

SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

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TOWN COUNCIL/BOARD OF EDUCATION JOINT MEETING

2019 FEB 28 AM 8:18

Shula M Bailey

LIBRARY PROGRAM ROOM

FEBRUARY 25, 2019 - 7:00 P.M.

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT: William Eccles, Chair; Brenda Falusi; Tammy Nuccio; John Reagan and Paul Reynolds

COUNCIL MEMBERS ABSENT: David Skoczulek, Vice-Chair and Christine Vincent

BOE MEMBERS PRESENT: Colleen Yudichak, Chair; Karen Moran, Vice-Chair; Sam Adlerstein; Katherine Howard-Bender; Michelle Harrold; Robert Pagoni; Jane Pasini; Christina Plourd and Jeff Schroeder

BOE MEMBERS ABSENT: None.

OTHERS PRESENT: Steven Werbner, Town Manager; Walter Willett, Superintendent; Fisher Thompson, School Rep

- 1. Call to Order – Pursuant to Section § C9-4 of the Town Charter the Town Manager is required to call and attend a joint meeting of the Town Council and Board of Education for the purpose of discussing the appropriation request of the Board of Education – Explanation of the budget process by the Town Manager**

Steven Werbner called the meeting to order at 7:03 p.m.

Mr. Werbner handed out a document which outlined the initial estimates that they had been working off of for the town budget, and then what the changes are as a result of the recent release of the Governor's budget for FY's 2020 and 2021.

The major differences include:

-Municipal Stabilization Grant: Budgeted at \$48,871; actually received \$322,977.

This has gone into the Capital Non-Recurring Account to offset the costs of Tolland's share of the improvements to the treatment plant. Next year, he is hoping that the grant will be fully funded, so he is including it in his revenue estimates as tax deferred revenue.

-ECS: There is an existing 10 year phase out of our loss of ECS funds. The Governor has accelerated that loss into a three year phase out. They had initially estimated to receive \$9.4m in the next fiscal year. Now it is down to \$8.8m, and then it will be down to \$7.9m in 2021. This is a rapid acceleration of the decrease.

-Sharing of teacher pension costs: The Governor's proposal is that municipalities would pay 25% of the normal cost, not the non-funded liability. There is a provision for an additional penalty if your teachers' salaries are above the state median/average. The penalty is rumored to be +/- \$78,000. He doesn't believe it to be a problem for Tolland at this point. For 2020, the obligation would be \$100,136, and for 2021 it would be \$206,790. As of now, the third year is unknown.

-Town Aid Road and LoCIP: Those are basically being funded pretty much at last year's levels.

The revenue in terms of state aid at this point in time is down significantly. Looking at the impact of the Governor's proposal, just to fund the lost revenue would be .79 mills or a 2.25% increase in the mill rate (disassociated with the loss revenue before there is expenditure requests).

Mr. Werbner's budget comes out on March 7th, and workshops will start the following week.

Karen Moran wanted to clarify that the BOE will not be giving a presentation tonight.

Mr. Werbner outlined the process, which is similar to the one used last year. There will be three (3) workshops:

March 13: Discussion of the Town Manager's Proposed Budget;

March 14: Joint Meeting to Discuss the BOE's Proposed Budget; and

March 19: General Discussion.

2. Recommendations and suggestions to BOE regarding consolidation of non-education services and cost savings (per State Statutes (Public Act 13-60))

Mr. Werbner advised that there is a Public Act that requires that the BOE and the Council consider suggestions regarding consolidation of non-education services each year. Tolland has a sub-committee consisting of BOE and Council members. They have met and are working on those types of ideas. Having the sub-committee meets this obligation.

3. Questions from the public (2 minute limit) specific to the Board of Education budget with questions being directed by the Town Council Chair to the appropriate body for response

George Eldridge of Fish and Game Road: He started by saying that Tolland has fewer students, but they are not closing any schools, nor are we losing teachers. Is there any way that we can cut teachers? We have crumbling foundation issues. We need to get money to fix this. We are not bringing in any money. He suggested that if they knock down Birch Grove and get rid of it, they will save money there. He wants to see some cuts in this town or see industry come into town. He wants to see a reduction in teachers this year.

