

Board of Finance Public Budget Hearing #2
Tuesday, March 15, 2022
7:30 pm
Via Webex

A recording of this meeting can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KickIFqNAHE>.

FINAL MINUTES

MEMBERS PRESENT: Lori Charlton-Chair, John Mitola-Vice Chair, Sheila Marmion-Secretary, Craig Curley, Christopher DeWitt, Mary LeClerc, Kevin Starke, Jack Testani, James Walsh

OTHERS PRESENT: Superintendent of Schools Mike Cummings, Executive Director of Operations and Processes Dr. Zakia Parrish, Executive Director of Personnel and Legal Services, Title IX Coordinator Colleen Deasy, Executive Director of Finance and Business Services Courtney Leborious, Executive Director of Special Education and Student Services Robert Mancusi, Executive Director of Operations Angelus Papageorge, Executive Director of Instruction, Curriculum and Assessment Dr. James Zavodjancik, BOE Chair Christine Vitale, BOE Liaison to the BOF Jeff Peterson, Town of Fairfield CFO Jared Schmitt, CAO Tom Bremer, Budget Director Frank Magneri, First Selectwoman Brenda L. Kupchick, FairTV, members of the public

1. Call to Order

Chair Lori Charlton called the meeting to order at 7:30 pm.

2. Pledge of Allegiance

Chair Charlton led the Pledge of Allegiance.

3. Discussion on the Following Budget:

Chair Lori Charlton wanted to let the public know that the Board will be reserving time for responses to emails by any Board member who would like to comment. She said the Board has not received any emails regarding the budget yet, but she encouraged public comment and participation.

Board of Education:

8010 Board of Education Budget

Superintendent of FPS Mike Cummings and Executive Director of Finance and Business Services Courtney Leborious presented this item. Mr. Cummings said the presentation is an overview of the 22-23 Board of Education (BOE) budget, where they are now, and the nature of the request, as well as what has happened since the budget was reduced by the Board of Selectman (BOS). Mr. Cummings said COVID has impacted their ability to deliver a full educational program and hire staff. He said the impact on learners is catching up and his presentation will show that. The BOE presentation was shared on the screen and is included in the recording and available online with the backup documents for this meeting.

Chair Lori Charlton opened up the discussion to the Board of Finance (BOF). Chris DeWitt said he appreciates the Fairfield school system and has children who have gone through it. He said the BOE budget is two thirds of the Town budget, and everyone needs to consider there is still another third including Fire and Police. Mr. DeWitt said his questions are not meant to undermine any of his colleagues on the BOE, but the BOF needs to know where the money is going. Mr. DeWitt asked about the Special Education (SPED) budget and why tuition went up almost \$4 million. He asked if it was due to students needing outplacement because FPS cannot meet their needs. Mr. DeWitt also asked about the increase in SPED settlements.

Executive Director of Special Education and Student Services Rob Mancusi said the outplacements are recommended by school-based teams. Mr. Mancusi said there has been a significant increase in unilateral placements. He said parents place their students in unapproved schools in the area and file for due process against the district. He said he put this process in a link with the presentation. He said it is a cost that is negotiated in litigation.

Sheila Marmion said she appreciates the budgeting process and asked about the middle school blocking program with a .6FTE. Ms. Marmion said there was a discussion that this program will be delayed until next year. Mr. Cummings said they are delaying the intervention period as teachers are doing the interventions in the classroom. Ms. Marmion said she had concerns about delays with the Purchasing Department moving things forward and referenced the RLMS roof project. Ms. Marmion wondered if there had been talk about separate purchasing departments and if that was something Central Office (CO) could handle or if it would impact the budget next year. Mr. Cummings said items are hard to get so it isn't necessarily the Town. He said there is a vetting process at CO before sending it to Purchasing and feels the BOE could handle everything at CO.

James Walsh said he watched the last BOE meeting and heard criticism toward Purchasing and that projects are being delayed there. Mr. Walsh wondered if all the information that Purchasing needed was getting to that department. Ms. Leborious said there is a good relationship with the Town, specifically the Purchasing Director Gerald Foley and the CAO Tom Bremer. Ms. Leborious said she had concerns about projects being held up when she felt the information was provided. She said proactively, they can work with the Town. BOE Liaison Jeff Peterson said Mr. Cummings asked him to present challenges at a recent BOE meeting. He said the meeting's intent was not to insult anyone, but he needed more information. There was a longer discussion at the meeting about the Purchasing Department and the relationship with the BOE. Chair Lori Charlton said a conversation was needed with members from CO. Ms. Marmion asked if the impact of the past two years of COVID flowing into this budget is other than SPED. Mr. Cummings said the interventionists at the middle schools didn't have those needs in the past. He said the high school intervention courses have been redesigned and there is no need for additional staffing. He said the elementary schools addressed intervention with current staffing to balance proactive and reactive work. He said reactive with current staffing will be prioritized.

