

TOWN OF WALLINGFORD, CONNECTICUT
SPECIAL TOWN COUNCIL BUDGET WORKSHOP

WEDNESDAY
APRIL 19, 2023
6:30 P.M.

AMENDED RECORD OF VOTES AND MINUTES
FY 2023-2024 BUDGET

The Special Town Council Budget Workshop on Wednesday, April 19, 2023, was called to order at 6:30 p.m. There was a moment of silence and the Pledge of Allegiance was said. Councilors in attendance were: Autumn Allinson, Samuel Carmody, Craig Fishbein, Thomas Laffin, Joseph A. Marrone, III, Christina Tatta, Vincent F. Testa, and Chairman Vincent Cervoni. Mayor William W Dickinson, Jr., and Controller Timothy Sena were also present.

1. Moment of Silence
2. Pledge of Allegiance and Roll Call
3. FY2023-2024 BUDGET

PUBLIC HEARING

Board of Education

In attendance was Tammy Raccio, Chairperson, Danielle Bellizzi, Superintendent and Dominic Barone, Business Manager

Ms. Bellizzi thanked the Central Office team, the Board of Education, the Building Administrators, the Curriculum Administrators, and the Business Office team for their help in putting the budget together. She shared a PowerPoint presentation of the budget for the 23/24 school year. She also provided answers to questions generated at the April 10th meeting. Ms. Bellizzi gave enrollment numbers historically and predicted. She noted that the special education, 504 and EL populations have increased. Some of that is the effect of the pandemic. She outlined the mental health needs of the district. She explained the sustained service budget including the proposed increases. She noted that they were able to reduce the insurance cost increase. Due to a mandate, they will be providing menstrual products in bathrooms for grades 3 through 12. She explained the Strategic Planning budget recommendations and capital appropriations. The total proposed budget increase is 6.223%. She noted that the Mayor’s budget reduced the increase to 3.02%. She reviewed the Unencumbered Fund Balance, the 2% Fund and grants. Ms. Bellizzi noted that there was a question about where the ARP ESSER grant money was spent and she explained the five priorities and what was funded in those priorities. She thanked the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Instruction and Assistant Superintendent for Special Education for their work on these grants.

Counselor Allinson asked about the Right to Read program mandate. Ms. Raccio explained that it is for every district, no matter the scores. The mandate is that certain programs be purchased and implemented unless you can get a waiver. It teaches the program, not the child. Every child responds differently. We have worked with a consultant, Literacy How for the last four years that trains teachers on the science of reading. We have added professional development at the elementary schools. Instructional coaches work with the teachers in the classroom. Wallingford has been proactive and is in a very good place with our reading program. We don’t want to purchase the mandated curriculum. Councilor Allinson stated that we don’t seem to be realizing a score benefit. She stated concern about taking teachers out of the classroom.

Ms. Bellizzi replied that the consultant works with teachers in the classroom as well as before and after school. Councilor Allinson noted the growing need for social and emotional issues and class sizes. Adding high-level administration takes teachers away from teaching students. She stated that she thinks teachers and administrators are heroes and do a wonderful job, but she worries about having too much administration. She asked for clarification on the para-educators. Ms. Bellizzi replied they would be added district-wide, depending on student needs. Councilor Allinson referred to the 3.5 million reductions to the increase and asked if any of it can be bonded or if it is a reduction on top of that. Ms. Bellizzi stated that it is on top.

Councilor Laffin thanked the team for the presentation. He asked for the timeline for the Right to Read program. Ms. Bellizzi replied they are hoping to hear back on the waiver request by July 1. Ms. Raccio added that there is pending legislation to extend the timeline, so the implementation may be pushed out another year. Councilor Laffin asked about the strategic plan and that there was nothing spent last year. Ms. Bellizzi confirmed. Councilor Laffin asked about the life of the Sheehan track. Ms. Bellizzi replied that the new track will last 20 years. It is an investment because the whole district, Park & Recreation, and others use it. The budget is for the field and the track. Ms. Raccio added that even if we made the decision today to merge the schools, it will take a while and the track will be unusable, due to being unsafe. Councilor Laffin asked about the floating nurse in the COVID grant. Ms. Bellizzi replied that it is two positions; they are not part of the union and are year-to-year positions.

