

BOARD OF ESTIMATE & TAXATION MEETING ACTIONS

MARCH 29, 2006

ATTENDANCE: Richard Moccia, Mayor, City of Norwalk, Tom Hamilton, Finance Director; Ron Coley, BET; Michael Lyons, BET; Frederick Wilms, BET; Jim Clark, BET; Stuart Wells, BET; Gwen Briggs, Common Council; Doug Hempstead, Common Council; Kelly Straniti, Common Council, Carvin Hillard, Common Council (7:40 p.m.)

STAFF: Mary Roman, City Clerk

OTHERS: Sally Salancy, Friends of the Norwalk Public Library President; Lee Levey, Norwalk Public Library Board of Directors; Stanley Siegal, Norwalk Public Library Board of Directors Secretary; John Lombardi; Carol Seirup; Jody Bishop-Pullan, Norwalk Board of Education; Dave Davidson; Sheri Cadden; Bruce Kimmel, Norwalk Board of Education; Diane Lauricella, League of Women Voters; Dr. Sal Corda, Norwalk School Superintendent, Dr. Angela Vancinzi, Connecticut Health Care Associates Vice President; Alexander Nosevich

CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Moccia called the Public Hearing on the Recommended (Tentative) Operating Budget for Fiscal Year 2006-07 to order at 7:35 p.m. He introduced the members of Board of Estimate and Taxation and the Common Council to the public. Following this, Mayor Moccia requested that Mr. Hamilton from the Finance Department present a review of the proposed budget.

Mr. Hillard arrived at 7:40 p.m.

Mr. Hamilton stated that the purpose of the public hearing was to allow the public to comment on the proposed finances for the upcoming fiscal year. He then reviewed the budget.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Let it be noted that the following comments and remarks by all speakers have been summarized and are not necessarily verbatim.

Mayor Moccia stated that there were many department heads present at the meeting and this those who had questions for the department heads ask the appropriate questions at the beginning of their comments so that the Department heads could respond.

Ms. Salancy, the President of the Friends of the Norwalk Library spoke first and stated that on March 17th, a newspaper article in the Norwalk Citizen-News had included a statement from the Board of Estimate and Taxation member which suggested that the Norwalk Public Library seek out volunteers. She stated that the Norwalk Library does have volunteers in the form of the Friends of the Norwalk Library and reviewed several projects that the Friends have done for the Library. Ms. Salancy explained that the role of the Friends of the Norwalk Public Library is supporting extras. The Library is a department of the City and therefore, the City of Norwalk needs to support the staff. Using volunteers for staff is not the answer to staffing shortage. She also stated that everyone was invited to become a member of the Friends of the Norwalk Public Library.

Mr. Lee Levey, a member of the Norwalk Public Library Board of Directors, spoke next and stated that he had been on the Board for six years and indicated that there were other members of the Board present at the hearing. He acknowledged that the BET had a difficult task but reminded everyone that the Library performs a vital task. He pointed out that during the last nine years, there has been a 20% personnel loss due to cut backs but during that same period, the library usage has increased. Staffing shortages will limit the usage of different portions of the library by the public. He stated that a private grant will provide a Teen Center but the grant will not cover the staffing of that center. He also stated that the South Norwalk Branch of the Library will be reopening during the summer and that this will cause further staffing shortages. He stated that the library needs to add qualified and experienced employees and not to depend on the use of volunteers. He commented that the Library volunteers supplement the paid staff but do not remove the need for properly trained staff members. No other City department is asked to supplement the staff with volunteers. The Library is requesting the addition of three full time staff members, two children and young adult librarians, one for the Main library and one for the newly reopened SONO branch. The third staff member will be needed to cover the workload of the additional thirty computers, a new Children's Department circulation desk; and the reopening of the third floor Community Room. While the Board of Directors and the Library staff are doing whatever they can to help themselves, the Library is a department of the City of Norwalk and not a not-for-profit agency.

Mayor Moccia expressed his appreciation and gratitude to those who volunteers for Library.

Mr. Siegal, the secretary for the Norwalk Public Library Board of Directors, spoke next. He stated that the Mayor had described the City of Norwalk as a diamond in the rough. Mr. Siegal believes that the Library also is a diamond in the rough and reviewed the library statistics for everyone. Mr. Siegal concluded by reiterating the request for the three full time positions mentioned by Mr. Levey.

Mr. Lombardi introduced himself next and stated that at a March 15th meeting with the BET and the Board of Education, Dr. Corda stated that the Board of Education could not reduce the number of teachers even though student enrollment is down. He informed everyone that last year's projected enrollment was around 11,000 students, but the actual number was 570 fewer. Mr. Lombardi was concerned that there were no complied

statistics on how many teachers are in the school system and that the budget is presented to the Board on a school by school basis, making it difficult to determine how much money was being spent on a particular aspect. He stated that he had requested a breakout of the budget no less than six times, but has not received one yet. Mr. Lombardi reiterated that the staff will be increased by three positions, but that the student enrollment has declined. He claimed that in 2005, Norwalk had 735 teachers. According to his calculations, that would work out to a ratio of 14.1 students per teacher. He commented that in the past, the BOE had given surplus money back to City and wondered if that would continue to be the case. He also pointed out that a March 11th article in The Hour stated that the school budget was only increasing 4.4% this year because of several one time items. However, next year, Mr. Lombardi expected that the budget would increase 10%. He reiterated that getting the number of teachers that the Norwalk schools employs requires calling each school individually.

Mayor Moccia stated that the Board of Education presents the budget school by school.

