

ANNUAL BUDGET PRESENTATION MEETING MINUTES

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TOLLAND TOWN COUNCIL
HYBRID MEETING

6th Floor Council Chambers or Zoom
April 17, 2024 – 7:00 P.M.

2024 APR 22 AM 11:20

Katherine Stargardt

Members Present: Katherine Stargardt, Chair; Jacob Marie, Vice Chair; Jennifer Buckler, Chris Moran, Alex Noonan (Zoom), Joseph Sce (Zoom), Colleen Yudichak

Members Absent: none

Also Present: Brian Foley, Town Manager; Lisa Hancock, Director, Finance & Records (Zoom); Mike Wilkinson, Director, Administrative Services (Zoom); Dr. Walter Willett, Superintendent; Bev Bellody, Director, Human Services (Zoom)

1. **Call to Order:** The Chair called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m.
2. **Pledge of Allegiance** - recited
3. **Moment of Silence** - observed
4. **Annual Budget Presentation**
 - 4.1 Pursuant to C9-9 of the Town of Tolland Charter, the Town Council shall arrange for an annual budget presentation. The annual budget presentation is intended to provide information and encourage public discussion.

Ms. Stargardt reviewed the following:

Town of Tolland, Town Council's Annual Budget Presentation

Fiscal Year 2024-2025

April 17, 2024

- Agenda and Purpose
- Budget and Community Planning Timeline
- Changes to Expenditures
- Impact to Town Services
- Board of Education
- Significant Cost Drivers for the BOE Budget
- Town Council Budget
- BOE Adjustments
 - Mr. Holt, Chair of BOE, noted that the initial Board request included five reductions. The Board met last night and recognized that there was no good news and that it would be difficult. Mr. Holt noted that this is not doom and gloom but reality. The Board instructed Dr. Willett to continue to look for alternate revenue sources and will do the best it can with what it has. The Board appreciates the Council's support and looks forward to continued conversations.
 - Dr. Willett noted that they appreciate the efforts of the Council, which worked hard to do its best and continues to do so. This includes the Town Manager as well. Last night, the Board did due diligence to provide the best outcomes for students and the community. It is difficult in a year with reductions, but the Board found a way with the 3.91% that will be great for Tolland. It is tough to see adjustments made, and they always come at a price. At this point, there are seven reductions, but they will do their best to continue the excellence the school system has had in the past can will have in the future. Dr. Willett noted that a document that illustrates the impacts is available on the BOE website:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tST7LovgUZozSxgclqdj9GHZidLP4TVU/view>
 - Jayden Regisford, Member of the BOE, commented that the Board's discussion focused on how to save whatever positions they could given the circumstances. He thanked Dr. Willett, Mr. Holt, the Board, and the Council for making the adjustments necessary.
 - Dana Philbin, Member of the BOE, commented that they have had many difficult budget meetings. The Board proposed a budget with five position reductions as well as program reductions. With the situation it was put in, they are also losing the following at THS: 1 ELA teacher, 1 social studies teacher, 2 science teachers, 1 PE/health teacher, 1 paraprofessional, 1

librarian. They are also losing a K2 educator. These are not only positions, but also people. Today, at the Finance & Facilities Committee meeting, they discussed ensuring that educators are in front of special education students in order to comply with IEPs and 504s. If there are gaps, it impacts general education which will snowball and tier I students will become tier II students etc. which will cost the district, and town, more money. Ms. Philbin hopes they think of cost savings and there is an opportunity to fund the entire town including the BOE budget. She thanked the Councilors who advocated for the entire town, including for a robust budget for the schools. It is people, curriculum, programs, classes, and class sizes. THS is being greatly impacted.

- Capital/Debt Services Summary
- Additional Budget Highlights
- The Budget: Expenditures
- The Budget: Revenues
- Estimated Taxes – Residential & Commercial
- Comparable Communities
- The Budget Referendum Question
- Where to vote and when
- Online Resources
- Additional Resources
- Annual Budget Referendum
 - Tuesday, May 7 from 6AM to 8PM
Tolland Library Program Room
- Questions and Comments

Mr. Sce asked if this presentation will be repeated elsewhere. Ms. Stargardt noted that it will be presented again tomorrow at the Senior Center, 12PM. Mr. Sce asked if they could correct the presentation. He commented that it is misleading in terms of the various departments that are shown to be receiving an increase in the budget and debt increasing by 14%. The BOE shows an increase of 3.91% and Debt Service shows an increase of 14.39%. Mr. Sce commented that this is inaccurate. In budgeting, the budget number moves when the liability is moved, and this is not being done. The budget number is kept where a liability no longer exists, creating an inaccurate and misleading presentation of debt and the BOE budget. Debt Service increased by less than 1% and the BOE budget increased 5.5%.

