

**CITY OF NORWALK
BOARD OF ESTIMATE AND TAXATION
PUBLIC HEARING
MARCH 23, 2011**

ATTENDANCE: Mayor Richard A. Moccia, Fred Wilms, Chair; Jim Clark, Jim Feigenbaum, Leo Mellow, Michael Lyons, Michael Kolman

STAFF: Tom Hamilton, Assistant Director, Bob Barron, Finance; Ellen Wink, City Clerk

CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Moccia called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. He then explained that there were two sign up sheets, one for those who wished to speak on non-BOE issues and one for those who wished to address BOE issues.

Ms. Shirley Moseby came forward and greeted the Board. She said that she was the newly elected NAACP Vice Chair. Ms. Moseby said that she was a realist and fully recognized that the hearing was a formality, since most of the appropriation decisions had already been made. She then said that she would like to focus on next year's school budget and stated that the City needed to invest in education for the children. To have successful graduates, it is important to support the education. She asked the BET to consider how the cuts in education would affect the success of Norwalk's students.

Dr. Susan Marks, the Superintendent of Schools, came forward and greeted the BET. She then read and submitted the following text:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you tonight. To put it, simply, the budget process has been challenging. Somewhere, in all our discussions, something may have gotten lost [sic] and that is to remember that we all are here because of our students. I hope we can bring our children back into our discussion.

Thank you to the BET for voting to give the school district the \$1.4 million ECS funding. These monies are for our children and IT IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO!

I worry, however about the future. In order for our schools to thrive, there must be a commitment to investing in our school district. This does not mean minimum investment, but to invest in proven programs, such as the International Baccalaureate and other rigorous programs. We cannot keep financing a status quo budget.

Mr. Mayor, I agree with you when you say that Norwalk is not Westport. Norwalk is a wonderful city with great traditions, wonderful citizens and the diversity that is what America is all about. However, I do believe strongly that our students can compete with Westport, Darien, and Wilton and should and can have high SAT scores, have access to the best colleges and our high schools in Norwalk should be in the top 3% of the high schools just like our neighbors.

The brand of our schools and the perception of the community about our schools are just as important as a Triple AAA rating.

The current state of the operating budget is that there will be deep reductions in our ability to provide and maintain our instruction programs at an adequate level.

It should be pointed out that the superintendent's budget included \$4 million dollars in reductions to the operating budget. We are also looking at improving efficiencies and putting processes in place in the central office to save dollars. In addition, as with every other area in the school system, we are analyzing job descriptions and will be looking for reductions at every level. However, this budget cannot be reconciled by only making further reductions in the central office.

We have many dedicated administrators, teachers and support staff. We need everyone's help in avoiding people losing their jobs. The initial list of reductions means we will not have the administrative and instructional supports that our children need. We cannot afford to lose our instructional assistants, Housemasters, APs and teachers and others.

The school system needs our employees to help us. Over the years, the school district has been able to provide good salaries, good benefits and up until now fairly good job security. Requesting a hard freeze is not too much to ask. One year of holding salaries and steps at the same level is the RIGHT THING TO DO!

So I ask that everyone put the student back in the center of why we are here tonight. IT IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO. Our students are watching us and how we are working together. I ask that everyone DO THE RIGHT THING and put our students first.

Mr. Bruce Mellion, the president of the Norwalk Federation of Teachers (NFT) came forward and said he had distributed copies of a statement before the start of the meeting. He said that the document outlined the items that the Norwalk Federation of Teachers had saved. He claimed that there had been five offers during the last two years by the NFT and there had been no response from the BOE. He said that there would be a loss of 58 positions under the current budget. He then suggested a reasonable and responsible solution taking money from the fund balance to provide the shortfall.

Ms. Donna Riddell came forward and said that the Norwalk Federation of Educational Personnel (NFEP) was opposed to the cuts proposed by Dr. Marks. She then listed the various staff positions that had been eliminated over the last few years and said that the budget was being balanced on the backs of the lowest paid staff. She said that the Mayor had requested give backs, and that the Union had done this time and time again through the job reductions. She then pointed out that there was a major savings opportunity that was missed when the health insurance changes were not processed promptly. She said that it was time that other options were considered.

