Van Aken felt it important to correct the inaccuracies of the letter and felt a response is needed.

Ms. Morgan urged caution and only stating the facts. She doesn’t want to put a wedge between the towns and school district.

Mr. Devine asked whether the BoE typically responds to letters to the editor, and asked whether this is a precedent the BoE is interested in starting.

Mr. Bauer replied that, while it is not typical practice, because this letter was authored by the Bethlehem town leaders, he believes providing a factual response is warranted. He said he and Ms. Van Aken will draft a letter for the Board’s review. If anyone has strong sentiments regarding this, he urged sharing that with him.

Mr. Bauer opened the floor for public comment.

What follows are very brief synopses of comments made, with apologies for any errors in name spellings:

Dave Deakin, Bethlehem Selectman, corrected Mr. Bauer saying there was no call in the letter for a mass “no” vote. The Selectmen are not attacking any line item, just the timing. A tentative agreement has been reached in Hartford today. He mentioned First Selectman, Len Assard, has found a good oil price, questioned the pedometers and swim team, is concerned about the \$70,000 surplus, and commented the voter turnout was poor in both towns.

Jennifer Higgins, Woodbury, praised what she felt was a transparent/honest budget; asked that the same number be put back out; felt the ECS issue was a ploy to confuse voters; said the question is whether we want to improve our programs and safety measures; the failure was due to low turnout, especially among parents; feels there are no excuses – everyone needs to vote.

Sarah Kate Walkup, Woodbury, thanked the BoE, Dr. Anna and administrators for a thoughtful budget; said ECS funds have been unpredictable and inequitable for 27 years; urged taking responsibility at the local level to be sure students have

what they need; wants to send out the fiscally responsible 1.28% budget; believes the letter from town leaders was meant to influence voting; feels parents can create a shift.

Teresa Mieczkowski, Woodbury, spoke about how little the 1.28% budget increase affects households – less than \$2 more per week; urged thinking about how failed budgets cause parents to look to private school options, and then support the economies of those towns; also spoke of students' desire to bridge gaps with townspeople and ways to do that.

Nicole Natale and **Penny Thomas**, Bethlehem Elementary parents, spoke about the excellence of that school, the innovative technology, the “poetry palace,” and that the kids feel safe. They support the 1.28% increase.

Kathy Doyle, Woodbury, is a proponent of a high quality educational system and likes many aspects of the budget. She is not in favor of the swim team, cited a \$47,000 increase in transportation even after a new bus contract, and asked the board to tighten up on spending.

John McDonald, Woodbury, asked for a range for best/worst case scenario state reimbursement for estimations of mil rate increases to give a better idea of impact to taxpayers. He spoke in favor of the swim team, urging spending as much as we can to keep kids busy with healthy activities; cited activities such as these also help get kids into better schools, thereby boosting the school and the desirability of the town to families looking to buy a home here.

John Torre, Woodbury, supports the budget and activities like the swim team; a community is a living, breathing thing, and a community has to have kids, and schools, that we need to put money into. He feels it's a fair budget.

Bill Butterly, Woodbury First Selectman, asked the BoE to consider May 24th as a referendum date and to have the town and school budgets voted on simultaneously. He cited interest on the part of the townspeople to vote in this way, as other neighboring towns do, and felt it would be prudent and lead to a positive result.

Jill Buban, Woodbury, finds many fair things in the current budget, and many cost neutral opportunities that are no-brainers. CAD and digital design, for instance, prepare students for the future and are essential. They should be expected to be part of the curriculum. She spoke in favor of the swim team, citing the amount of time parents spend traveling out of town so their children can swim. She believes in this school system and urged support of the budget.

Linnea Amodio, Bethlehem, said Region 14 is an extension of her family, and many of the experience at BES are not available in other communities. She cited the “poetry palace” and her child's excitement for learning. She asked to preserve the 1.28% increase.

Katie Yocis, Woodbury and NHS Chemistry Teacher, said the changes the world is asking of our children is huge and students are involved in their own learning; pedometers are an excellent real life activity; not having CAD at NHS would be insane and not good for the future of the school and students. There are many engineering students at NHS and to keep cutting back on 21st century learning is not doing them any favors as competition for the best colleges is great. Sports, arts and music tend to get cut first, but all are important to a well-rounded student.

NHS Junior **Lanie Marra**, Woodbury, asked that the budget be put back before the towns. She spoke of her school's amazing art program and how art ties in with architecture and other sciences. She also spoke of the value of sports to a well-rounded student.

Diane McLeod, Woodbury, spoke positively of the recent arts festival; making the district as desirable as neighboring Region 15; the importance of community partnerships and people coming together; urged providing opportunities for students to give back to their community.

Joy Geraci, School Social Worker at WMS, Woodbury, is sad to say that we are still having the same struggles and challenges as when she attended the district's schools in 1994. She urged those who vote against the budget to voice specific concerns ahead of the vote.

Tom Amatruda, Woodbury, said all the "for sale" signs scare him; believes residents are voting with their feet and leaving; CT is a high cost state and Woodbury is becoming a high cost town. He believes people are voting "no" because the cost of government is increasing faster than their wages and is higher than inflation. He urged renegotiating some of the contracts.

Leslie Brighthaupt, Woodbury, agreed that a community is a living, breathing entity and that schools are the heart of that. Teachers are inspiring excellence for our future and every citizen is obligated to support the heart of the community.

Dave Mechler, Woodbury, urged listening to the more than half who voted no, who didn't like the budget and thought it too high – at least consider why they voted no. He asked the board to consider what people can pay, and consider a reduction.