Mr. Eccles commented that he understands his frustrations. No one wants to see taxes go up. They are trying to maintain the services the best they can. Mr. Pagoni commented that they have lost 41 teachers since 2008 and 39 teachers since 2009. They are averaging 20 – 22 students in classes, some have more. Ms. Falusi directed the public to a document called the Data Point Sheet, which is accessible on-line at the BOE's site. It addresses the numbers and class sizes. Mr. Eccles commented regarding Birch Grove: a Committee has been formed to study all the options. At some point, the public will be involved. The members of the Committee consist of BOE and Town Council members. Dr. Willett referred folks to the DRA Study, which is on the website as well.

Amy Raccagni of 21 WoodfieldS Drive: She has a junior in high school. His classes have 28 kids per class. She thinks that is too many kids. She thinks there is the need for another teacher.

Dr. Willett said their goal is not to have classes of 28 kids. It usually has something to do scheduling.

Jackie Thompson of Buff Cap Road: She does not want to see the taxes go up, but she is willing to pay more if she has to for the education. She supports the budget that was presented by the Superintendant and accepted by the BOE. This District needs an assistant to the Superintendant.

Kenny Trice of 53 Doe Run: There is not going to be any easy solutions. We are dealing with crumbling foundations. We have an excellent school system, and we need to continue with that. He doesn't want to see taxes go up. Maybe we need to push back. Maybe they need to go and make a risk assessment to the Governor, or whoever, saying that if they want us to continue to be the town we are, we need some type of a break.

Jackie Kolb of 34 Susan Drive: She has kids in the schools. She does not want to see the taxes go up, but she wants to support the schools. She supports the BOE's budget as put forward. The kids need to be educated, and we need to maintain our property values. She asked if they could use the fund balance.

Mr. Eccles said it is early in the process, but they can use the fund balance to offset tax increases or revenue shortfalls. Although, he reminded that is also the savings account.

Amanda Doyle of 8 Lakeview Drive Ext.: She supports the budget and thanked everyone for their time. We need to prepare our children for the future.

Deirdre Goldsmith of 21 Marlboro Glade: She supports the BOE's budget. She thinks our kids would be better served if they had an assistant Superintendant.

Liz Costa of 54 Josiah Lane: She does support the budget. We don't need to put dollars and cents on our children's heads. She thinks they can look at shared services within town and other towns.

Carl Rossow of 8 Hillcrest Drive: All things are changing and we are changing with them. He supports the BOE and their budget. We need to move in that direction. Our future belongs to the young people, those we are educating. The Superintendent needs to be supported, and he does need assistance.

Fisher Thompson, School Rep: He thanked everyone who supports him as a student. To everyone who is not in support of the BOE's budget, if you do not educate the students now to solve real world problems, then what is the point? The kids need to be challenged to be able to move forward. With regard to class sizes, some are literally at the limit of how many kids can be in a class. Every chair is filled.

Kenny Trice: The other side of the argument is that there are people who say we need to cut spending. His suggestion then is to close the schools and eliminate the services, except for 911. Let's see if that will work.

Dana Philian of 11 Harvest Lane: She sees the struggles the teachers have at the Birch Grove School. The BOE has spent a lot of time on the budget. They moved to Tolland, because of the school system. She is concerned with the businesses closing within the town. She knows some people want to continue the small town feel, but we need to get revenue in here. She wants the BOE's budget passed.

Ms. Falusi said there will be a new tenant in the 7-11 store front; and the PZC is in the middle of the POCD. She suggested that the residents attend PZC meetings.

Mr. Werbner added that while it isn't good to have vacant spaces, the owners of those facilities still pay their taxes as if their buildings are full. So, the revenue is still coming in.

Kate B. of 80 Tolland Green: She follows the BOE's budget process closely. She doesn't want to see the taxes go up. If we want to see a high quality school system, she asks that the Town Council support the BOE's budget.

Donna Allegro of Peter Green Road: She is hearing a lot about the student / teacher ratios. She asked if there is somewhere that lists a breakdown of paraprofessionals.

Dr. Willett said the budget has it broken out by school. They do shift around based on student need. There are one to one paraprofessionals that are part of the Special Education program. There are also paraprofessionals that work with groups. He also explained the role of interventionists.

Ms. Moran said there is a video on the website which speaks about the reading intervention and the reading program that is being used right now. It is called SPIRE.

Ms. Plourd advised that page 15 of their budget addresses the teacher / para numbers.

Kenny Trice: The world has changed. We can't compare today to the old days. We can't go back to the old days.

George Eldridge: He commented that he is on a fixed income. This doesn't make him anti-school. We just need to use our money better. A growing percentage of people in the town are on fixed incomes. They don't have the money to increase the budget. He understands that people have kids in school. He has a granddaughter in school too. He wants to make sure they are looking at every possible place to eliminate costs? He suggested looking at the buses. The buses are not full nowadays. You have to think of the other people who are also paying your bills.