5. Public Participation

George Ulrich, Fish and Game Road, commented that he agrees with Mr. Sce. The school budget is much higher than is pointed out and people do not realize this. Hopefully, they will be back in mid-May, and it will be fixed.

Andy Powell, 21 Clearbrook Drive, noted that his comment reflects only his position as a citizen and not his elected position. That said, he noted that they are working to increase the commercial viability of route 195 and seeing expansion of the economic base. As a citizen, Mr. Powell asked what drove the increase in legal costs. *Ms. Stargardt explained that they have seen increases in legal costs over the past couple of years and have a number of legal cases that need to be addressed. There are legal costs associated with guiding the town through the contaminated well issues. It is not a rate increase for the town attorney. Mr. Foley confirmed that the town attorney renewal did not have a rate increase; however, they have brought in additional counsel, yet they are coming in at a similar rate.* Mr. Powell asked how many resident state troopers are in town. *Ms. Stargardt responded that there are currently four and there is a contract to continue to have four.* Mr. Powell asked about the value of having a sergeant and if it would be an on-the-road or an administrative position. *Mr. Foley explained that a sergeant would be \$15K more than the highest paid trooper. It is an administrative position with the ability to go on the road. It is debatable whether it would benefit a town of Tolland's size.* Mr. Powell commented that in the presentation, the projected increase is shown for other towns. He recommended showing the current mill rate as well to provide a better view. Mr. Powell asked about the seven reductions for the BOE and if they are people or positions. *Dr. Willett explained that it is both.* Mr. Powell asked if a performance review on the grant administrator has been done in regard to if the grant awards have been paying for the position. *Mr. Foley responded that they have, and then some. He noted that the staff person has also picked up the responsibility of project management which is not in the job description. She applies for all grants but holistically, the town is not eligible for many of them due to its status of not being an impoverished town. They are working with CRCOG and CCM on this. Mr. Foley believes the staff person is worth every penny, and then*

some. She brings money in. Mr. Powell recommended, since it is a fairly new position, that the payback be shown. In terms of debt administration and closure, there used to be a graph of outstanding bonds. The high school bond is close to the end, and it may be interesting to present it to the public. Debt retirement should be presented as well. Ms. Stargardter noted that this was presented as part of the capital budget presentation. In terms of grants, the Grants Manager applied for, and the town was awarded \$700K to replace the tennis courts. This was in the capital plan and would have been bonded. Additionally, pickleball courts at Heron Cove were in the long-term plan and the town was awarded a \$400K grant. Thus, she concurred with Mr. Foley and agreed to present the cost/benefit. It will be included in the Town Manager report.

Kate Howard-Bender, 103 Goose Lane, commented that she is grateful that the Council moved the UISF to town funding. This is where it belonged ten years ago. She thinks of how much could have been invested in the schools had this been done when the issue first came up. Schools do not make money. They educate and create the future. The increase for the BOE means they are losing at least seven positions. She is still distraught that the Council decreased the BOE budget by \$400K. Schools will open regardless and show up for the students. She noted the hard work of those advocating for the schools – the center of the community. Ms. Howard-Bender acknowledged the work being done to bring in businesses to ameliorate the tax burden. She wishes they had used more of the tax stabilization fund and tapped into the large unassigned reserve fund.

Mr. Moran asked for elaboration on the budget numbers presented and UISF. Ms. Stargardter explained that the numbers are what the Council voted on and were passed by a majority vote. The percentages are a reflection of those numbers.

Tony Holt, 67 Mile Hill Road, noted that he is the Chair of the BOE. He commented in regard to Councilor Sce's comment. There is no benefit to the Board in trying to hide information or having a sleight of hand with numbers. The intent is to be transparent. Anyone with questions should go to the website, e-mail the Board, or reach out to Dr. Willett. Explanations will be provided informed decisions may be made.

Mr. Sce spoke in regard to Mr. Holt's comment. Mr. Sce recommended changing the presentation to reflect 5.5% for the BOE and taking off the increase in Debt Services. Ms. Stargardter commented that what is presented is what needs to be presented as what is shown is what was voted on by the Council on April 4th. Mr. Sce commented that it is a reclassification. It does not change what was voted upon. Ms. Stargardter commented that she does not disagree with Mr. Sce's comments, but the Council voted on four numbers – a total budget that included a call out of the four numbers. The budget cannot be changed at this point. The Director of Finance confirmed the numbers. His information is fully documented in the budget documents. Mr. Sce commented that it is misleading because they are summarizing the information incorrectly. He is not saying to change what was voted upon but to correct the beginning balances to show the reclassification. Ms. Stargardter believes they are being transparent, and this conversation is on the record. She does not disagree with what he is saying. Mr. Sce believes it should be discussed and added that perhaps they should present more accurate, and clearer information. They are misleading people. Ms. Yudichak called a point of order and noted that they are in Public Participation. Ms. Stargardter noted that she disagrees with Mr. Sce's conclusion. They are not misleading people. The information is publicly available, and it has been discussed at length. It is not misleading.

