

## The Bulletin (CTBulletin.com)

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### News

# John Pettibone School in New Milford to Close

Thursday, June 26, 2014

By ALICE TESSIER

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NEW MILFORD—The Board of Education, in a split vote last week, after the Litchfield County Times deadline, decided to close an elementary school due to declining enrollment, an action expected to produce significant cost savings.

John Pettibone School will be closed at the end of the 2014-15 school year and the school district will be reconfigured, with third-graders attending Sarah Noble Intermediate School, sixth-graders going to Schaghticoke Middle School and students in pre-kindergarten through second grade being sent to Hill and Plain and Northville elementary schools.

About 335 Pettibone students would be redistricted and four buses and a van for special needs would be added, as Superintendent of Schools JeanAnn Paddyfote has stressed that there would be a 50-minute maximum for bus runs.

“It was a difficult decision to make. It was tough. It was heart-wrenching,” said Daniele Florio Shook, the board chairman, in an interview last Friday regarding the June 18 vote. “I went into the meeting not knowing 100 percent how I would vote. I really wished it would be up to different bodies to make the decision, but the charge was ours.”

Mrs. Florio, former chairman Wendy Faulenbach, Angela Chastain, David Littlefield and Theresa Volinski voted in favor of the closure. Robert Coppola, David Lawson, David Shaffer and John Spatola opposed the proposal.

Although many residents who addressed the board during informational sessions and hearings on the matter sought a public vote, the community was told that by law the decision rested with the school board.

“I don’t have any issues with the reconfiguration of the schools,” said Mrs. Florio. “I believe it will have more teachers collaborating and students interacting, and it could enhance learning for them.”

The projected savings would be \$650,000 per year, “but over 10 years it would be a total of \$23 million because of other changes, not just from the closing,” the board chairman said, noting that Pettibone School needs updating and the projections include these potential costs.

Mr. Coppola has asked what the educational value would be of realigning sixth and third grades. He said this week he opposed the proposal because he didn’t think it was the right time to close a school.

“I repeatedly said that I had two concerns,” he said. “I felt we weren’t making a good case educationally to close a school and redistrict students with the enrollment projections they have now, and I thought we should wait because of reports that say Danbury is the biggest growth area,” which would have a spill-over impact on New Milford’s growth potential, he said.

Dr. Paddyfote said last week that last year’s total school enrollment, as of Oct. 1, 2013, was 4,590 students; the current (2013-14) year’s is 4,472; and the projection for the upcoming school year (2014-15) is 4,349. “We just do them year to year,” she said.

No determination has been made about any future use of the school building, which remains a school board responsibility unless it returns Pettibone to the town.

“We did not decide this. My goal was not to discuss it at this time but to focus the vote now on whether to close the school,” Mrs. Florio said. “I expect it will come up at the next subcommittee meeting, maybe the facilities committee or the operations committee

or both.”

The School Facilities Utilization Committee, comprising 28 members representing a cross-section of the community, was convened in November 2012 and charged to review enrollment statistics and utilization of school facilities going out to 2021. It presented its recommendation—to close Pettibone, move third grade to the Sarah Noble and send sixth-graders to Schaghticoke—to the previous school board, led by Ms. Faulenbach, in June 2013, and the board conducted informational meetings for the committee to present its findings. Last October, the school board, at a special public hearing, had a representative of its consultant Milone & MacBroom explain how enrollment projections were made.

The majority of the public comment at these meetings and the March 20 special meeting expressed a range of concerns about the possible closure and redistricting (including transportation and the emotional readiness of sixth-graders being thrust into a middle school environment), some calling for a referendum vote should a proposal go forward.

Town Council members Paul Szymanski and Beth Falder, as well as councilor Katy Francis via a letter to the board, said they believe closing JPS would be a cost-saving measure that would benefit the town and school district.

“I have not had any experience as a former member of the Town Council and the Board of Education of money being added to any education budget, and I’m not sure the money that is to be saved is going to go where people who want more support for the schools want to see it go,” Mr. Coppola said this week.

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**Decided: Pettibone School will closed**

Susan Tuz

Published 9:31 pm, Wednesday, June 18, 2014

NEW MILFORD -- John Pettibone Elementary School will be closed at the end of the 2014-15 school year.

In a 5-4 vote Wednesday, the New Milford Board of Education approved closing Pettibone School, reconfiguring grades, redistricting the town, and creating a subcommittee to assess the use of the 16.4-acre Pettibone property.