John Mitola said past BOE presentations have included things that are positive in the school system and asked about AP Classes, honors classes, and test scores.

Mr. Mitola said he wants the public to know young residents are getting a great education. Mr. Cummings stated that 77 high school students were in the reading intervention program. He said 23 students exited the program mid-year and have gone back to core classes. Mr. Cummings said during the last two years of COVID, over 700 students have graduated in the district and went to college. He said the school district also supported non-college routes. He said the AP enrollment is up, but standard scores didn't achieve what they wanted which he said is happening all over the State. Mr. Cummings said the greatest achievement was the ability to meet the needs of the students despite the obstacles. He said he will give more data if requested.

There was a discussion about expenses that were originally in the town budget being transferred to the BOE budget and the effect it will have in the classrooms with the overall BOE budget reductions. Mr. Curley acknowledged the items being contemplated for cuts and said he knows that the BOE will need to go through a process, but the list seemed harsh. Both Mr. DeWitt and Mr. Walsh talked about the email that included Mr. Cummings's list of potential cuts to the schools that was sent to the residents with children attending schools. They said the email was sent without having it vetted through the BOE and caused reaction from the public. Mr. Walsh said the list included \$4.2 million in cost cuts despite the fact that the First Selectwoman cut \$2.4 million. There was a lengthy and passionate discussion that followed. Mr. Testani agreed that the potential reduction in a proposed \$10 million budget was egregious and alarmed parents. He said he received many emails, most of which were respectful, but many were not. Mr. Testani added that the BOF has no control over the list or how the BOE chooses to spend the final allotted amount. He also asked about the \$800,000 deficit in the current BOE budget and asked what had been done to rectify it and what will be done going forward to prevent it in new budgets. Ms. Leborious said Mr. Mancusi's budget increased to reflect needs and thinks it is adequate. She added that the current year updated second quarter shows his budget coming to balance as there were shortages in other areas.

Kevin Starke asked about structural change and possibly cutting CO staff. Mr. Starke asked Mr. Cummings if there has been a study of productivity with CO staff. Mr. Cummings said he reduced a position last year and he is well aware of the work CO staff is producing. He said many staff are fulfilling multiple roles. There was a discussion about an evaluation audit for CO staff. Mr. Starke and Mary LeClerc asked questions and started a discussion about who determines when a child needs special services and the process that follows. There was also a conversation regarding COVID, pre-COVID and a mental health crisis with kids.

A discussion about enrollment followed and Mr. Cummings said there is a breakdown of levels of schools. He said trends are declining in Middle and High School, but Elementary is increasing. That report is on pages 160-161 in the proposed BOE budget.

Mr. DeWitt and Mr. Mancusi had a discussion about enrollment and potential revenue in the Walter Fitzgerald High School (WFHS) and the Early Childhood Center (ECC).

Mr. Walsh had additional budget and educational questions that were addressed, one being about a scoreboard for FLHS that costs \$238,000. Mr. Testani said that scoreboard generated revenue when he was in Trumbull as corporations paid to have their logo on the scoreboard.

Ms. Vitale said there will be a BOE Town Hall meeting on March 23, 2022 that will address the cut list and who will ultimately make decisions on how the money is spent/cut.

11030 Health and Welfare Services

Mr. Mancusi said there is a grant from the Town to meet the obligation to identify special needs students who attend private schools in Fairfield. He said the BOE is obligated to identify them. He said the Individuals with Educational Disabilities Act (IDEA) requires that they are identified, but if they want an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and services, they need to return to the district school. He said if students are identified and an IEP is written, but not serviced if they don't return to the public school system.

2531 Private School Bus Transportation

Ms. Leborious explained the increase in the budget was due to a rate increase of 2.5% annually, fuel costs rising, and the number of runs being utilized for non-public schools to reflect actual enrollment for the upcoming school year. The costs could go up more due to the continuous rise in fuel.

Mr. Walsh asked if the school district was running short on drivers, but still getting students to school. Executive Director of Operations Angelus Papageorge said there is a limit to the length of time a student can be on a bus, otherwise the district could use fewer drivers to make less runs and still get students to school.

Mr. Curley asked Mr. Papageorge to go back to the scoreboard and asked why FLHS isn't getting a comparable scoreboard to FWHS since that scoreboard was installed a couple of years ago. Mr. Papageorge said the district is working with other companies to see costs. He said non-ad scoreboards are approximately the same price. There was a discussion on the ad sale process and potential revenue for the Town. Mr. Papageorge added that the BOE will have the final say on what is advertised and what can be advertised per State law with children present.

There was no public comment.

4. Adjourn

Chris DeWitt made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 11:42 pm. Sheila Marmion seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Pru O'Brien
Recording Secretary