Kate Vallo, 80 Tolland Green, commented that she has a senior at THS and started tuning into the budgets when her daughter was in kindergarten. At that time, the BOE portion of the budget was about 80% and has started to erode over the past 10-12 years. It is now 69%. She noted that moving some of the debt service to the town may have had an impact, but she is glad that it was moved. Ms. Vallo commented that this may speak to shifting values in town but hopes it does not and that the Council can be a leader to help the town refocus on supporting education. It helps support property values, encourages young families to move in, and keeps the town vibrant. It is important to fund all of the town. Ms. Vallo is grateful for her children's education as a parent, educator, and neighbor. She hopes people can think about values and support education in Tolland. Additionally, she is concerned that Mr. Sce feels that items are being misrepresented and that he can verify this at a more appropriate time.

Rebecca Risely, 103 Mountain Spring Road, commented that she tries to stay objective but has a student at THS who will be impacted by the cuts. She has heard Councilors who want to separate the town and BOE budgets. The BOE creates a budget and a single budget for the town is created. It is one town. The BOE is a big part of the town and the budget because students are a big part of the town. At the last meeting, several Councilors spoke of wanting to prevent town employees from losing jobs. Teachers are town employees and seven jobs, or positions, are being lost and people

are attached to the positions. She asked if they are aware of the impacts the cuts will have on students and teachers. Currently, there are three PE/health teachers that teach 740 students in grades 9-12 and they are reducing this to two. She noted additional reductions of seven to five in English, seven to five in science, and five to four in social studies based on the directory. When thinking about the cuts, she hopes they know what they are doing.

Claudette Morehouse, 89 Merlot Way, commented that she is concerned about Mr. Sce's comments. If the numbers are not correct, it does not change the number they are voting on, but it is misleading. During the six-hour budget meeting, members were in a "gruff" because they were not given the right information to make a decision but are asking people to vote on a budget without the correct numbers. This is not transparent. It is misleading and unfair to voters. Ms. Morehouse commented that she would like verification from Ms. Hancock.

Ms. Stargardter asked if Ms. Hancock could respond.

Ms. Hancock noted that the numbers are not incorrect. They are the numbers voted on by the Council. She explained that for clarification, and included in the Town Manager's budget book, is a statement that although Debt Service increased by 14.39% (\$676K), it was a reclassification from the Board of Education budget and the Town budget to Debt Service. She explained that it was a reclassification of money already in the budget. Ms. Hancock understands what is being stated but the numbers presented are the numbers that were voted on and must be displayed as they are. The only thing that can be done is to add a footnote if so desired.

Ms. Stargardter confirmed that a footnote can be added. She will update the presentation.

Deirdre Goldsmith, 21 Marlboro Glade, commented that if they are making adjustments, revisions, or corrections, the general public will be confused. They see a percentage increase and will think education is getting more but it took a hit this year and is a disaster. When making revisions, she asked if they could include that there is a loss and not an increase. People will not understand. Ms. Goldsmith thanked the Councilors who supported adequately funding the education budget.

Liz Costa, 54 Josiah Lane, commented that adding the footnote is smart. It makes it transparent. That said, they need to look long term. Her friend left the Tolland school system their student was in a class of 24. The teacher had difficulty controlling the student and recommended an IEP. He went to a school system with a class size of 16 and did not need an IEP. Everyone is happy. Ms. Costa questioned if by cutting the education budget they are continuing to add IEPs and 504s because teachers cannot control 24-25 young students. The IEPs and 504s have to be funded. It is federally mandated. They are cutting for the rest of the students and likely adding to the budget in the future.

Ms. Yudichak commented that she does not think any of the Councilors addressed the budget "willy nilly" for six hours. Many people are disappointed with the vote, particularly her vote, and it does not sit well with her, but they represent 14K people. She does not believe an "eye for an eye" in regard to another \$200K was an appropriate comment by the Chair at that meeting.

Mr. Marie commented that it is a difficult process, especially when there is a high number to start. Decisions were not made lightly. It was a compromise and there are parts he likes and parts he does not. It is what they could get the majority to agree on. They have to look at the entire town. The Council voted on its goals and supporting education was one of them but there were also fiscal goals. They want to look out for taxpayers, particularly those on fixed incomes. This is what he tried to take into consideration. Additionally, he looks forward to continuing to cooperate with the BOE and whatever voters decide on May 7th.

