

**CITY OF NORWALK
FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE COMMON COUNCIL
PUBLIC HEARING & SPECIAL MEETING
FEBRUARY 21, 2013**

ATTENDANCE: Carvin Hilliard, Chair; David McCarthy, Matthew Miklave, John Igneri, Warren Peña

STAFF: Thomas Hamilton, Finance Director; Robert Barron, Finance Department

OTHERS: Council Member Bruce Kimmel, Council Member Sarah Mann, Council Member Michelle Maggio, Council Member Anna Duleep; Atty. Jeffrey Spahr, SPED Partners; Michael Barbis, NPS BOE Finance Committee Chair; Patrick Begos, BMHS Parents Club; Ms. Suzanne Brown Koroshetz; BMHS Principal; Margaret Watt, SPED Partners; Elio Longo, BOE Chief Operations Officer; Tony Daddona, Interim Superintendent of Schools

CALL TO ORDER.

Mr. Hilliard called the meeting to order at 7:35 p.m. A quorum was present.

Atty. Jeffrey Spahr came forward and said that he was a life long resident of Norwalk. He said that he was present to speak about the budget. He said that his daughter had just started at the Norwalk High School Marching Band and the program was amazing. He said that he was very pleased.

Atty. Spahr said that he wanted to familiarize the Committee with Norwalk SPED (**S**pecial **E**ducation) Partners program. He said that it's not just a situation where a program wants more money. CREC reviewed the NPS Special Education program. This independent study revealed that Norwalk's SPED was under funded. Atty. Spahr then said that he had spoken to Mr. Lyons about the amount of funding for SPED and also pointed out that the Norwalk SPED department had fewer staff members.

He then reminded everyone that last year, there had been 19 SPED students who needed aides, which were mandated by the IEPs. This was a federal violation. Atty. Spahr also pointed out that by providing students with the appropriate type of support and education in the early years, it could very well prevent a situation like Sandy Hook from happening.

He then reiterated the fact that the Norwalk Public Schools Special Education was under funded, understaffed and inadequate for the students.

Mr. Michael Barbis, a member of the BOE, came forward and distributed a document to the Committee. He said that he was present as the Chair of the Board of Education Finance Committee. The Board had requested an amount and the City had proposed an amount that was 1,105,578.00 less. Part of the differential is that the \$1,105,578 involved either contractual costs or was for restoration of critical positions. Mr. Barbis then gave a brief overview of the items on the document.

Mr. Barbis said that there had been a quote in The Hour today about the budget funding. He said that the 30 basis points would cover a great deal of ground.

Ms. Sheila Wolf came forward and said that she was associated with BMHS. She said that she deeply appreciated the Art Teacher position at BMHS. She requested that the Committee consider restoring this position.

Mr. Patrick Begos of 10 Richmond Road came forward and stated that he was one of the Co-Presidents of the Brien McMahon Parents Club. He then spoke about the Common Core curriculum, which is being imposed on the City by the State along with 48 other states. The Central Office had done a major amount of work to prepare for this change. However, it will cost a great deal of money. Stamford has spent something around 20 million dollars and they are nowhere near being as prepared as Norwalk is. He then spoke about the Central Office presentation on the Common Core and the costs associated with it. The figures in the BOE budget were less than recommended and now that amount is being reduced by the City even further. Mr. Begos said that every student will be taking tests on computers and the testing will be personalized.

Regarding the operating budget, the BOE request is for the staff training for teaching the Common Core. It is a two year implementation period and then the training is over. He said that he hoped that the BET, the Council and the BOE could find time to sit down and discuss how they would be able to finance the Common Core Standards.

Ms. Suzanne Brown Koroshetz, the Brien McMahon principal, came forward and said while she has a residence in Norwalk, she spends most of her waking hours at Brien McMahon as its principal. She said that in her six years as principal at BMHS, all the budgets have been about cuts. The introduction of the Common Core was a national movement and a fundamental change on how education is delivered. The Federal Government has announced that this is mandatory. It will insure that any Norwalk student will be receive the same education as any student elsewhere.

The curriculum specialists play a critical role. This program introduces a totally new curriculum. The teachers need training on how to teach the material. Both NHS and BMHS will be reviewed for their accreditation in the next year.

Ms. Margaret Watt came forward and said that she was a co-chair of Norwalk SPED Partners and co-chair of the Jefferson PTO. She said that the recent CREC evaluation had indicated that the District does not have enough staff or resources for the most vulnerable students. There are equality and quality issues. Every dollar that is spent when the students are young will be paid back. There is no method for building capacity for the future. However, all the focus is on getting back to where the program should have been a few years ago.

Ms. Watts said that the library aides were critical, particularly for the students who do not have access to libraries.

