

A Public Hearing of the Regional School District 14 Board of Education was held on Monday, April 8, 2013 at 7:00 pm at Mitchell Elementary School, 14 School Street, Woodbury, Connecticut.

Present: Superintendent Jody Ian Goeler; Interim Director of Operations John Turk; Board members George Bauer, John Chapman, Charles Cosgriff, Sophieazane Bartlett, Pam Zmek, John Swendsen and Maryanne Van Aken; Administrators and Directors MaryLou Torre, Eric Bergeron, Kim Culkin, Jeff Turner, Andrew O'Brien, and Mike Molzon; Board clerk Debra Carlton

Absent: Board member Gary Suslavich

Audience members included: Region 14 faculty/staff members Katie Yocis, Carol Tomkalski, Sharon Gomes, Joy Geraci, Doriene Wester, Tricia Dannenhoffer, Jean McDevitt, and Jodie D'Alexander; Bethlehem BoF Chair Len Assard and member Mike Devine; Woodbury Selectmen Jerry Stomski, Barbara Perkinson and George Hale; Woodbury BoF Chair Bill Butterly; three members of the press and approximately 60 additional members of the community.

I. Call to Order

Mr. Bauer called the hearing to order at 7:05 pm and led the Pledge of Allegiance. He thanked Woodbury Middle School student Dean Jones for filming the hearing, and the audience responded with hearty applause for Dean.

II. Appointment of Moderator

Mr. Bauer appointed resident Attorney John McDonald to serve as moderator.

III. Appointment of Meeting Clerk by the Moderator

Mr. McDonald appointed Debra Carlton to serve as meeting clerk.

IV. Call of the Meeting

Mr. McDonald stated the following call of the meeting: To present and receive questions about the Regional School District 14 Superintendent's proposed budget for 2013-2014

V. Presentation of the Region 14 Budget for the 2013-2014 School Year

Mr. Goeler presented background for the budget, highlighting that the landscape of public education is dramatically different than even a year ago, and explaining how students will be assessed and the district indexed.

Mr. Turk provided financial details of the budget, highlighting that 72% of the total represents salaries, pointing out changes/savings in areas of electricity and fuel, and showing that 83% of the budget is spent in the "cost centers," the schools. He explained the concept of minimum budget requirement and maintenance of effort as relates to special education, which requires a budget greater than or equal to the previous year's in order to qualify for federal IDEA funds, and indicated that, as of now, the transportation grant has been eliminated by the State.

Following the budget presentation, Mr. McDonald opened the floor for public comment.

VI. Public Comment

Simon Yocis, Woodbury, read a prepared statement about his hope that his school district would be able to offer him the level of quality education, including technology, that will support him in reaching his goal of attending the university of his choice, MIT.

Pam Gengenbach, Woodbury, asked for dates for the natural gas line completion, and was told by Mr. Molzon that all 3 Woodbury schools are burning natural gas. She asked if the \$86,000 budgeted for teacher evaluation is for position(s) or programming and was told it would be used for the computer technology needed for data collection, PD and training. She asked whether money for new programs is all related to the common core and was told that, with the exception of expanding the strings program, most all is related to secondary school reform and the common core.

Tom Arras, Woodbury, asked about funds budgeted for asbestos abatement at MES, what was completed last summer, and what is still in the 5 year capital plan. He also asked about the budget for 76 special education students and asked how the money spent compares with State averages. Ms. Culkin explained that the budget is for the 200+ students, not just the 76 outplaced students to which Mr. Arras referred. He also asked about the cost of outsourcing the preschool program, at CAST, as compared to having it in house. Ms. Culkin replied that those numbers are being compared, and Mr. Goeler added that there are benefits to the students to be in district and it was also pointed out that the district paid tuition, transportation and salaries when the program was outsourced.

Art McNally, Woodbury, questioned the budgeted amounts for social workers and director of instruction, commented on costs going up constantly, noted districts such as Wolcott showing budget decreases, asked if there are any projected surpluses and, if there are, asked why these are not considered and used for capital improvements. He understands the need for security upgrades but believes the economy does not allow for other initiatives. He spoke at length about decreasing home values and number of foreclosures in town. Mr. Turk cited a number of studies indicating home values reflect the quality of the schools.

Scott Baider, Woodbury, asked about School Resource Officers and what we expect they will do for safety. Mr. Stomski replied they are the best bang for the buck because a deterrent is the best security measure. They are armed police officers with the ability to stop/detain/question and that the right fits for the schools would be sought, officers who would interact with students and, as students grow, they would have relationships with local law enforcement that would be positive. Mr. Baider asked whether this would be a true deterrent and Mr. Stomski felt it would – they would have a car and radio communication for faster action. Mr. Goeler added they are trusted members of the community within the schools and a support to mental health staff. Mr. Stomski said they would be able to attain a degree of intel and would offer a mental health component, too. Mr. O'Brien anticipates many avenues for service, including special programs and teaching.

Sharon Gomes, Bethlehem and NHS Social Worker, shared her concern about the significant need for school-based mental health support services. She felt by speaking tonight she was advocating for her clients who are not apt to do so themselves. Safe schools, she said, include having support for the variety of issues facing students and their parents. A CT task force on gun violence prevention/safety cited social workers and psychologists as preferable to police and physical enhancements to buildings. Now is not the time to cut support services in schools where early intervention is critical, and having access to help in the place students spend their day makes common sense.

