

## **Town Manager Opening Remarks at 3/26/14 Budget Public Hearing**

I want to thank you all for attending this Budget hearing. I also want to thank many of you for your involvement in the entire process which began in early January and for the valuable input you have provided me, the Town Council and BOE as efforts are made to best address the needs of the Town, BOE and the taxpayers.

I also want to thank the members of the Town Council and BOE who have put in countless hours during this process. Government at all levels is a complicated organizational structure with operations that many are not fully familiar with. Therefore, before political leaders can decide on budget priorities, it is necessary that they understand the core business principals of both the Town and BOE. Unfortunately, in the first term of office there are only a couple of months of “orientation” time before you are immersed in the budget process. So I know what our political leaders have been through the last several months and continue to go through and I congratulate them all for the process that they used to best understand the needs and financial restrictions of the Town and Board of Education.

I have my typical budget presentation which many of you have seen in the past. However, before I run through that quickly, I must say we are entering what I call a “new age” in TOLLAND. Let me explain. During the worst recession during modern times I as manager felt it necessary to recommend to Council budgets that, to the extent possible, limited tax increases, which necessitated in some cases a reallocation of resources, retrenchment of services and employees, wage freezes and changes in fringe benefits, and establishment of regional collaborative efforts such as the six Town self-insurance program we took the lead in establishing that in the first year saved us over \$400,000 in insurance costs. Our average tax increase during this time was almost half of the cost of living index. There is, however, a reasonable cost to government as there is a cost to any business enterprise. I have said over the last several years we will reach a point where it will be inevitable that a tax increase of a somewhat higher level will be needed if we desire to sustain the base level of services offered by the Town as well as the BOE and provide needed improvements primarily in the area of education to meet new educational standards being mandated by the state and federal government. We have reached that point and my budget recommendations reflects what I feel is absolutely needed for the next fiscal year. To be quite honest I would have preferred to have as part of my deliberation multi-year plan costs particularly in regard to future education needs but hopefully this type of information will be developed through the course of the upcoming fiscal year in time for the 2015/2016 budget cycle.

So what is the new age? This is a method of budgeting that looks at the needs of the Town and BOE and a review of the most cost effective method of delivery, the establishment of combined accounts that are centrally managed such as in the areas of utility and health insurance expenses and the establishment of appropriate reserve accounts to address future needs and rate fluctuations, a more detailed understanding of programmatic needs through open dialogue, a realization that taxpayers deserve value for the investment they make in governmental services which means that “business as usual” budgets even with limited resources are not acceptable, that short- and long-term planning is essential to all levels of government so that we can fully understand needs and potential future investments needed, the need to align such plans with the financial opportunities we may have over time, the need to continue to build trust levels between the Town and BOE so that information vital to the decision making process of both entities can

be readily available and the realization that not all priorities can be addressed in any one fiscal year. Since we are intertwined more than ever, no longer can budgets be seen as a separate amount provided for the Town and the BOE. Rather the budget must be seen as an expenditure level provided in its entirety. This budget presented to you for consideration provides expenditures within the Town accounts for maintenance of BOE property by the Town including the artificial turf field at the High School as well as all Town and BOE HVAC systems, allows for combined health and utility funds, continues combined purchasing of fuel, gasoline and electricity, continues combined planning and implementation of security improvements and provides funds for a comprehensive behavioral improvement program featured by the reinstatement of the School Resource Officer position through the Connecticut State Police. In addition, the debt service and capital improvement portion of the budget includes costs for both the Town and BOE. So my point is costs for our total services are not just found within the individual budgets of either entity. And for that reason and many others, we need to continue to work on transparent budgeting that builds trust not only in the numbers but the needs.

As I stated previously, I feel strongly that to convince taxpayers of the need to increase taxes they must see value added for which there is a demonstrated need. Is there anyone in this room who enjoys paying more taxes and being told this is a no improvement budget? So we all know the needs are many and cannot all fully be addressed this fiscal year, but the ones that can be addressed immediately by this budget are in my opinion two of the most important and that is All-Day Kindergarten to meet common core requirements and a School Resource Officer. I am not going to speak to the first item since that has and is being thoroughly discussed by the BOE but I want to spend a moment on the second issue.

Why a School Resource Officer now when we have other educational needs for things like computers, curriculum improvements training, etc. Tolland had a School Resource Officer in the past shared with the Town of Mansfield. The State Police eliminated the position several years ago when a federal grant was no longer available. Without that position, the school system for several years has as their number one priority the hiring of a Social Worker. Mid-year several years ago this position was funded and now carries a very full caseload. The current Sergeant serving Tolland was a Resource Officer in Killingly and is familiar with the need for the position and how effective the position can be when allowed to work as a team with Administrators and Social Workers from the School and Town. Other surrounding school districts have seen the benefits of a Resource Officer position and how when working pursuant to a shared vision can improve the educational climate and actually decrease the number of arrests occurring on school property. The Sergeant can tell you of the rather high number of calls of service at the school system ranging in nature from sexual assaults to mental health issues to drugs and alcohol issues, etc. I can tell you of our interactions with school aged children and their families after school hours and the many difficult issues they face on a daily basis. I can tell you that in my eight years in this Town, I unfortunately have heard of more serious mental health issues within the 16-25 year old age group than in my entire career in a neighboring community. I can tell you of incidents of drug overdose, excessive use of alcohol, drunken driving and all the same types of issues which kids are facing in school systems throughout the country. No school system is immune from these issues and most schools today in the post Sandy Hook era have at the top of their agenda the implementation of a School Resource Officer Program. I have communicated with the Superintendent of Schools on this issue and he is in agreement with me on the need and the need to implement this program now. We have together looked at using Constables or private security personnel and neither option provides the full range of benefits we can receive through the State Police. In my opinion the expenditure of dollars for this purpose is of the

greatest importance to the Town and why I am willing to sacrifice having one officer available for general patrol and have that position dedicated to the school system. I had cut funding from the Town budget under the assumption that the school system would pick up the cost of the position. At this point while the BOE has this as a priority, they are not prepared to commit funding. By the time the Town Council adopts a budget on April 1<sup>st</sup>, there has to be certainty as to whether there are funds to continue the State Trooper position. If we were to lose the position and want it at a future date, it could be several years before it would be our turn for an additional officer. Therefore, I am recommending to the Town Council that when they adopt their budget, they reduce the BOE budget by \$110,000 and add that to the Town budget to continue funds for this position for use by the BOE. By so doing, this should in no way impact the base budget of the BOE or its two additional priorities of All-Day Kindergarten and reducing pay-for-play costs.

Again, I thank you all for your involvement and together we have to encourage the community to endorse this budget so that we can continue to, in a reasonable and well thought out manner, meet the immediate needs of the Town and BOE.