She then spoke about the fact that Jefferson has approximately 600 students but only 1.5 administrators. This is the same amount of administrative staff as schools with only 400 students. However, now Jefferson will be losing the .5 administrator, who will be going to Columbus School. That will leave Jefferson with just 1 administrator.

Mr. Hilliard asked if there was anyone else who wished to speak to the Committee. Hearing none, he closed the public hearing portion of the meeting at 8:09 p.m.

DISCUSSION ON FISCAL YEAR 2013-14 OPERATING BUDGET CAP.

Mr. Hamilton then asked if the Committee had the summary sheet and of the budget and spreadsheet that contained the calculation of what the tax rate would be depending on cap that Council set. He reviewed the range outlined the figures on the calculation sheet. He noted that Mr. Daddona and Mr. Longo were present to answer questions.

Mr. Miklave pointed out that this was a special meeting and that the Committee could not vote on a resolution since it was not on the agenda. Mr. Miklave said that the Chairman has the power to put a proposed resolution on the Council agenda.

**** MR. MCCARTHY MOVED THAT THE BUDGET CAP BE SET WITH A MAXIMUM LIMIT ON THE TOTAL APPROPRIATION FOR THE CITY OF NORWALK FOR THE FISCAL YEAR BEGINNING JULY 1, 2013 SHALL BE NO MORE THAN \$294,798,999. THIS APPROPRIATION CAP REPRESENTS TOTAL EXPENDITURES OF \$311,317,270 LESS ESTIMATED INTERGOVERNMENTAL GRANTS OF \$16,518,271 FOR A TOTAL TAX INCREASE OF 3.94%.**

Mr. Kimmel asked for a point of information. He said that this would cause a tax increase of 3.9% and wished to know how this would affect the BOE budget.

Mr. Kimmel then asked Mr. Longo for some of the details on the summary of the BOE budget. Mr. Longo came forward and reviewed the individual line items.

Mr. Hamilton stated that he would like to make a clarification. In order to fully fund all departmental request would result in a budget of \$299,245,504 and require a 5.6% tax increase.

Ms. Maggio asked what amount was budgeted for substitutes. Mr. Longo said that it was almost \$900,000.

Ms. Mann asked whether or not staff from Silvermine Art group could come in and teach the students. Mr. Daddona explained that since the District is a public school, the teachers would have to be certified. There were also contractual issues involved.

Ms. Duleep asked about the security funding. Mr. Daddona replied that there was a District Safety Committee that was currently assessing each school to determine the needs of each location. He gave an example of some of the simpler safety measures that were being taken. Mr. Hamilton then spoke about the fact that the Mayor would like to have additional three police officers for security. However, he reminded every one that the final decision is up to the Police Chief.

Ms. Duleep had several questions about the training that any security staff would receive regarding dealing with students. Mr. Daddona said that there were three resource officers at the high schools already. The District is working to develop a crisis management plan and provide the needed training. He said that the \$100,000 figure that was put in the budget was a place holder.

Ms. Duleep went on to speak about funding to help the schools that need to deal with basic issues. She said that there had been a statement that Representative Fleischman made that indicate there might be some funding available in the future.

Mr. McCarthy asked about the issues with the BOE line items. Mr. Hamilton reminded everyone that the Council has some input over the Capital Budget, but that State law is very clear that the BOE has sole jurisdiction over how their funding is spent. Mr. Hamilton said that in developing his recommendations, he did not touch the request for Common Core curriculum.

Mr. McCarthy had some questions about the utilities. He noted that the cost of the gas and oil had decreased. Mr. Longo agreed and explained that the BOE works with the City's Purchasing Department to get favorable prices.

Mr. Hilliard asked about the Special Education students and requested a brief explanation of the evaluation process that determines whether a student might have a disability. Mr. Daddona said that there were State regulations that mandate the District take certain actions, such as SRBI interventions. This is followed by a PPT process. An IEP is then created and the student receives special services.

Mr. Hilliard asked what happens when a student is designated as a special education student and what kind of follow up is provided. Mr. Daddona said that there was a tri annual testing and evaluation for each student.

Mr. Peña then asked about the BOE request for 3.4% and the 2.7% City recommendation. Mr. Barron said that this was a 1.2 million dollar difference. Mr. Peña asked if the BOE did not receive the 3.4% increase, what would be cut. Mr. Barbis said that there were contractual obligations of 4 million dollars. He then reviewed the items that were listed on the document that he had distributed earlier.

Mr. Peña asked what impact would be if the BOE were given their full request. Mr. Barron indicated where the figures would be if the full BOE budget was approved.

Mr. Peña asked if there was any department that could be left as is. Mr. Hamilton said that he had already reviewed each department and made his recommendation.

Mr. Peña then requested clarification on the insurance deficit reduction. Mr. Hamilton said that the 4 million dollar deficit had been moved from the BOE budget to the City budget. \$1,744,000 was to fund approximately 50% of the audited deficit from June 2012. The second half of the deficit will be addressed in 2014-2015.

