

A District Meeting/Public Hearing of the Regional School District 14 Board of Education was held Monday, April 6, 2015 in the gymnasium of Woodbury Middle School, 67 Washington Ave., Woodbury, Connecticut.

Present: Board members George Bauer, Carol Ann Brown, John Chapman, Charles Cosgriff, Michael Devine, Janet Morgan, Maryanne Van Aken and Pamela Zmek. Also, Superintendent Anna Cutaia-Leonard, Director of Finance/Operations Wayne McAllister, Administrators and Directors Alice Jones, Kimberly Culkin, MaryLou Torre, Susan Ruddock, Susan Domanico, Eric Bergeron, Andrew O'Brien, Jeff Turner, Mike Molzon, and Paul Ciotti; student representative Ricky Robinson; members of the Boards of Selectmen and Finance for Bethlehem and Woodbury; two members of the press; and about fifty members of the community.

The meeting was called to order by Mr. Bauer at 7:35 pm.

Mr. Bauer appointed Woodbury Town Moderator, Lou DeLuca, to serve as moderator for the public hearing.

Mr. DeLuca appointed BoE Secretary, Ms. Brown, to serve as the meeting clerk.

Mr. DeLuca read the following call: To present and receive questions about the Regional School District 14 Superintendent's proposed budget for 2015-2016.

Mr. DeLuca turned the meeting over to Dr. Cutaia-Leonard to present the budget.

Following her presentation, Mr. DeLuca opened the floor for questions/comments, reminding the speakers that a 3 minute time limit would be enforced.

Sean Murphy, Woodbury, gave commentary as one from the business community. He was opposed to Dr. Cutaia-Leonard's use of the terms "investment" and "assets," which he said are supposed to make you money, not cost money. He felt elements of the budget lacked common sense, and he advocated for the people who have to pay for it.

Catherine Ringheisen, Woodbury, related the importance of a strong school system to real estate, citing research indicating home buyers will do without desired numbers of bedrooms or a garage if it means gaining a good school system. She considers supporting the schools as part of economic development.

Sarah-Kate Walkup, Woodbury, thanked the Board and Superintendent for a thoughtfully crafted budget that is student centered. She spoke about the impact of technology, that it is how today's students learn, and that it is imperative to provide these resources. She challenged the audience to imagine their reaction if they found outdated technology in doctors' offices, stores, or other businesses they utilize.

Mia Higgins, Woodbury student, spoke in favor of technology in her school and about how much she values her education.

Diane Macleod, Woodbury, advocated for the arts, asking that technology not be funded at a loss to the arts. She feels arts enrichment is important, Waldorf schools don't introduce technology until grade 9, and asked for a balanced approach to the budget.

Len Assard, First Selectman, Bethlehem, congratulated the Board of Education on the hiring of Dr. Cutaia-Leonard. He expressed concern over the debt service, suggesting if any cuts are to be made, it should be there so that citizens currently living in the towns are not paying for the needs of future residents.

Katie Yocis, Woodbury, and NHS teacher, feels that kids are absolutely investments, and that it requires books, teachers, technology, arts – and the towns – to support the system. She believes the community could be stronger if the schools were a centralized part of it. She hoped people will decide to make the investment, and felt 2.12% is a fiscally responsible one.

Tom Arras, Woodbury, agrees we need to keep the school system going, but also to keep balance with the needs of the community. He complimented the Superintendent on a comprehensive plan. He noted that kids leave this area after graduating and it is hard to lure them back when taxes are so high. He cited staff:student ratios that he believes are out of proportion with ratios from the past.

Amy Samuelson, Woodbury, thanked the BoE and teachers for all they have done for her children. She spoke of the benefits of the BES technology program, advocated for the arts, and urged keeping the debt service in the budget as a “down payment” for the future.

Barbara Bradbury-Pape, Woodbury, responded to the comment about where students go after they are educated here. She noted that people, like herself, come to communities like ours to raise a family and support education. She appreciated the “bucket planning” aspect of the budget and also stressed that we are all investing in our children.

Pam Gengenbach, Woodbury, feels we need to invest in both the towns and schools in order to retain students and families and stop doing things that cause them to leave the school system. We need to make smart investments, and reinvest in our assets, such as the buildings, instead of allowing them to deteriorate. It is disturbing to her to invest in the system and then see grass growing on the tennis courts, for example.

Adele Taylor, Woodbury, still has a big stake in the schools although her children are grown. Through her work with the Woodbury Scholarship Fund, she has become aware of how incredible our graduates are, and feels they are an investment to pay attention to.

Gary Suslavich, Woodbury, echoed prior speakers in agreeing it was the best budget presentation he has seen; however, he disagreed with a few things in it. He noted different student counts, on p2 and p6, and sees the increase as actually 3.27% as the debt service falls off. He asked what the \$120,000 in purchased services is for, agreed with lunch for all students, felt the district should pay for AP exams if it is going to pay for PSAT, had questions about vo-ag, and wondered when health care costs had last been evaluated. He believed the maintenance numbers were incorrect, and felt the board goals were lofty ones that cannot be measured.

Kelly Packett, Woodbury, feels more resources are needed for special education students. The number, and needs, of these students have increased and many are not coming to school prepared. A 2.12% increase should easily pass, in her book.

Deb DeSorbo, Woodbury, thanked the Superintendent for using the term “excellence.” She feels we have been remiss in not fixing what is broken, in terms of facilities, and believes the curriculum is lacking and also needs to be fixed. She thanked her for a responsible budget.

Lisa Rubacha, Woodbury, commented that Dr. Cutaia-Leonard is the best thing to happen to the community is awhile. She encouraged people to meet with her to work out any kinks they see in the plan, and to stand with her to find solutions, instead of creating suspicion if certain numbers don't look quite right. She urged being part of the solution.

Jeanne Ross, Woodbury, praised the budget planning process as being driven by goals and direction for students and recognizing what they bring to the community. She supports the goals related to reading, and agreed that technology as a learning tool – and not a social one – is key to student success. She gave her support to the growing of the strings program, too.

Mr. Murphy returned to express that he is insulted by the suggestion that he is “causing turmoil.” He is a stay-at-home dad who does his homework and questioned what we are teaching our kids. He cited an overdependence on technology, and he disagrees with the use of School Resource Officers in the schools.

Mr. Arras returned to quote figures on number of students lost since 2004. He urged dealing with what we have, and working to make the community more attractive to people. He wonders where we stand in relation to other districts in the area of special education, and noted the special education budget exceeds the MES and BES budgets combined. He questioned voag costs of \$962/student to the taxpayer, and felt the barometer is the net PPE, a \$1415 increase per student, which is a 8.76% increase.

Ms. Macleod returned to express her belief in a public/private school partnership, and advocated making the schools magnets for activities to include homeschoolers, and to learn from each other. She agreed that we have taken a piecemeal approach to taking care of community facilities.

Julie Haggard, Bethlehem, thanked the Superintendent for a well thought out budget. She noted what is important is that investments yield a return, and our children are the return on investment in the schools. Education is not a business and so cannot be viewed in the same way as one from the business sector would. Dr. Cutaia-Leonard has a plan, she said, and conviction.

Hearing no further comments, Mr. DeLuca adjourned the public hearing at 9:30 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, 4/8/2015