Mr. Moran commented that his hope is that the Council will stand behind the budget. Information is available. He encouraged people to review it or reach out. He supports adding the footnote if it adds clarity. They worked tirelessly on the budget and there were compromises that they are not happy with but he hopes the Council will be united and put its best foot forward so the public will have confidence in the Council.

Ms. Buckler commented that in looking back at the process, most disappointing is hearing Councilors say they represent all of Tolland. It has no meaning because they had overwhelming support for the BOE budget as it was approved by the BOE and presented by the Town Manager. They received 100 e-mails supporting the BOE budget as it was since cuts were already made. At the public hearing, there was overwhelming support for the BOE. For one to say they represent all of Tolland, she asked where the people are who say they want to cut more from the BOE. While there was a sprinkling, the support for the BOE budget was overwhelming. A number of Councilors are not supporting what the

townspeople are saying they want. She asked how they can say they support the people when they are not listening to the people. Everyone has an opinion but when they see so many people in support, she feels that is what the town wants. She is disappointed in how some Councilors voted and hopes in the future they can do better.

Andy Powell, 21 Clearbrook Drive, noted that he is speaking as a private citizen. He explained that one can look at a budget and talk about cuts. In real numbers, he does not believe the BOE, nor the town's numbers are being cut. They are being increased and there are drivers for this. Money does not equate to the quality of education. In terms of dollars, Hartford spends double what Tolland does. Hartford graduates 34% of students and 12% go on to secondary education. Tolland graduates 99.4% of students with more than 80% going on to secondary education. It is not a question of money being spent, it is programs, curriculum, and parental support at home. The latter is one of the greatest indicators of educational success. Mr. Powell noted that the community supports education – it supports it at home. People will look at the numbers and say that the BOE is not being cut – the number is being increased. He appreciates the Council's stewardship of the resources in reserve. Temptation to go after that money has ramifications for the town and for its AAA bond rating. Only four towns in CT have a AAA rating. Mr. Powell noted that by not dipping into the pool of money, saves money over time. The finance team has done a good job of explaining this. When he came to Tolland 22 years ago, foreign language was taught in elementary school, and it moved. There were more opportunities for advanced placement classes, and they have been lost, yet they are spending more on education. It is the other costs associated with education that are the drivers. Mr. Powell would like to have the programs but because the focus is on the numbers, they lose sight that it is not the dollars being spent, it is the programs and curriculum that make the difference. Mr. Powell cited the examples of the street sweeper and pavement management system and how without those, they realized the problems that resulted. At times, in the short term, what reduces, or does not increase the mill rates, and ends up costing more. Focusing on curriculum and programs rather than raw dollars is the goal. The power of a Tolland education can put people in space. It was not because of the money but because of programs, the curriculum, and the people involved. He would like the Council to fully support the referendum and encourage the vote. If this is the best case for all services, they need to push people to vote.

Jen Gallichant, 150 Timber Trail, commented as both the Vice Chair of the BOE and a parent. She thanked Ms. Stargardt, Mr. Moran, and Ms. Buckler for responding to her son's e-mail sent to the Council. Her son is a junior. She heard that most said they cared about education, and it was disappointing that not all the Councilors answered the e-mail. The BOE should not hold debt. The Council did not do the BOE a favor, it did the right thing. Education is a part of the community and the town. There were options to fund every department in town with a lower mill rate and keep funds healthy, but it did not happen. Ms. Gallichant commented that they are reducing eight positions and six of them have people in them. Decisions were made. She asked that they stand behind the decisions and move on.

Ms. Yudichak commented that she will fully support the budget.

Ms. Stargardt noted that she does and will support the budget. Supporting the budget is in the best interest of the town and addressing issues of debate during a previous meeting are not productive at this point. On May 7th she will vote "yes" and believes voting "yes" for this budget is in the best interest of the town. She promised that all seven Councilors considered the budget with a lot of effort. The final vote was not done lightly. They do not always agree, but they came together and there is a Town Council Budget that she supports. Ms. Stargardt hopes the rest of the Council will support the budget and on May 7th there is a successful referendum with a great turnout. It is in the best interest of the town for registered voters to consider the budget, what it means to them, what it means to the town, and to make their decision at the ballot box. A lot of deliberation and consideration went into the budget. She does not believe anyone is happy with every line but this is the outcome of compromise and working as a team. They found an agreement that the majority of the Councilors voted for. The Town Council's Budget is moving forward. The referendum will be on May 7th in the Library Program Room, 6AM-8PM.

6. Adjournment

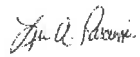
Mr. Marie motioned to adjourn at 8:22PM.

Ms. Buckler seconded the motion.

Discussion: none

All in favor. Motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted by,



Lisa Pascuzzi
Town Council Clerk

Town Council Chair