

**BOARD OF FINANCE PUBLIC BUDGET COMMENT SESSION**  
**Saturday, March 26, 2022**  
**9:30 a.m.**  
**Fairfield Ludlowe High School Auditorium**  
**785 Unquowa Road**  
**Fairfield, CT 06824**

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

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: FairTV, members of the public

- I. Call to Order  
Chair Lori Charlton called the meeting to order at 9:34 am.
- II. Pledge of Allegiance  
Vice Chair John Mitola led the Pledge of Allegiance.
- III. Public Budget Comment Session  
Chair Charlton told the public that the Board was there to listen to the public's feedback on the budget process. Chair Charlton told the public to please keep comments to three minutes or less and to sign in with names and addresses.
  - Bud Morton - 95 Field Point Drive – He said the BOE budget is two-thirds of spending that is elapsing all public services. He said the BOE budget is up and enrollment is down. He said there's an increase in faculty and labor costs. He said there will be long-term consequences for rapid growth in BOE spending.
  - William Lenahan - 42 Alma Drive – He said he supports Human Services' requests for full-time staff. He said Seniors account for 25% of Fairfield's head of households. He said socialization is critical to maintaining quality of life and investing in the Senior community will result in a great rate of return for the Town.
  - Melinda Gremse -68 Oxbow Road- She said elementary school teachers are in support of the STEAM program (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art & Math) and the level of engagement in class is amazing and fosters problem solving. She said the vision of a graduate would change with cuts proposed to the BOE. She said the pandemic has been traumatic.
  - Jennifer Vilenski -1822 Stratfield Road – She said to restore BOE funding. She said she is a middle school teacher and education funding costs cause a gap in education. She said counseling staff is stretched thin. She said 12 teaching jobs are on the list to cut.
  - Lauren Kinsley -212 Buena Vista Road – She said she has been a teacher for 17 years. She said she supports the STEAM program. She said with cuts, class size will increase, and paras will decrease. She said it will cause a struggle to learn because teachers will be overloaded.

- Sharon Meyers -25 Lawrence Road- She said she has lived her whole life in Fairfield and is now a math teacher at FLHS. She said Fairfield is considered a good school system, but it is only good because of good teachers. She said Paras are needed for the children and the well-being and effectiveness of the teachers.
- Laura Karson -187 Buena Vista Road – She said to restore the BOE budget. She said she doesn't have kids in the school system, but she has no problem paying more as a resident. She said schools are the #1 asset in Town and we owe it to the kids.
- Randi Cohen -200 Lloyd Drive- He said he has two kids in schools. He said the Math Academy from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade up is an incredible program. He said it doesn't make sense to make cuts after the pandemic.
- Owen Guernsey - 241 Brookside Drive – He said he's a student and his principal sits outside the boys bathroom to control chaos. He said he would be upset to see teachers leave.
- Matt McKinnis -301 Sasco Hill Road – He said he is a student. He asked to reinstate the BOE budget. He said we are coming out of bad times, teachers are stressed, students are not learning how they should be and students are turning to drugs and crime because they feel like they can't catch up. He said this is not a partisan issue.
- Heather Dyer -240 Mayfair Road- She said she is a sixth grade teacher at RLMS and a graduate of the FPS. She said proposed cuts would eliminate significant people and programs. She said she will lose her job along with 56 others.
- Urb Leimkuhler -83 Spruce Street – He said he is a member of the Fairfield Senior Advocates and Affordable Housing Committee. He said keeping Seniors in Town is good for everyone. He said there must be programs that support the most vulnerable residents. He said he supports the full-time positions in Human Services and he supports the Seniors who will benefit from the programs.
- Paula Healey -1882 North Benson Road- She said she has been a Kindergarten teacher at North Stratfield for 28 years. She said young kids have spent half of their lives in the pandemic in a socially-distant world of masks. She said these kids are lacking a normal preschool experience and had trouble transitioning. She said a teacher has 20 kids and learning is impacted.
- Cindy Wapnitsky -41 Valley View Place – She said she is a retired teacher with an autistic child who is 33 years old who went through the FPS. She said her child functions independently because of teachers and paras. She said early intervention is the key to success. She said budget cuts will affect the middle class who can't afford to pull kids out and put them in private schools.
- Kate Schallau - 1135 Jennings Road – She said she is a Kindergarten teacher and paras in the classroom help kids who need help with writing, bathrooms and reading. She said to allow for 1-1 teacher assessments. She said Paras don't cost much, but provide plenty of help.
- Judy Salemme - 11 Morehouse Drive – She said she is an Elementary Library Media Specialist. She said in the Library/Media Center, paras help students with independent reading. She said they allow for the circulation of and access to reading materials. She said she supports the school with arrival/dismissal, lunch, recess and PPT meetings.
- Sharon Pistilli -107 Lota Drive – She said she is on the RTM, but she is speaking as a resident. She said to restore the BOE budget. She said the community realizes the negative impact of the pandemic on the kids. She said this year more than ever, money is needed and to treat parents with respect.