Liz Costa: She recalls that Dr. Willett had an incentive for substitute teachers. She asked if he needed to eliminate that.

Dr. Willett said there was a feeling that paying substitute teachers more in Tolland would bring more subs here. Then he did more research and found that wasn't the case. What they did do, was they created permanent subs. Those individuals are guaranteed to have a placement, making them more apt to sign up and stick with us.

Mr. Eccles thanked everyone for their comments.

4. Petitions and/or questions to the Board of Education from Town Council members specific to the BOE Budget

Colleen Yudichak reviewed the process that the BOE has been through regarding their budget. The BOE's proposed budget shows an increase of 2.98%. It includes an assistant to the superintendent. She outlined the job duties: curriculum instruction, evaluation, professional development, budget communication and a lot more. A .5 world-language teacher and an instructor in the SRBIRTI are also included in the budget. Since 2009, Tolland's district has been reduced by 39 teachers. She pointed out that the 2.98% budget reduces outplacements of students to magnets and charters, and capitalizes on staff for internal programs, expands reading support and boosts support for students who struggle with both general and special education.

Ms. Falusi mentioned that in addition to the workshops that the BOE has held most of the Principals and the Superintendent have hours for questions and comments to be answered. There are more than just workshops occurring.

Sam Adlerstein: He wants to make a commitment to George and Carl (*residents who spoke above*). He knows others struggle with the tax burden. The BOE is here for the students, but they are here for the town too. They think about the dollars all the time. Reducing dollars is in the forefront. He knows there are a lot of ways to save money. He just asks for a little trust. The BOE and Town Council try to find the balance. He added that he thinks they should fight regarding the ECS and teacher's pensions.

Robert Pagoni: He said they need the curriculum coordinator. Dr. Willett needs assistance. People come to the town for the school system. We are competing on a worldwide basis here. He continued to speak of what the Principals do, the buses, and the special education program. If you compare us to other towns, we are near the bottom.

Christine Plourd: She commented that she was the only one who voted against the budget. It is hard when you are thinking about the people who can't afford the taxes. Just because she voted no, doesn't mean she doesn't want the best for the education system. She will have two children in the schools in the future; of course she wants them to have the best. She thinks they do need to look at wants versus needs, and that there needs to be policy changes.

Michelle Harrold: Due to the issues a couple of years ago, the BOE has been refocusing their priorities. There are no wants in this budget. She is willing to sacrifice the larger class sizes to fill the positions needed. Any reduction that they will see to the budget will impact every student in some way or another.

Karen Moran: She wants people to be pro community. We need to keep our schools strong, so we can get people to come to Tolland. We, as a community, can remain strong if we do it all together, and if they talk about it together. They need to talk about the facts, the future and the values of this community. She realizes that everyone is not affording of everything, but the town does offer assistance to those who need it.

Colleen Yudichak commented that she agrees with everyone. No one wants higher taxes. With some initiatives, they have been creative in trying to keep students in the District, and saving on their outplacements.

Council Member Questions:

Mr. Reynolds said one of his concerns is what the programs are doing for the budget. Where are the savings from these programs? When he is evaluating the budget, he can't see where the impact is. He has asked the Superintendant to present exactly what these programs actually do for the budget. It's hard to look at a budget that has grown from \$38m actually costs in 2017/2018 up to almost \$41m as proposed today. Are they effective or not? He sees no numbers. He only sees the budget going up year after year. In order to explain it to the taxpayers, and for them to understand it, he needs to know what he is talking about. No matter how much they do here in terms of deciding how much they can afford for the school system and town, it is ultimately up to the taxpayers to determine how much they are willing to pay in increased taxes through the referendum process.

Dr. Willett said he has offered a couple of times to meet personally with Mr. Reynolds to discuss his questions. With regard to the programs that are excellent alternatives to outplacement, they will have two courses of action with a student. You will either address those needs in District, or you are going to outplace them. There is no middle choice. A program that is involved in providing an alternative to outplacement is not something done in public session. It is done in a PPT or IEP. He did a presentation back in April 2017 for the BOE and Council. It described what the program would do, and currently the program is doing all of those things. He said he would be happy to discuss this and go into further details. Mr. Reynolds said he would like to see updates to the presentation from 2017 as to how things compare to now.