Mr. Bauer read a prepared statement from staff members supporting the mental health staff in their schools.

Alex DeSorbo, Woodbury, asked for an explanation for the \$271,000 in additional revenue and what has happened to it. Mr. Turk explained that the State had withheld \$400,000 in grants for the middle school building project that was not utilized as planned when the fifth grades from both towns did not relocate there. When appealed, legislators did refund \$271,000 and, as a result, that amount was reduced from the amount sought from the towns, he said.

Leslie Lebl, Woodbury, noted if less funding is coming in and the town budget is able to be flat, the people will resist increases from the schools. If mandates are forced upon us, what are we doing to lobby against them? Mr. Goeler replied that, in CT, the burden of proof lies with the schools to show it is serving students adequately. The common core standards are actually national ones that the State has adopted to compare our students to high performing countries.

Deb DeSorbo, Woodbury, said that mediocre is not acceptable to her. She was glad to hear from the social workers. She recognizes we are behind in technology – there is no internet access at NHS – and the board has much to do. Parents, and citizens, need to speak out but are afraid to do so. She pointed out the lack of services (social workers, counseling) in the towns available to all tax payers. That MES spends the least is also not acceptable to her. The most parents can do is to understand what is going on and offer solutions to what is wrong, but doing more with less is not working and students are not getting the same education they did in the past.

Katie Yocis, Woodbury, has 3 children in the schools and teaches at NHS and has seen a lot of cutbacks in the schools. She understands the argument about decreased home values, but cutting back on the schools won't raise house values and we need to invest in our future. Part time social workers are not effective; she has been involved in situations at school she never should have on days when the social worker was not there. Kids need help from someone they can relate to. We have trouble keeping people who can make changes that will help us.

Wayne Anderson, Woodbury, congratulated Mr. Turk on a budget presentation that was a 110% improvement over last year's. But, while he is willing to support a cost center based budget, there must be a logical reason why \$271,000 was spent and is now being given back instead of reducing capital outlay. He sees this as a perception problem, and adding back that money would have decreased the 5% increase in the budget.

David Hartman, Woodbury, thanked the board for addressing safety issues; his daughter had need of the help of the elementary social worker and received it for which he is grateful. He is concerned over staffing reductions at MES as it appears computer education is being eliminated. Mr. Goeler explained this as an integration and reallocation of resources, not elimination. Mr. Hartman believes we've been trying to do more with less for too long.

Joy Geraci, Woodbury, graduate of NHS and WMS Social Worker whose daughter attends the preschool, thanked the board and administrators for their leadership; noted it is not SROs vs. social workers but that SROs are not trained mental health workers. She also noted that no services are available in the towns, and that she also serves on the local substance abuse prevention council. The challenges students and families face make educating them a challenge, too. She said when votes go down, people are voting against elements of the budget and it is important that those disagreements be expressed beforehand so the budget can reflect the will of the people.

Tamra Velleca, Woodbury, thanked the board for its time and is very hopeful that the technology piece will stay and that technology will be integrated into the curriculum as mandated by the common core state standards.

Jim Uberti, Woodbury, found tonight's turnout gratifying after so much self-indulgent discourse in town over signs and who should resign from office. The board has come together with the superintendent and produced a budget sensitive to the economy, and he thanked Mr. Turk for a budget with great transparency and detail. Historically, with increases in fixed expenses, 1% budget increases should be viewed as decreases and with so many areas that cannot be cut, where should cuts be made? In a bad economy, if schools are allowed to decay, home values slip. Communities wither and die if we lose our families and our children. He asked everyone to consider why we are here, and believes it is to create a better place for our kids.

Duncan McDougal, Woodbury, asked the board to check to see how many homes are in foreclosure and asked how many in the room received a 5% raise this year. As for mandated programs, he suggested Mr. Goeler go to Hartford and tell them to put a stop to those. He said he will vote for the budget this year on the condition that he be told that the money will cause test scores to go up and that a number, a percentage increase in scores, be stated and met.

Penelope Eastham, Woodbury, does not think smaller class sizes mean better education, and the terms of the last teachers' contract were unacceptable. She understands what is needed as far as technology and everything else, but the board is trying to get blood from a stone.

Donna Dreska, Woodbury, asked about adaptations to the CCSS and whether PD is being utilized so teachers can understand the standards. Mr. Goeler indicated principals are working with staff and, alignment is the focus, and the work will take place over the next 10-15 years. Standards are available to us in other districts; the assessments are technology based ones. She asked if we will be ready in 2014-15 and he said we will do our best; the director of instruction job will be to focus on all the work to align, vertically and horizontally, and to move from pockets to complete coherence.

Mr. Arras had additional questions about the monthly budget update of 3/15/13 on the purchased services line. Mr. McDougal noted that, two years ago, when the MES roof was redone, Mr. Arras was not asked to bid on the job and we should use local workers more often. He also suggested that Mr. Stomski direct the local police, who aren't doing anything anyway, to park at the schools at no cost.

VII. Adjournment

Hearing no further comment, Mr. McDonald adjourned the public hearing at 9:20 pm

Respectfully Submitted,

Debra W. Carlton, Board Clerk
Regional School District #14 Board of Education
April 9, 2013