

SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

TOWN COUNCIL/BOARD OF EDUCATION JOINT MEETING

HICKS MEMORIAL MUNICIPAL CENTER 6TH FLOOR COUNCIL CHAMBERS

MARCH 11, 2015 - 6:00 P.M.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Jack Scavone, Chairman; George Baker, Vice-Chair; William Eccles; Richard Field; Paul Krasusky; Jan Rubino and Ben Stanford

MEMBERS ABSENT: None.

BOARD OF EDUCATION MEMBERS PRESENT: Sam Adlerstein, Chairman; Patrick Doyle, Vice-Chair; Steve Clark; Kathy Gorsky; Karen Moran; Robert Pagoni and Colleen Yudichak

BOARD OF EDUCATION MEMBERS ABSENT: Alfred Fratoni; Tom Frattaroli and Joseph Sce

OTHERS PRESENT: Steven Werbner, Town Manager; Dr. Walter Willett, Superintendent of Schools; Clem Langlois, Public Works; Beverly Bellody, Human Services

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 6:06 p.m.

2. **Presentation by the Town Manager of anticipated revenue stream for the next fiscal year and potential impacts of the Governor's Budget proposal**

Mr. Werbner started with a brief overview of his budget, which will be released tomorrow. There are two major things impacting the budget this year: 1.) the revaluation that Tolland went through. The town saw a decrease in the Grand List, rather than an increase as a result of the revaluation. This is happening all over the state. It changes how the budget process gets explained. To some it is a good thing, to others it's not such a good thing. 2.) The state budget. For the most part, the Governor kept municipalities flat in terms of state aid, which is a good thing during this economic period. The Governor has kept us at an even level with state funds, primarily the education funds that come from ECS. The town receives over \$10m, which has not been impacted over the last four years. Although, it hasn't been increased either, which is significant given the cost of education and municipal government services have increased. Other states have seen significant slashing. Even though municipal aid has been held flat, there have been cuts in other areas that have affected Tolland directly. With regard to the Resident Trooper program, Tolland funds 70% and the State funds 30%. Now, the Governor is proposing to change that to 100% town funding, which will have an impact on sixty communities in Connecticut. Also, on the town-side, they are seeing other small cuts, for example with human service grants, the youth service grant, the aid that is received towards mutual aid, etc. The biggest concern is that the Governor was faced with a \$1m+ deficit, and he has made cuts to human services programs, higher education and hospitals. There are very strong lobbyists who are now trying to persuade the Legislators to reinstate funds. To reinstate the funds

with this deficit, they will need to find the money somewhere. Either taxes get raised, or they readjust how the cuts were made. Mr. Werbner is concerned that they will redo the entire budget that was presented to them from the Governor, and reestablish new priorities. Tolland may not know the full impact of what this means to municipalities until much later in this fiscal year, and hopefully before the next fiscal year. All he can do is develop a budget off of the information that he has now.

Mr. Werbner reviewed his handout with those present. He spoke of the Revenues, and showed a comparison with preceding years. In 2015/2016, he is estimating a small increase in revenues. It is primarily due to increased building permit fees. Tolland did see an increase in new home starts last year. Last year, nineteen new homes were built, which is the most in the last six years. There is anticipated continued development this year, such as multi-family housing on Route 195. So, he is anticipating some increase in building permit fees that will offset some of the other losses in revenue. With regard to expenditures, he has worked with Dr. Willett to try to keep our expenditures at a level very similar to what people found acceptable last year. The town-side, at this time, is showing a 1.91% increase, and the BOE is at 2.98% increase, for an overall increase of 2.68%. The BOE had originally requested a 3.44% increase. Since that budget came to the Council, adjustments have been made and our contributions for health insurance, as well as other post-employment benefits, were reduced. This brought the BOE budget down from 3.44% to 2.98%. None of the education plan as presented by Dr. Willett and approved by the BOE is impacted. Changes were made to the insurance line and post-employment benefit line. Again, 2.68% is the overall increase in the budget.

The Grand List growth is where the revaluation really shows up. In prior years we've had a small increase in the list. When Tolland was in its 'boom' period, there was a 3-4% increase in the Grand List. It has been below 1% for the last several years. This year, because of the revaluation, the Grand List went down 3.51%, which is a loss of -\$1,418,664 in terms of potential tax revenue. Due to the revaluation, the mill rate will go up, assessments go down and the adjustment normally results in a balancing factor. In order to offset the decrease in the Grand List, the mill rate has gone up by 2.31 mills over what it was last year. When people see the 2.31 mill increase, they panic. You really need to look at your particular assessment. What the impact was to you from the revaluation, what the mill rate means to you on your new, and in most cases, lowered assessment in terms of your overall tax burden.