Councilor Marrone stated concern with the growth at the top. Regarding the Right to Read program, he noted that test scores are lower than expected. He expected more in the budget to address the deficits in reading and math. Ms. Bellizzi replied that they continue to revise the curriculum and provide professional development. The instructional coaches provide resources and data analysis. There is also a math consultant. Curriculum Administrators also support the teachers. She noted they look at the needs and diversity of students and families. Ms. Raccio pointed out slide 5 which states that they are down by 501 students since 2018 but the high-need population has increased requiring more support and services. Councilor Marrone asked how they arrived at the \$647,000 for the special ed. contingency budget. Mr. Barone explained that it was set up four or five years ago they projected a large deficit. Instead of doing projects, they set them aside for tuition, transportation, and those types of needs. The remaining balance is what's there. Councilor Marrone asked about the strategic vs. the sustaining budget. The strategic budget gets smaller every year. Ms. Raccio explained that the sustained is the recurring costs and strategic is the one-off items. Councilor Marrone noted that other districts don't manage their own fields. Ms. Bellizzi agreed and added that some districts do capital projects in partnership with the Town. Ms. Raccio explained that when they applied for the HVAC COVID grant, the state asked for the district's 5-year capital plan and if it was funded. Wallingford doesn't have a 5 year funded capital plan. She stated that she would love to have that plan. The strategic budget includes things like safety. She noted that they take what's left of the sustained budget and put it in the 2% fund to use for projects. Ideally, there would be a town-wide capital improvement plan.

Councilor Tatta asked about the waiver application for the Reading program. Ms. Raccio replied that the original legislation was targeted at Alliance Districts (lowest performing). There was public opposition and the legislation was amended to apply to the entire state. But the funding for it stayed only with the Alliance Districts. Ms. Bellizzi gave credit to Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Carrie LaTour, and Curriculum Coordinator Angela Will who put together the waiver which is about 30 pages. It includes our curriculum, reasoning, professional development, and consultant work. She added that the State provided a list of seven programs to choose from that they reviewed. She added that they will be applying for the financial waiver as well. Councilor Tatta referred to pages 22 and 30 regarding the Sheehan track and Lyman Hall softball field. With the decision on merging the schools pending, she would prefer to hold off on that funding. Ms. Bellizzi replied that it could be 5-7 years before the schools are merged. Even if the schools merge, the track can still be used. Councilor Tatta noted the \$500,000 for

contingency on page 34. She asked if this is in addition to the \$647,000 special education contingency. Mr. Barone confirmed that it is around \$500,000 and has not been spent. Ms. Raccio stated that they wanted to maintain the existing contingency from the prior year. The Board has not done transfers this year so they could see where the deficits were. The office proposed \$280,000 and the Board brought it back to \$500,000. She noted that they decided to include all their strategic needs so they are transparent about what needs to be done. They know that everything will not be funded. The total Strategic budget is \$759,014 on page 21. Councilor Tatta noted that the Board of Education can move funds around in their budget. Only the total budget is approved by Council. She clarified that the financial decrease on page 29 is not a budget cut, but a decrease to the proposed increase. The increase is 3.02% in the Mayor's budget.

Councilor Fishbein referred to page 29 and asked what the actual decrease is between the budget request and the Mayor's budget. Mr. Barone replied, approximately \$3.2 million. Councilor Fishbein asked about the use of the track at Sheehan. Ms. Bellizzi replied that outside groups can request to use it. She added that she doesn't know what the charges are. In response to a question, Mr. Barone explained the notes on page 34. Councilor Fishbein asked about the ERSSA grant on page 39 and what the 2.2 million is being used for. Ms. Bellizzi referred to slide 39 where there is a description under each priority of what it is used for. Councilor Fishbein asked about the reading scores and if there were incentives or rewards to help increase them. What can be done to get the scores up? Ms. Raccio replied that COVID impacted all districts. One impact is a higher truancy rate. We test several times during the year and watch to see if interventions work. We have fantastic teachers and all the principals are involved. She cautioned looking at teacher pay to increase test scores. She noted that we don't teach to the test. We want the kids to have real-life skills. She explained that the problem is with the teacher prep programs that don't teach teachers how to teach reading. Every teacher in the district goes through the Literacy How program and works with coaches. We are seeing a difference in test scores. Ms. Bellizzi reported that they have a committee addressing absenteeism. The committee communicates with the families and determines what support is needed. They work with Youth & Family Services, social workers, and school psychologists and do home visits. Councilor Fishbein mentioned a bill on extending the family service needs program to truant kids. That will be another tool. He stated that he is in favor of a 5-year strategic plan and earmarking funds. He asked about the public concern about special education cuts. Ms. Bellizzi replied that they had grants to add a special ed. teacher for a specialized program (elementary WISE program). It was based on the needs of the students. We don't need that additional teacher anymore due to the number of students. Councilor Fishbein asked about the Transition Academy. Ms. Raccio replied that they are in negotiations and will be coming to Town Council for approval.

