

Town Debates the Future of Haddam Elementary School

by **Emmet Teran**, *Special to the Haddam Bulletin*

This past January, the Regional School District (RSD) 17 Board of Education (BOE) announced the intended implementation of a restructuring plan for its five school campuses. This plan, which was first announced to the public at the beginning of this year, is now in its early stages and once completed will reshape the current distribution of students and faculty of grades K-8, and includes the closure of Haddam Elementary School (HES).

A center of activity for the town located just off of Saybrook Road and across from the Higganum Green, HES currently enrolls 190 students a year. Under the current plan, grades K-3 are set to transfer to neighboring Burr Elementary School, and grade 4 to the Haddam-Killingworth Middle School as early as the year 2020.

“The process of deciding to close a school began more than a year and a half ago as we confronted declining enrollment—a trend we see continuing—and the more effective use of resources by operating four campuses instead of five,” Superintendent Howard Thiery and BOE Chair Joanne Nesti wrote in a joint statement to the Bulletin. “The decision on HES was made because Burr is a newer building and one that offers a better floor plan, infrastructure and surrounding property.”

The BOEs decision to shutter the school’s doors came as a surprise to some and has been met with mixed reactions around town. Recently, the restructuring plan was discussed at a July 16 town meeting among Haddam Board of Selectmen members Lizz Milardo, Larry Maggi, and Melissa Schlag.

“I would love to see the board of selectmen call a public meeting to allow the residents to speak about this, they haven’t had that opportunity yet,” said Schlag at the beginning of the meeting. “While the BOS doesn’t have control of the education system, we do have control over that building, in a way.”

“Board of Education Chair Joanne Nesti is willing to discuss the possibility of the town taking the building over, whether by long-term lease, or buying it outright,” Schlag continued, stating that town residents should have the opportunity to discuss the possibility since the school is a huge part of the center of Higganum.

“I know that there is a lot of frustration about the board making this decision, but unfortunately under statutes and regulations and the way it was written, we are a [part of a] regional school district and they serve as their own entity with their own voting members,” First Selectman Milardo explained.

When HES first opened in the fall of 1948, it was operating on a plot of land that was previously donated to the town by the Edward W. Hazen Foundation. According to Milardo, HES would remain under the local government’s control for another six years before joining a school district in 1954. Upon joining, the town gave up ownership rights to the land and consequently, any real power over future BOE decisions regarding the property and school building, which also includes the Swan Hill hiking trail system that’s open to the public.

“I know that the School Board has decided to go through this next school year with the kids,” Milardo continued, saying that she had recently consulted legal counsel

regarding the matter. “I don’t believe that we have any legal right...as far as preventing them from closing the school.”

A year and a half ago, the BOE created the Strategic Capital Planning Committee, a group of Board members in charge of addressing a 10-year continued decrease of almost 500 enrolled students. According to the latest approved BOE budget, the number of filled seats dropped from 2,557 in the fall of 2007 to a projected 2,067 this year. Nesti told the Bulletin that the Planning Committee had reached out to some of the local governing committees throughout this process.

“There were informal conversations, but nothing official,” she wrote. “In my letter to the First Selectman, I assured her of ‘continuing consultation with town officials’ and we will live up to that commitment.”

The July 9 letter to which Nesti is referring, was one sent to Milardo regarding the sale of the HES property. The Planning Committee has yet to determine its asking price.

“Though we have talked often about the school’s closure and its potential sale by the school district, this letter is a more formal request to you to let the Board know of any interest the Town would have in owning and controlling the HES building and real estate parcel,” Nesti wrote in the letter, which Milardo read aloud at the July 16 town meeting. “I also would welcome any related insights or considerations as to potential uses if the Town decides not to take ownership. If possible, I would appreciate a response by August 15th.”

Gina Block, a member of the Haddam Planning and Zoning Committee since fall 2017, expressed frustration over what she has described as a lack of transparency with which the BOE has operated, and anxiety over the potential to leave such a large building unoccupied in the downtown.

“If I were a perspective resident or business owner who was driving through town and saw another empty building, I would keep driving through,” Block said. “It is a mistake to take out something that is so crucial to the center of a town.”

Block is a member of a growing group of concerned parents and residents, who are meeting, and speaking out against the BOE’s plan under the name “Friends of HES”.

Jennifer Petrillo, another member of “Friends of HES”, also spoke with the Bulletin about the restructuring plan. “I do not like the decision at all,” she said. “I am a former HES student. My whole family went there. My children were going to go there.... I live in the town. I am a taxpayer. I know that they have put a lot of work into the restructuring, but I’m not sure [that they considered] a parent that’s going to have a four-year-old on a bus for forty minutes now as opposed to ten.”

The debate over the future use of excess space in the district appears in stark contrast to BOE debates of the late 1990s and early 2000s when RSD 17 was seeing a record high in enrolled students. After a 2003 referendum passed on the subject, the Board created an Intermediate/ Middle School Building Committee to address overly optimistic student population projections by the State Department of Education that far exceeded actual enrollment (see chart on page 8).

Back at last month’s town meeting, all three selectmen stressed the need for public input on the conversation over whether or not the town ought to purchase the land.

“We as a town have a voice in what happens,” Milardo said. “We can’t control what happens to that property, but I think the town should have a choice in purchasing the

building or not purchasing the building. There is talk of the property behind the school being donated possibly to the Land Trust.”

While the BOE has mainly focused its public comments on the future of its student body makeup, a topic that has largely gone unaddressed is potential employee layoffs as a result of the restructuring process.

“The assumption is that the majority of our students will be going to BES, and therefore the majority of our staff will be going to BES as well,” HES Principal Whidden said in a June interview with Haddam Now. “With the exception of our fourth grade teachers who will likely be going up to the intermediate school. We’re not thinking that we will be having any major staff reductions or even minor reductions. In terms of individuals, we really haven’t gotten that far into the planning.”

According to the BOE’s 2018-19 Budget, the annual operating cost of HES is at \$1,993,419, with \$1,733,070 going to the salaries of teachers, administrators, custodians and other employees. With projected annual savings of \$1 million after restructuring, and what BOE member Brenda Buzzi says is an estimated \$70,000 operating cost for the empty building once the school shuts down, that would mean cuts of approximately \$930,000 to salaries down the line. When presented with these statistics and an inquiry into whether or not the board has a sense of how many staff will be cut from the payroll, Nesti referred the Bulletin to their July 2018 update, which can be found on the district’s website. “There are two committees working on the above question at this moment,” Nesti said.

While the property’s future as a school is uncertain, at the July 16 meeting, the selectmen floated the potential to repurpose the space for other community-oriented programming like a daycare or senior center should the town decide to buy it.

“We owe it to the people of this town that we have a hearing about this property,” Shlag said toward the end of the town meeting. “There’s a lot of opportunity in that building.”

“I have fiscal, financial concerns about the town owning another building,” Milardo said. “However it’s really the taxpayers’” decision on what they may or may not want to do.... We can put it on the ballot in November.”

No doubt that as of press time, updates on such actions as the proposed November ballot initiative will be well underway. It appears debate over the future of the HES property is only just beginning.

For more information on the district restructuring plan, its updates, and the Board of Education’s current approved budget, visit the website for Regional School District 17 at www.rsd17.org.