Mr. Edward Musante, the president of the Norwalk Chamber of Commerce, came forward and said that he was present to speak about a specific aspect of the Educational budget. He said that he realized that the BET approves a lump sum for the District and then the BOE and the District manage the funding. He then spoke about the School to Career program and said that education was all about the future. The School to Career program provides a significant opportunity for many students. He spoke about the recent scholarships that were presented to Norwalk students. He added that the Chamber was not present to take a position on the budget, but would like to see if there could be a reordering of the BOE priorities to retain the program.

Mr. Jack Chiaramonte, the chairman of the Norwalk Board of Education, came forward and said that this has been the most difficult of all budgets. He added that Westport had just announced it would be sending out over 140 pink slips. He pointed out that just to keep the status quo, the District would increase the budget by 6 million additional dollars. He added that the BET had a difficult job to do with juggling the services for all the departments.

Mr. Chiaramonte pointed out that while some people point out that the budget could be balanced by everyone giving the price of a cup of coffee, but added that the price of a gallon of gas was rising at a rapid rate. He said that there were those who wanted to have more services but to keep the taxes low. Mr. Chiaramonte said that the City had worked to keep the taxes low, and there have been pay freezes, job losses and benefits reductions. Because of this, the residents cannot afford to pay more taxes. Last year, there was a zero increase in the budget and the Unions were requested to help. One of the proposed plans would have saved money last year, but it would have been a loan, not a give back.

Mr. Chiaramonte then went on to describe how the changes that were described by the NFT would not have been savings for the City. He claimed that this was smoke and mirrors and went on to list several examples that he felt were relevant. He reminded everyone that no one foresaw the economic conditions a few years ago.

Mr. John Lombardi came forward and greeted the Commission. He said there were two reasons for his presence tonight. He said that he did not believe the BET should increase the BOE budget. Mr. Lombardi said that he had given the BET members copies of a comparison of the numbers for the District earlier. One category was the comparison of the students per teacher over a range of years. He then reviewed the details of that information with the BET. He recounted how when he was on the School Study Group many years ago, it has been recommended that the City construct six new schools, but instead the Study Group had recommended that the District close four or five schools. He explained that there had been small increases in the teacher/student ratio over the years. Mr. Lombardi asked how the BET would come to understand that these increases resulted in Norwalk Educators were the third highest paid administrators in the State of Connecticut a number of years ago.

Mr. Dan Grundman of Adams Lane, came forward and said he would like to see if the City could do more reductions. He said that while the grand list was recently increased because of Avalon and Pepperidge Farm, but the seniors have not had a raise in their Social Security for the last three years.

Ms. Elsa Hungaski came forward to speak to the BET. She said that she was a Norwalk public teacher and a Norwalk tax payers. She said that she was insulted and offended by Mr. Chiaramonte's recent comments in the newspaper about how the Norwalk teachers don't care. She said that he did not speak for her. Mr. Chiaramonte immediately objected to this.

RECESS

The Mayor then declared a recess that 7:50 p.m. The meeting reconvened at 7:55 p.m.

Ms. Hungaski said that it is important that the Board understand that the teachers were stretched. She said that it was important not point fingers and as a taxpayer, she was willing to kick in the extra \$60.00. The increase in the taxes is because Norwalk is growing. She said that it would be important that the BET restore the original budget cap.

Ms. Lisa Lenskold came forward and greeted the Board. She said that there had been meetings with the BET, the Superintendent, and the BOE and her PTOC group. She said that her group has encouraged the BET to increase the cap. She said that there appears to be a standoff with the Union and the BOE. She said that improving the District in Need will require everyone to work together.

Mr. Drew Todd said that this was his first budget process. He said that the one aspect that he had noticed that was missing was listening. He said that he was hearing rhetoric, not discussion. He then listed a number of instances in his own professional life where discussions were necessary in order to move forward. He said that it is important to work on the problem and to work towards a solution.

Mr. Tony Ditrio, the principal of Kendal Elementary School and the president of the Administrators Union, came forward and greeted the Board. He said that he wanted to thank the BET and that the group had given the Union had been given many opportunities to speak. He said that what he found difficult to deal with is that the people who were elected to work on education, like Mr. Chiamonte, who were not working for education. He then gave a brief overview of his 42 years as a teacher, and stated that his time at Norwalk had actually started with a strike. He added that the students were caught in the middle.