"It's awful," said Dionne Boisvert, a mother of two and Pettibone PTO president. "My biggest concern is that the sixth-graders don't belong with seventh- and eighth-graders. And I don't think Hill & Plain can handle more kids."

With the reconfiguration of grades, third grade will move to Sarah Noble Intermediate School, while the sixth grade moves from Sarah Noble to Schaghticoke Middle School.

Kindergarten through second grade will be distributed at the two remaining elementary schools, Hill & Plain and Northville.

The vote deviated from party lines with the three Democratic board members -- Bob Coppola, David Lawson and David Shaffer -- being joined by Republican board member John Spatola in their vote against the closing.

Republican board members voting in support of closing were Angie Chastain, Dave Littlefield, Danielle Shook, Theresa Volinski and Wendy Faulenbach.

Considerations for closing Pettibone centered on finding the most efficient use of school facilities and resources. It is estimated \$23 million will be saved over time with the closing of the school. Some board members believe that money could be spent on enriching educational programs for students.

"I believe that numbers don't lie, but there's a human element to this decision," Spatola said. "There's love at Pettibone ... If you can get a child to love going to school, you're doing something right. I can't support closing Pettibone."

Faulenbach supported her vote, saying, "I am looking at numbers, but it's not all about the money for me ... It's about taking the (financial) resources we have and using them for the kids."

"I can't support having partially empty schools and seeing the money going there," Faulenbach added.

School enrollment in 2013-14 was 4,346 students compared to 4,591 students in 2012-13. Projections show a decline of 11 percent by 2017-18, with prekindergarten to third-grade classes affected the most.

A total enrollment of 617 students in preK to third grade is projected for 2020-21.

The decision to close Pettibone School came after eight months of study by a facilities subcommittee on the most effective use of resources and facility space given the declining student population.

The Facilities Committee in June 2013 gave the former Board of Education a recommendation to close Pettibone. That education board passed the decision on to the present board, which met three times to hear parent and resident input and discuss the topic.

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## **Monroe superintendent proposes one-year closure of Chalk Hill Middle School**

Vinti Singh, Staff Writer

Published 6:11 pm, Saturday, December 11, 2010

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MONROE -- Monroe Schools Superintendent Colleen Palmer is proposing to close Chalk Hill Middle School for a year, a move designed to restrain the district's budget increases.

Enrollment at the school is declining faster than expected, Palmer said. She intends to propose "hibernating" the school for a year -- heating it to just above freezing and keeping the ventilation going -- so the school or town could use the building in the near future.

The school district already closed half of the building at the beginning of this year by moving the fifth grade to the elementary school. The sixth-graders who use the building now can be absorbed by Jockey Hollow Middle School and the new Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Program that will operate out of a wing in Masuk High School next year, Palmer said.

Moving the students out of Chalk Hill will save the school district about \$500,000, Palmer said.

Chalk Hill is a 40-year-old building that has not had any major improvements at all, Public Works and Facilities Director Art Baker said.

The school "is not in a state of disrepair -- the building still has a useful life," Baker said. "But its big mechanical components are reaching the end of their useful life and the building could be approaching a major failure."

The boilers, for example, are old and inefficient. Replacing them would save the district 4,000 to 6,000 gallons of heating oil a year. A lot of heat also escapes through the building's outdated windows.

The work needed to bring the building up to current standards would cost \$15 million, Baker said.

The school also houses the town's Parks & Recreation Department on the first floor and the Information Technology Department in the basement. If part of the school were to be shuttered, the parks department would be moved back into Town Hall, Baker said.

Palmer plans to propose keeping the IT Department in the basement, and also moving the alternative education program, which is currently off campus, into the basement as well.

"We'll save on the rent we're currently paying for the alternative education space," Palmer said.

The Public Works Department is researching what it would cost to hibernate the whole building versus everything except the basement level, Baker said.

"We wouldn't want to leave the building in that state for very long," Baker said. "The intent is a year."

A year gives the town enough time to complete a comprehensive facilities study and determine if the building could be used by either the school or town, Palmer said.

The Board of Education has final say on whether to shutter the building. The decision will be made during the budget process, Palmer said.

First Selectman Steve Vavrek said that although there will be a savings of \$500,000 on the schools side of the budget, the town will absorb the costs of maintaining the building.