Discussion between Mr. Reynolds and Dr. Willett continued. Mr. Adlerstein added that he understands what Mr. Reynolds is saying. He suggested that they create a schedule that exactly ties the dollars in the budget to the FTE's in the budget at the same point in time. Mr. Reynolds said that would be helpful. He needs to understand how they have gotten from \$38m to \$41m.

Ms. Nuccio said they have actuals, then accruals (encumbrances), and then the projection (what they think they are going to spend / this is what we think we are going to have at the end of the year). That is the piece that is missing. She commented that there is an overage in salaries. When asked if the whole budget will be over this year, the answer has been no, but it is not shown. All they see is a big balance, with no projection.

Dr. Willett said the projection is what is in the allocation for that amount. If a balance is showing now, it is because not all encumbrances happen now, some happen at the end of the year. The bottom line is that he doesn't expect that balance to be there.

Mr. Eccles handed out a memo from the Tolland Town Council Republican Caucus to the Tolland BOE. The memo included 21 questions. *(See attached memo)*. They would appreciate answers to these questions from the BOE. The memo is aimed to help them to understand the numbers in the budget. Since the meeting was nearing the end, Mr. Werbner suggested that the BOE and Superintendent take these questions into deliberations. They could respond either in writing and/or publicly at the second scheduled workshop (March 14th) when they meet again.

Dr. Willett said it is up to the BOE as to how they want to handle the questions. Personally, he is recognizing a lot of the questions. He has already received some questions through the Town Manager, and has already started answer some of them. He will continue to answer them regardless of how the BOE will manage the questions they've received tonight.

Mr. Reagan added that some of the questions did come from him. It will help him to understand the budget.

Ms. Falusi suggested that they write letters to the Legislatures and push back.

5. Adjournment: Steven Werbner adjourned the meeting at 9:00 p.m.

Steven R. Werbner
Town Manager

Michelle A. Finnegan
Town Council Clerk

To: The Tolland Board of Education
From: The Tolland Town Council Republican Caucus
Re.: The BoE Adopted 2019/2020 Budget

Good evening!

We have reviewed the proposed 2019/2020 Board of Education Budget and have some concerns which we would like the Board of Education to answer. Can the Board of Education please provide answers to these concerns by the time of our next joint meeting?

Many thanks,
Bill, Tammy, Paul, Christine and John

(The questions are numbered for convenient reference.)

Question 1:

The proposed budget shows salaries increasing by \$1,443,607 from the 2018-2019 budget. It's increasing \$2,320,433 (13.4%) versus 2017-2018 projected actuals. What accounts for the difference of \$876,826?

Question 2:

In the adopted budget, a breakdown of the proposed \$1.4M salary increase identifies two increases, namely:

\$328,000 for LEAP teachers

\$177,000 for Board Certified Behavioral Analysts.

At the November 7 budget presentation, contractual obligations for salary increases were identified as \$475,000.

The total of these three items is \$980,000, leaving a difference of approximately \$463,000 between the identified items and the requested budget increase. Other than an identified increase in headcount of 1.5 (one of which is grant-funded), what accounts for this difference?

Question 3:

In the latest Q&A's from the BoE, the contractual obligation went from the \$475,000 (mentioned above) to \$559,000. What is driving this \$84,000 increase?

Question 4:

From The BOE Special Meeting minutes of February 4, 2019, a board member identified that a net of 17.6 teaching positions were added. Last year's budget included adding 5 new positions. (4a) What were the other 12.6 positions which were added? (4b) Should the BoE adopted budget show the addition of these positions?

Question 5:

The superintendent said that the 12.6 positions added for the 18/19 school year which were unbudgeted (i.e., not the 5 in the 17/18 budget) will not cause the BoE 18/19 budget to exceed the plan.

(5a) What is the source of funding for these additional personnel?

(5b) If they are being paid for out of savings in other line items, will those same line items be used to pay for them in the 19/20 budget, or will their costs be transferred to the general salary line? If the latter, have those line items been reduced by those amounts?

Question 6:

Student population reductions do not seem to lead to budget reductions. Here are the numbers:

13/14 - 14/15 student population down by 54 students, budget increased by 3.13%.

14/15 - 15/16 student population down by 78 students, budget increased by 2.92%.

15/16 - 16/17 student population down by 114 students, budget increased by 2.76%

16/17 - 17/18 student population down by 19 students, budget is unchanged

17/18 - 18/19 student population down by 72 students, budget increased by 0.78%

18/19 - 19/20 student population projects reduction by 127 students, requested budget increases by 2.98%.