Mr. Werbner reviewed examples showing the potential impact of the revaluation and mill rate change on property taxes using four scenarios. Again, he reiterated that residents really need to take their new assessment, compare it against their old assessment and utilize the mill rate that is being proposed to see what their impact is directly. A calculator will be provided for the community to use on the town's website.

The Town Manager closed his presentation by advising that there will be more information presented in his budget book, which he urged the community to go on-line to view.

Dr. Willett said he feels that the means by which they were able to come to 2.98% were ways that allow the District to have the programs and critical needs that they need. He fully supports this number. He would like to see this go to referendum, because this is something that he believes will pass. He feels strongly that this is a good plan.

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

Ms. Rubino asked if the savings that they will achieve to bring the BOE budget down to 2.98%, is money that is going to have to come before the Council to approve to fund the BOE.

Mr. Werbner said no. It is part of his budget recommendation to the Council. That money has already been taken out of the BOE budget as a result of the reductions in the health insurance funding. So, if they were to adopt the budget, no further action would need to be taken.

Mr. Field asked if this affects the budget that they passed at 3.44%. Do you see anything that has been lost, or is it the insurance and everything else stayed the same?

Dr. Willett said that covers the differential between the 3.44% and the 2.98%. It would not compromise their ability to execute the initiatives that he has put forward in his budget.

Mr. Adlerstein said the insurance estimates that they used when they finished their budget, have actually come back more favorable.

Mr. Field thanked the BOE for the work they have done on the budget. They have changed the way it is being presented.

Mr. Adlerstein thanked the Council for their communication with the BOE. It has been a long budget process. They have done a lot of workshops. There are a lot of reductions in the BOE budget. At one point Dr. Willett characterized it as "Sophie's Choice". There are a lot of things that nobody wants to reduce. In the end, the BOE voted and believed that these were necessary reductions. They are part of the plan that is moving the BOE forward. In the long run, this is a true plan to move our school system forward. He thanked those that participated in putting this together.

Ms. Rubino commented that Dr. Willett and the BOE had to face a declining enrollment. There are 15 teaching positions that have been eliminated. She commends them. It is really hard work to make those decisions and realign all the classrooms. It was a difficult task. As we bring this budget to referendum, she wants the community to realize the work that has gone into it.

Patrick Doyle added to Ms. Rubino's comment: 15 positions were cut as part of the BOE's budget. 10 of the positions were certified teaching positions, and the other 5 were other paraprofessional staff. The BOE, under Dr. Willett's leadership, have done a lot of work. He can't underscore the amount of work that the staff has done. It has been a tremendous effort.

Mr. Werbner commented that this is the first budget that he fully believes should be supported as it is being presented. This budget process has been a good experience.

Mr. Eccles asked Dr. Willett how the staff within the school system feels about the budget.

Dr. Willett said that whenever you have staff reduction, there is not a tremendous amount of enthusiasm. Although he has had a number of educators express to him great enthusiasm over the direction they have. They are very appreciative of the direction that the District is taking. Understandable, some are deeply upset with the staff reductions, which is to be expected.

4. 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

Lynne Carnemolla of 16 Crystal Ridge: She is a BOE employee. She urges the BOE to re-evaluate their decision to eliminate the funding for the literacy paras in the Reading Department at Birch Grove. She went on to explain why the program is so important. She asked that by supporting the reduction of 5 out of 6 paraprofessionals in reading support literacy, how they are going to meet the plan to maximize student achievement.

Mary Dunay of 8 Sherry Circle: She has been with the BOE for 18 years; she was in the Literacy Department for 17 of those years. The program has kept kids out of the Special Ed Department. Cutting the positions will not allow for the programs to continue. Why are you cutting positions that are giving you the best bang for your buck? Please reconsider your position in eliminating the literacy paraprofessionals who assist and support the literacy goals that are met each year at Birch Grove. Of all the positions being cut, this one will have the biggest impact on the children. They are the important ones here today, and why we are here today.