Mr. Kimmel said that he was glad that this was being handled this way. He pointed out that on the Capital budget, the Council does not have line item control on the Capital budget.

Mr. Kimmel commented that this was not just a meeting to discuss the BOE budget. He noted for the record, this was the first time that the department heads were not present to answer questions on the budget. He said that he was not happy that the department heads were not in attendance.

Mr. Miklave stated that he was not implying anything by his questions. He noted that this recommended budget that Mr. Hamilton was required to put forward by Charter. He asked if the Mayor was in agreement with this budget. Mr. Hamilton said that he believed that the Mayor had reviewed the budget and was in agreement.

Mr. Miklave asked whether the City had replaced some funds into the fund balance. Mr. Hamilton gave a brief overview. Mr. Miklave said that it was his recollection was that there had been a consideration of drawing down the fund balance for 12-13 and 11-12. Mr. Miklave said that he believed that the draw down had not been as much as anticipated. He also asked whether the City would be drawing the full amount from the fund balance. Mr. Hamilton said that he would not know at this time. He pointed out that there are projected revenues, such as building permits and other income variables. These revenue streams can be either greater than the expectations or less than the projections. This would affect how much was drawn from the Fund Balance. Mr. Miklave had several other details questions.

Ms. Maggio said that she was present tonight because these were important issues. She said that Mr. Daddona and Mr. Barbis had a meeting about the Common Core Curriculum for the Council Members. She said that she wanted to assure Ms. Koroshetz and Mr. Begos that she understands the issues. Ms. Maggio then addressed each of the speakers regarding their concerns.

Ms. Maggio said that her husband is a Norwalk firefighter and he gets six weeks of sick time. However, if a fire fighter misses two tours, a doctor's note is required to return to work. She wondered if there were people who were being held accountable for their sick time in the BOE. She said that no one on the Council was taking any of the issues lightly.

Mr. Miklave said that this was his eighth vote on the budget. This is the recommendation on the vote on the preliminary budget. The final vote will be had later. He added that the Council does not vote on the BOE budget, or the City budget. The Council sets the total expenditures for the City. What happens with the revenues, the fund balance and other issues is not something the Council has control over. The Council does not raise taxes, it sets the limit on spending.

Mr. Miklave went on to speak about his concerns regard the budget process, which he said that he has objected for the last eight years. He said that the Council should have a line item veto on the City budget and that there needed to be a better process. The lack of performance standards in the budget is a problem. Mr. Miklave said that the discussion centers on the 1.2 million that is not being funded rather than the \$311,317,270 that is being funded. Public oversight is needed on what is being funding.

Mr. Miklave said that he was not prepared to vote on this budget because he has requested additional information.

Mr. Kimmel pointed out that the BOE is governed by the State and Federal law while the City administration is govern by the Charter. Mr. Kimmel said that he was glad to see the performance standards in the budget book. However, some of those standards make no sense.

Mr. Kimmel said that the final question was the taxes. It is critical that the Council set the framework, because there are factors, such as the Governor's budget has not been finalized. The Board of Estimate and Taxation are not unreasonable. They work within the framework established by the Council. The departmental budgets are thoroughly discussed within Committee. He said that there are departments such as IT or the Mayor's Office that the Committee does not oversee. For those departments, Mr. Kimmel says that he trusts the BET to perform their due diligence.

Ms. Duleep said that she was also not on the Committee. She then spoke about her experience in a classroom when she substituted. She mentioned the lesson plan preparation, the required paperwork, parental meetings and other demands on the classroom teachers. Considering there have been so many years in a row where there have been missed opportunities for expanding the program, it is important to support the teachers and the aides in the classrooms. She urged the Council members to consider why a particular administrator may be necessary. It is difficult to keep teachers in the classroom for five years.

Mr. Igneri said that the original BOE request seemed reasonable and he was disappointed that the BOE request was not being fully funded. He agreed with Mr. Kimmel that he would like to have had the department heads present to answer questions. He said that he was not prepared to vote on the budget cap tonight.

Mr. Peña said that he felt that the City needed to rebuild the schools. He said that many of his clients look at Norwalk's school if they are considering moving to this area. However, after doing an internet search, the negative stories come up and the clients chose other communities.

RECESS.

Mr. Hilliard called a recess at 9:30 p.m. He reconvened the meeting at 9:42 p.m.

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TOTAL TAX INCREASE OF 3.94% PASSED WITH TWO IN FAVOR (HILLIARD AND MCCARTHY) AND THREE ABSTENTIONS (MIKLAVE, IGNERI AND PEÑA).

ADJOURNMENT.

**** MR. MCCARTHY MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** THE MOTION TO ADJOURN PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 9:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sharon L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services