Councilor Allinson mentioned the implications of cutting 3.02% of the total plan. She noted that this would affect personnel. She asked if they are continuing the summer learning loss programs. Ms. Bellizzi replied yes, for all grades.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Jason Michael, 81 Meadow Street asked if we can reset the budget floor if the schools are merged. Mayor Dickinson replied that his interpretation is that the statutory floor is based on the total amount of money spent on education, not by the school. So the number of schools doesn't matter. Mr. Michaels asked if the cost of running the high schools is lower, and do we have to start at the hard budget floor.

Melanie Rosacci, 9 Platt Drive asked why the budget was reduced by \$3.515 million when for the last few years at least \$7 million has been left over in the overall budget. We have facilities and fields that are not up to par and more higher needs students. Mayor Dickinson replied that budgets are an estimate of costs. He stated that he never approves what is given to him at the beginning of the process as it is unaffordable to the public. Most departments have money left over. The Board of Education expects \$900,000 left over this year. He doesn't want to have budgets that end up at zero. We need to maintain a reserve to garner better borrowing rates. This is sound accounting and finance policy for public money. Otherwise,

taxes would be higher. Ms. Rosacci stated that we would have better schools and fields. The proposal to combine schools is because it would cost too much to renovate them. We need to do something.

Cafeteria

In attendance were Tammy Raccio, Chairperson, Danielle Bellizzi, Superintendent and Mr. Barone, and James Bondi, Food Services Director

Mr. Bondi provided highlights of the 23/24 budget and how it came about. He reviewed revenues and expenses. The budget is based on a normal school year without free meals for every student. The State has no plans to extend the free meals for all students next year. He noted that it might change. Meal counts in the budget are based on historical records. We seem to have more free and reduced meal students each year. He explained the federal reimbursements. He stated that food costs are easing as there are few shortages and supply chain issues now.

Councilor Laffin asked about the free meal reimbursements and how it relates to what the students are charged. Mr. Bondi replied that they have to consider reimbursement when setting pricing. Councilor Laffin asked if the Fed money was adjusted due to the shortages. Mr. Bondi replied yes. Councilor Laffin asked if there is any truth to the impression that the portions are smaller in the free meals. Mr. Bondi replied no, that would be in violation.

Councilor Testa pointed out that there is no BOE or Town contribution to this budget. This budget is self-sustaining and they have a healthy balance. Mr. Bondi stated that the Federal reimbursement rate was the highest it could have been and we received federal grants for supply issues. He added that they are required to put their surplus back into operations. He will be using that for vehicles and equipment. Councilor Testa thanked Mr. Bondi for the nice job and the healthy and fresh food. It was noted that they no longer need the large storage freezer since everything is fresh now.

Councilor Fishbein stated that in 2022 FY there was a direct contribution from BOE of \$100,000. He understands that this year is an anomaly. The Cafeteria will probably end this year with a \$700,000 surplus. If next year is back to normal, why not reflect some sort of contribution from the BOE? Ms. Raccio replied that they have a fund balance to use if there is a deficit. Councilor Fishbein referred to page 88, 2022 budget there was a transfer from BOD of \$100,000. Above that is the Fund Balance Contribution line. Why not budget what generally has to transfer in that line? Mr. Barone replied that they will start the year with over \$1 million. So there is money in the fund to absorb a deficit. Councilor Fishbein asked, even if no free lunch next year, does he expect to be in the black? Ms. Raccio noted that the difference is that the quality of the food changed. Also, they are now serving breakfast, which is available to all students. There is huge participation in that breakfast program which will continue. They are hopeful that it should be a self-sustaining program. There should be no need for a BOE contribution. Councilor Fishbein asked about the Enterprise Fund. Mr. Barone explained that it is a special revenue fund. Ms. Raccio stated that they did not usually budget the funds, they made transfers as Board action. You are representing that will have \$700,000 that may be used to internally support the Cafeteria special fund. He understands that they will be constrained if it is not in the budget.

Councilor Laffin offered congratulations on doing a good job. He asked if the percentage of meal cost correlated to staffing. If we go into free lunch mode, do we have to hire more people? Mr. Bondi replied that it does increase staff with free meals but the federal reimbursement rate absorbs it.

Hearing no public comment, Chairman Cervoni thanked the presenters and stated that he appreciates their dedication.

Chairman Cervoni asked for a motion to adjourn.

MOTION WAS MADE TO adjourn at 8:40 pm.

MADE BY: FISHBEIN

SECONDED BY: ALLINSON

Respectfully submitted,

Cheryl-Ann Tubby
Recording Secretary



Vincent Cervoni, Chair

23 MAY 2023

Date



Joan M. Stave, Acting Town Clerk

6/1/23

Date

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AT 1:30 P.M. AND RECEIVED BY
Deborah McKernan TOWN CLERK
Joan M. Stave, Acting town clerk