Linda Gallic of 29 Ruops Road: She holds one of the positions in the literacy program at Birch Grove. She outlined how the program assists the children. She asked them to think about their decision to eliminate these positions. She invited the Council and BOE members to Birch Grove to see what they do day in and day out.

Mr. Field advised the public that the Council cannot delegate where the dollars are spent within the BOE budget. So, the comments above are directed solely to the BOE.

Deb Goetz of 176 Kate Lane: She said she was here to support the 3.48% budget, and was surprised to hear it's been reduced to 2.98%. She asked if the BOE budget were left at 3.48%, what could they do in terms of saving some of these positions.

Sam Adlerstein thanked those who spoke tonight, and noted that what they said was correct. These are not easy decisions. They felt like they could preserve everything, so that everything would remain the way it was, but their eyes were opened. They realized that during the course of discussions they couldn't maintain everything. They needed to focus on what was really needed. The eliminations were "Sophie's Choice".

Dr. Willett said those that spoke tonight during the public comment made a wonderful presentation. They are very smart, capable people. The BOE needed to figure out how they could move forward. They needed to stay with the core priorities. They needed to look at the enrollment declining. There is no way he can justify losing these positions. He offered to have a special meeting with those involved if they would like. The principals were consulted and they are the ones that came up with these reductions. There is no good way to talk about the reduction of staff. He said they are trying to adjust to the things that need to happen.

Kathy Gramling of 15 Andrew Way: She said that without these ladies, she is not sure how the kindergarteners will get the support they need.

Dr. Willett said the enrollment has declined considerably. The attention will still be possible, because the number of kids that we had a few years ago was so much higher. You are arguing for more personalized attention. That attention will still be possible, because you are going to have fewer kids in the District. He respects her argument, but he is offering the response that is out there.

Bob Pagani said his daughter is a product of their program. He asked Dr. Willett who is going to do the work that they are not going to be here to do, and on top of that, who is going to have the time to do that work?

Dr. Willett said those are worthy questions, but the answer is not going to come out in 2 minutes in this forum. He encourages those with questions on this to attend a Superintendent's breakfast so that they can get all their questions answered. He reviewed the numbers showing the decline in enrollment. These decisions were made with great pain. He doesn't want to lose the 5 teachers, but if this referendum does not pass, he doesn't want to lose 22-25 more positions.

Lynne Carnemolla: She said they don't understand how this is going to happen. How are they going to achieve the goals? She asked if there could be a staff meeting where they can understand what their thoughts are.

Dr. Willett said that is excellent and that is coming. He has been in his job for 8 weeks now. He said they will find that as they move forward the message will be communicated. He believes that one year from now, that question will be answered.

A Teacher at Birch Grove: She spoke of the stress that the kids have when they come in, and how these teachers help them. She doesn't know how the help will be there if you cut these positions.

Frank Connolly, Business Manager: He commented that the BOE is getting a financial report each month. The Report provides an analysis of where they are financially. He does expect to finish the year in the black. The end of the year balance will not be as high as last year. He reviewed the variables that occurred in February.

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

Mr. Werbner said in accordance with State Statutes Public Act 13-60, there is supposed to be a conversation within 10 days of the submittal of the BOE's budget to the Town Manager/Council regarding recommendations and suggestions for the possible consolidation of BOE non-education services and cost savings. Last year, in response to this statute, the BOE and Council established a Service Sharing Committee, which has met regularly. In terms of meeting that statutory intent, he believes that is being met through the creation of that Committee and the ongoing discussions that are being had. If there are any suggestions that the public has, they'd be more than happy to hear those at a committee meeting.

Mr. Scavone applauds the BOE, Frank Connolly, and Dr. Willett for all their work on the budget. This budget is good quality and transparent. He is proud of where we are as a community in this process. Mr. Field agreed, and said that when they asked the BOE a question, they came back with an answer.

Mr. Werbner reiterated that by state law the Council and Town Manager can only approve a bottom line for the BOE. They cannot decide how the dollars get spent. It has been a learning experience for us all to hear the comments tonight, but those comments are best directed to the BOE where you can get a response. The Council or Manager cannot respond to your questions without going through the BOE.

6. Adjournment: George Baker moved to adjourn the meeting; Seconded by Ben Stanford at 7:16 p.m. All were in favor.

Steven R. Werbner, Town Manager

Michelle A. Finnegan
Town Council Clerk