Mark Forte, Woodbury, spoke in favor of the swim team, said there is a great group of swimmers in town, and ours is the only school in the Berkshire League without a team. He spoke of the benefits of swimming as well as preparing students for careers in the future that don't even exist yet. He noted that most of the budget is fixed costs; the 1.28% is enhancements, and the kids should be rewarded with this 1.28%; the return on investment is their future; we need to enhance education to grow the towns.

Lisa Rubacha, Woodbury, felt voters were complacent and the "yes" vote did not get out last week. Teachers work so hard to teach subjects like history, about our founding fathers, about debate; the duty of parents is to enrich education for our children. She urged voting as a family, and letting your children see you vote.

Dr. Cutaia-Leonard recognized the town leaders present as well as thanked the large number of faculty and staff present and waving flags of support. She presented a power point outlining rationale for the current budget proposal. She asked Mr. McAllister to review the financial numbers, and then expressed uncertainty about what to cut from the current proposal. She understands the economic times, but could not recommend eliminating anything from the proposed budget. Rather, she would stretch out certain proposals over the years. She agrees the district is behind in many ways and she is committed to moving the district forward.

Mr. Bauer reviewed what a number of attendees had said, and he agreed that the situation in Hartford played a role in the budget's defeat. He supports the 1.28% increase.

Ms. Brown felt tonight has been preaching to the choir; it is the seniors who are not here and who vote "no." She was disappointed that Woodbury didn't carry the vote, as Bethlehem almost always votes it down. She feels it's a good budget, has questions about the swim team and declining enrollment. She doesn't see any places to cut, though there could be some tweaking.

Mr. Devine feels that, programmatically, this is a "rock solid budget." He commended Dr. Cutaia-Leonard for a great effort to get the most "bang for the buck." The enhancements in the budget are sorely needed, he said, and we are playing catch up. As to the comments regarding electricity, he noted we use a third party vendor, and are part of a consortium for oil. He is reluctant to go out with the same number, but doesn't see where to cut, except maybe stretching out the mat replacement and instruments over time. As for the \$673,000 debt reserve, he asked whether that much is needed to be set aside.

Mr. Cosgriff is in favor of the budget as is, feels the people just didn't come out to vote, and wants to give them another chance. He is aware that some people are on fixed incomes, he is himself, but most of the budget is contractual and the district has been working to cut costs in the contracts.

Ms. Van Aken supports going back out with the 1.28% increase and believes concerns related to the ECS grant played a huge role in the budget's defeat. It is a lean and reasonable budget. As for the swim team, she emphasized that we need to keep students engaged; furthermore, the high school did its homework on the addition of this sport.

Ms. Zmek asked whether postponing a decision until Thursday or Friday would still allow enough time to vote by the end of the month. She recalled that, on 3/28, the budget was reviewed line by line with the Boards of Selectmen and Finance and her impression was that the budget had their support. The debt service, a philosophical difference of opinion, was discussed, and she thought the BoE had the support of the towns. She feels the ECS questions and the letter to the editor led to the budget's defeat. She asked to postpone a decision until after Thursday in hopes that the ECS uncertainty could be cleared up. She supports the budget, and noted that swimming is a lifelong sport, enhances our program, and she supports that, as well.

Mr. Chapman supports the 1.28% increase, said the Board has goals it agreed on and they are what drives decision making. The budget is prudent and thoughtful, and he is confident of it. Dr. Cutaia-Leonard has made great decisions with cost management and cost neutrals. He said the district is currently at a nexus and he does not want to walk things back when we are starting on a generational project that needs to be balanced with educational plans. He favors taking action tonight; if Thursday brings something wildly different from what is expected, decisions can be made at that time.

Ms. Morgan noted that she always asks for a 0%, went through all 1100 line items, and had questions on only a few. She responded to comments made this evening, noting the energy savings program has saved the district over \$1 million, transportation grant money was lost and offset that line, the district is locked in with consortium numbers, and \$70,000 in surplus was credited back to the towns. She feels the current budget proposal is fair and honest, and supports the 1.28%.

The board discussed not setting a new precedent by waiting for ECS numbers before setting the budget, discussed the pros and cons of voting on the same day as the town budget in Woodbury though not in Bethlehem, considered dates and notice requirements for the next referendum.

Mr. Bauer requested the following: *Move that the Board of Education approve and adopt the Superintendent's proposed budget for the fiscal year 2016-2017 in the amount of \$33,154,406 as presented to the Board.* Entered by Ms. Van Aken and seconded by Mr. Cosgriff, the **motion carried 6-2** with Mr. Devine and Ms. Zmek voting no.

Mr. Bauer requested the following: *Move that the Board of Education schedule a District Meeting for Tuesday, May 17, 2016, at 7:30 pm, at Nonnewaug High School in Woodbury, CT concerning the 2016-2017 budget, with said Meeting to be adjourned to a referendum on Wednesday, May 18, 2016 from 6:00 am to 8:00 pm in the towns of Bethlehem and Woodbury, CT.* Entered by Ms. Van Aken and seconded by Ms. Zmek, the **motion carried 7-1**, with Ms. Morgan voting no.

Mr. Bauer requested the following: *Move that the Secretary of the Board of Education is authorized, in such official's discretion, to prepare and to cause to be printed and distributed explanatory text regarding the 2016-2017 budget referendum scheduled for May 18, 2016, with such explanatory text subject to the review and approval of the District's legal counsel and to be prepared and distributed in accordance with Section 9-369b of the Connecticut General Statutes.* Entered by Ms. Van Aken and seconded by Mr. Cosgriff, the **motion carried 8-0**.

Ms. Van Aken entered a *motion to adjourn*. Seconded by Mr. Cosgriff, the **motion carried 8-0**.

The special meeting of the Board of Education adjourned at 10:14 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Carol Ann Brown, Secretary
Regional School District 14 Board of Education

Recorded and filed subject to Board of Education approval by: Debra W. Carlton, Board Clerk, 5/16/16