Ms. Lauricella introduced herself and requested to leave a written statement with the Board. This was agreeable to all and the document was given to the City Clerk. Ms. Lauricella stated that she represented the League of Women Voters and was happy that the City was considering a Aquifer Protection Officer. She stated that Norwalk's environmental management was below that of other cities and requested that the position start on July 1st. She reminded everyone that Norwalk has a Superfund site and also stated that this new position would assist the conservation officer. She pointed out that Norwalk currently has one staff person for a population of 82,000, while Fairfield has a staff of four for its population of 45,000. In conclusion, she said that the Norwalk League of Women Voters strongly supports this position.

Dr. Corda introduced himself to the Board next and stated that he was aware of the level of discussion regarding the Board of Education budget. He explained that there were constraints on the budget, but pointed out that money had to be set aside for insurance. He reminded everyone that money transferred to the Board of Education was really money being given to the students of Norwalk. He stated that he was quite pleased about the amount of six million dollars that the Board was able to transfer back to the City because of negotiations with insurance providers.

Dr. Vancinzi introduced herself to the Board next and stated that she was the Vice President of the Connecticut Health Care Associates. She stated that all of the Norwalk students need to be healthy and that it is the job of the Norwalk school nurses to oversee this. She stated that the school nurses support the 2006-2007 budget and stated that the City is fiscally sound. She also commented that the value of the real estate is connected to the quality of the education and urged everyone to support the proposed budget.

Ms. Seirup introduced herself to the Board and stated that she had attend a workshop where Dr. Corda reduced the overall school budget by 1.3 million dollars. She urged the Board to support the school budget as presented.

Ms. Bishop-Pullan introduced herself to the Board and identified herself as a member of the Board of Education. She requested that the Board support the submitted school budget and stated that she was concerned about the mention of proposed reductions. In conclusion, she reiterated her support for the proposed budget.

Mr. Davidson approached the podium and introduced himself to the Board. He congratulated the BET members on their insight in improving services, with the exception of the BOE budget. Mr. Davidson stated that he felt the budget was bloated at 2 million dollars and commented that Mr. Avery had pointed this out at earlier meetings. Mr. Davidson then stated that the Democratic candidates in 1999, 2001 and 2003 had promised to reform our schools rather than just spending more money, but they did not deliver on their promises. He then quoted from a newspaper article that "You Republicans now have the votes and the responsibility to control the money spent."

Mayor Moccia interjected that he did not want to have the dialogue include partisan politics.

Mr. Davidson went on to remind everyone that several years earlier the concert hall was filled with people protesting against the cuts proposed by Dr. Corda and the Teacher's Union president. Mr. Davidson said that last year this did not happen because of the one time adjustments expended in this year's budget. Mr. Davidson said that Dr. Corda was pleased with his budget while department like the library and the Department of Public Works struggle. Leadership calls for taking hard positions, Mr. Davidson commented, along with taking the heat that goes with it. He cautioned against the false goal of trying to appease the Board of Education at the expense of good government. He reminded everyone that the former administration had tried for that goal and never succeeded. He urged the Board to take a hard look at the BOE budget and listen to Mr. Avery's advice.

Following Mayor Moccia stated that he was mayor of the City of Norwalk and not acting as a Republican. He went on to comment that his party affiliation was Republican but the City's best interest must come first, and parties second. When Mr. Davidson warned him to take care, Mayor Moccia stated that he was trying to do the best for all involved and that he was not going to engage in a discussion of politics. Mayor Moccia stated that he was stating this because he does not like being labeled.

Ms. Cadden came forward, introduced herself and wished to take the opportunity to express her support for the proposed school budget. She reminded everyone that the Board of Education actually represents the students of Norwalk and that the City should provide the students needs. She concluded by encouraging the BET to work with the BOE on the budget.

Mr. Kimmel introduced himself next and said that he was a former member of the Finance Committee. He commended everyone for seeing the light regarding a new position of Delinquent Tax Collector. He commented that he had worked towards this goal for four years and was happy to see that the position was being considered.

Mr. Nosevich introduced himself and stated that he lived in the Fifth District, also known as Cranbury. He commented that his district does not have the benefits of sewer, water, garbage and other City services, yet his taxes increase steadily. As far as Mr. Nosevich was aware, there have been no attempts to provide these services to the residents of the Fifth District. He pointed out that the difference in the mill rate for the Fifth District works out to about \$150.00 per year, which does not even cover the cost of garbage collection. He asked if there were any plans for tax relief for the residents of the Fifth District.

Mayor Moccia stated that the Council is constricted on this matter because it is in City Charter.

Mr. Hamilton stated that former Mayor Knopp had dropped off a statement to be included in the record. This was given to the City Clerk.

At this point, Mayor Moccia concluded the public portion of the hearing at 8:40 p.m.

Those present from the Council and the BET were asked for their comments and observations. Ms. Straniti said that she felt the budget was done well. Mr. Hempstead stated that this was an opportunity to build on cooperation. Mr. Wells said that this budget had been well crafted. Ms. Briggs, agreed that this was a good, tight budget. Mr. Clark thanks everyone who worked on the budget, Mr. Hillard stated that it was a good overall budget for Norwalk. Mr. Wilms stated that it was a pleasure to work with everyone. He felt that everyone had focused on what is best for Norwalk and commented that the Council had passed a 2.6% increase, which was reasonable with the rising costs. He also supported the addition of the Delinquent Tax Collector and the Grants Coordinator. Mr. Lyons thanked Mr. Davidson and Mr. Lombardi for their comments and input. Mr. Coley thanked everyone involved and stated that this was his second year on the BET. He felt that this proposed budget was better than last year's budget.

Mayor Moccia concluded the hearing by thanking everyone involved and reiterated that when people are serving on the various boards, they are not Republicans or Democrats. He also thanked Mr. Hamilton for the excellent job in preparing the budget.

ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Moccia adjourned the meeting at 8:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sharon L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services.