Mr. Ditrio said that he had been at the table numerous times for unions. He pointed out that every time a teacher left, it would cost the City less money. Mr. Ditrio then listed the various offers that the unions had made last year. He said that there had been offers made to the BOE and that there was no listening on the part of the BOE. Mr. Ditrio pointed out that the economy was affecting the District. He said that he was tired of having the misrepresentation of the Unions as evil. He restated that there had been an offer made to the BOE, but they had not responded.

Ms. Joan Thane came forward and greeted the Board. She said that she had been critical of the teachers until she had children in the District. She said that she would like to see all the administration take the HSA program, and that she would be paying thousands of dollars into her health insurance. She added that she would like to see the new students show proof that they are residents of Norwalk. Ms. Thane said that she was sad to see Veteran's Day retained as a holiday.

The Mayor asked if there was anyone else present that wished to address the BET. No one came forward.

Mayor Moccia closed the public hearing at 8:12 p.m.

Mr. Clark thanked everyone for coming to share their views with the Board.

Mr. Feigenbaum said that he felt that there was not a more non-partisan board than this one. He said that with the exception of one abstention vote, the votes were unanimous.

Mr. Mellow said that those who were teachers, he is well aware of the amount work they contribute and the Board does not want to see teachers walking out of the door. He said that the important think was to focus on the result ion, not who was right or wrong.

Mr. Kolman said that he appreciated everyone's comments. He added that while he had two children in the District, but knew an elderly person who had to go back to work part time to pay their taxes.

Mr. Lyons that his two children had graduated from the District. He said that Norwalk spends more per student than Darien and about the same amount than New Canaan does. He said that 53% of the direct budget goes to education and that it is putting education first. Mr. Lyons said that he understood the concerns that people have but there are limits as to how much the City can tax. Mr. Lyons then went on to give a brief run down of his research on the issue. Norwalk spends approximately \$1,657 per student while some communities receive 75% of their school budget paid for by the State. Cheshire has a median income of \$110,000, which is twice that of Norwalk and they receive more State funding than Norwalk does, which is where the difficulties come in.

Mr. Lyons then reviewed the percentage of the ECS grant funding that the City receives. he pointed out that the City did not reduce the City portion of the District funding when the ECS funding increased.

Mr. Lyons then pointed out that the savings that were created by the switch to HSAs could not be considered "give backs". He then went on to explain what a "give back" was.

Mr. Wilms said that he had a chance to speak with many of those present. He said that he had thought that last year's budget was the most difficult, but this year's was equally as difficult. The sectors that are having the most difficult now are the State governments and the municipalities because these are less adaptable. He then listed the goals that the City had, including maintaining the AAA rating, and maintaining as many services as possible without layoffs. Mr. Wilms said that there would be an increase in taxes and there had been a request for a one year step freeze for the District. He added that the residents were facing a unique opportunity. He said that public opinions mattered and that negotiations that worked in closed room may not work in a open forum. Mr. Wilms said that the unions might want to consider the fact that there might be a great deal of respect gained by reconsidering. He illustrated this by relating the action that was taken by the Norwalk Senior Center.

Mr. Feigenbaum said that he had forgotten to thank Dr. Marks and Mr. Craig Drecek for presenting a budget that was very clear and transparent.

Mayor Moccia said it had been an interesting night. He said that the people on the BET were appointed by the Mayor. He said that while he is used to be accused of being responsible for many things, it was important to know that the BET members never have pointed fingers at one another. He then pointed out that Stamford had reduced their educational fund by 30%. The Mayor said that currently, there are over 1,200 Norwalk residents that could apply for a tax reductions. These residents are house rich and cash poor. For these homeowners, \$60.00 in additional taxes is a lot of money. This doesn't include those residents who are renting and make less than \$27,000.

The Mayor pointed out that he hadn't asked for furlough days, but a simple hard freeze. He said that he recognized that the teachers often reach into their pockets for additional supplies for their students. However, there are many Norwalk residents who simply can't afford an increase. The Mayor said that he was willing to talk to anyone about this. He also then reminded everyone that the Council sets the cap, not the BET. Regarding the request to cut the City side of the budget, the Mayor said that he didn't know where that could happen. He added that the City pays a million dollars to maintain the school playing fields, which is not part of the BOE budget.

ADJOURNMENT

**** MR. FEIGENBAUM MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 8:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sharon L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services