That's a 464 student decline (an 18% reduction) since the 13/14 year, and the school budget has increased by 12.57% since then.

(6a) During this period, what expenses have increased to account for this net increase in per pupil spending?

(6b) How many teachers (just teachers) positions have been reduced since the 14/15 school year?

Question 7:

During one BoE meeting, the Superintendent emphasized that decreasing budget items required a cost-to-benefit analysis to determine if the reductions were feasible. Please provide a similar cost-to-benefit analysis for all increases in the budget items which are not driven by contractual or mandatory obligations. (Please note these budget items which are.)

Question 8

Why are the following line items being increased in spite of having historically shown underspending (in some cases, rather dramatic underspending)?

(8a) Health Insurance: consistently underspent by \$200K–\$370K per year. Shows an increase of \$380K for next year. (Historical data below, amounts in parentheses indicate amount underspent.)

14/15 - (\$207,553), 15/16 - (\$287,788), 17/18 - (\$235,440), 18/19 - (\$368,631)

19/20 - budgeted increase of \$380,498

(8b) Audit and Legal: Never spent more than \$167K, but budgeting \$241K

14/15 - (\$8,806), 15/16 - (\$39,965), 16/17 - (\$80,831), 17/18 - (\$91,238) - 18/19 - (\$88,808)
19/20 - budgeted \$241K

(8c) Athletic Officials: Spend is about \$41K per year, but budgeting \$72K
14/15 - (\$44,727), 15/16 - (\$2,913), 16/17 - (\$16,557), 17/18 - (\$31,067)
19/20 - budgeted \$72K

(8d) Technology Repair and Maintenance: spend is between \$28K and \$32K, underspending budget by apx \$10k a year.

14/15 - (\$9,934) - 15/16 - (\$8,438), 16/17 - (\$10,443), 17/18 - (\$9,527)

(8e) What would make the BoE comfortable (e.g., agreement with the Town Council, a contingency fund, etc.) with budgeting the historical maximum spend for each of these, and other categories, instead of these higher figures?

Question 9:

In line item 535 (Postage/Advertising/Printing), the budget increases from \$59K to \$84K for "anticipated increased costs for advertising and mailing". (This line item is typically underspent.) What is driving the anticipation that spending will increase 42% in one year?

Question 10:

From 16/17 to 17/18 the total budget for lines 560, 561 and 564 (Special Education Costs) went up to \$2.9M but only \$2.2M was spent, resulting in \$749K (25% of budget) unspent. This year, the budget was increased to \$3M and projections show nearly all of it will be spent. That is a 32.6% increase.

(10a) What is driving this increase?

(10b) Isn't LEAP supposed to reduce special education costs?

Question 11:

What is causing the change in line item 564 to go from \$542K last year to \$57K this year?

Question 12:

What is causing the change in line item 516 to go from \$492K last year to \$813K this year?

Question 13:

An exhibit in the BoE's adopted budget shows a total of \$171K for the Magnet/Charter/VoAg schools. Line 561 in the budget shows \$812K. What is causing the difference between the exhibit amount and the line item in the budget?

Question 14:

How many students were enrolled in LEAP in 17/18 and 18/19, and how many are projected for the 19/20 school year?

Question 15:

(15a) Has LEAP achieved cost savings, as well as in-district placements, as intended?

(15b) Do the savings cover the costs of the program? If so, by how much?

Question 16:

Other districts were interested in placing students into our LEAP. Have any students been placed into Tolland's LEAP?

Question 17:

(17a) Does the BoE have a measure of success for LEAP?

(17b) If so, what is it, and how is the program doing?

Question 18:

How many students were enrolled in Tolland through the Open Choice program in 17/18 and 18/19, and how many are projected for the 19/20 school year?

Question 19:

An Open Choice program presentation given prior to Tolland's entering the program stated that there was to be a \$3,000 per child attendance grant and a \$4,500 per child early beginnings grant, totalling \$7,500 per child.

Currently, the budget shows Tolland's receiving \$72K for all Open Choice students. What per-student amount is being used to estimate this item?

Question 20:

(20a) Does the BoE have a measure of success for Open Choice?

(20b) If so, what is it, and how is the program doing?

(20c) What would cause the BoE to decide to leave the Open Choice program?

Question 21:

If a 1:1 computer program is being proposed for some, or all, of the student population, can we possibly look at more cost-effective ways to accommodate the expense? For example, as the superintendent has noted, the median income is high in the town, so we expect that some of this population already has access to a device at home; thus we would propose the use of shared devices.