- Nicole Stanton -1041 Burroughs Road – She said we are picking up pieces from the pandemic and children will continue to work to regain what was lost. She said to support the bipartisan approval of the BOE budget.
- Gordon Mackenzie -11 Palmer Bridge- He said he is a volunteer and member of Fairfield Senior Advocates. He said he supports the full-time addition to Human and Social Services at the Bigelow Center. He said the Center supports Seniors with tax filing, computer scams, games, hobbies, physical training and more. He said it is important to support the Bigelow Center in any way possible.
- Jessica Keane -112 Taunton Road – She said she is a teacher at McKinley. She said she has children in the FPS. She said she is an ESL teacher and bilingual teachers are invaluable. She parent/teachers provide translators by utilizing bilingual paras.
- Marta Mwambulukutu -399 Jackman Avenue – She said she is an Elementary World Language teacher. She said students from all backgrounds have their own language and heritage validated in school. She said this gives students a positive sense of self and community and losing EWL would hurt these students. She said specialists and paras are the only way some kids feel connected.
- Reini Knorr -83 Alberta Street – She said she is a volunteer focused on prevention. She said she is a parent of four adults who navigated their lives during the pandemic. She said it's tougher to have a child with addiction and tougher to bury a child because of mental health issues from pandemic.
- Kathleen Rupert -180 Warwick Avenue – She said she is a Math teacher. She said Paras are invaluable to students and teachers. She said they work for little money and are integral in all parts of school. She said the library para is a specialized position and provides tech support. She said the STEAM para provides students with the opportunity to apply this program to learning skills and teaches them to solve problems with different solutions.
- Sherry Miro -196 Stevenson Road – She said she is a Para and VP of the BOE Para union. She said Paras are the lowest paid bargaining unit, but the first to get cut. She said cutting 30 paras will be a huge mistake. She said without paras, classrooms cannot be covered the way they need to be.
- Aimee Guerrero -39 Lisbon Drive – She said she was a North Stratfield teacher from 2001-2003 and is a school Library Media Specialist in a neighboring town. She said students and teachers are suffering. She said during the lockdown, her two kids who are string players, taught themselves guitar. She said her older son suffers from depression and music helps immensely and schools need music programs. She said to support the public library budget as it supports the youngest and oldest citizens of the community.
- Katie Flynn -204 Grandview Road - She said the BOE passed the budget unanimously. She said educators pivot and persevere. She said there is a need for security and technology, SPED, and there are unfunded State requirements. She said the decrease in enrollment is eclipsed by the needs in SPED.
- Steve Baker - 634 Beach Road – He said he wants the Board to stop saying, “Not cutting BOE budget, only cutting the increase to budget.” He said he grew up in Town, graduated from Fairfield’s schools and the Town can afford a \$71.00 increase per household. He said people voted for people who supported the education budget and the body has changed.

- Kelly McWhinnie -947 Church Hill Road – She said kids went back to in-person learning in August of 2020. She said staff has been amazing. She said the budget says do more, but if the BOS cuts go through, kids will feel it. She asked to also please take care of the Town’s Seniors.
- Suzanne Miska -123 Ryegate Road – She said the budget is concerning. She said the town-side budget is not efficient in scale. She said the BOE cut the budget before presenting it. She said there are conflicting budgets - spend money on Gould Manor, but not on education, conservation or DPW. She said there’s an increase in the PD budget when crime has not increased. She said health care on the rise. She said to invest in the education we have to offer.
- Jill Vergara -271 Old Post Road – She said she is an RTM member and hasn’t attended a public meeting in two years. She is urging other Boards and Commissions to go back to meeting in person. She said the community is breaking down on Webex. She said the eloquence of the speakers who have been through public education is proof of the need for funding the BOE budget.
- Jennifer Kennelly -117 Edgewood Place – She said she is a BOE member. She referenced Mr. Morton and said this is not the time to speak negatively about the BOE. She said the reality is that students need more. She cautioned the BOF not to fall back on the repeated phrase, “BOF does not determine the items.” She asked if \$3 million could be cut and have it not impact children?
- Jennifer Giudice -59 Cedar Woods Lane- She said she’s in her 25<sup>th</sup> year of teaching high school. She said her daughter is volunteering at farm for kids with special needs as a result of the impact of her teachers and Paras. She said more kids are in crisis and need smaller classroom sizes. She said investing in students now is an investment for years to come.

Chair Lori Charlton thanked the members of the public for attending and speaking. Chair Charlton then gave the Board members the opportunity to speak.

Chris DeWitt: He said he is thankful to have two kids graduate from the FPS. He said it is not surprising to have support for the youngest and oldest in Fairfield. He said we need to think about all Fairfielders and what they want. He said the BOE budget is a \$7.5 million increase from last year. He said the BOF has to keep Fairfield affordable and will look at all parts of the budget.

James Walsh: He said his favorite BOF budget meeting is to hear from residents in person. He said the budget is a balancing act and the Superintendent’s list is scary because of the reasons heard today. He said it is shocking to see what Paras are paid and that needs to be looked at and they need a living wage. He said the BOE budget has no changes in CO and it has added positions. He said cutting the communications person would save six paras. He said there are no structural changes. He said the BOE wants to spend \$50 million to renovate Dwight and the building is at less than capacity. He said on the Town-side, adding police officers is needed because there is an increase in crime. He said there would be more money for air conditioning if there weren’t expenses from the last administration regarding the fill pile. He said the Town will have to learn from and pay for that.

Jack Testani: He said the BOE budget is evaluated seriously. He said he has two kids who went through the public schools system. He said there are other areas of the Town in the budget.

He said Gould Manor and Penfield need work. He said he will consider the increase and where the Town can benefit most. He said he heard what everyone had to say.

John Mitola: He said he has been serving on the BOF for 7-8 years and was also on the BOE as Chair and Vice Chair and on the RTM too. He said he looks at the Town budget to see where the Town can save and minimize increases on the Town-side and the effect of the BOE. He said some of the BOE budget can be restored without much impact. He said there is work to do.

Kevin Starke: He said 35% of residents have kids in school. He said it costs \$19,000 per pupil per year which is \$500,000. He said the average tax bill per household is \$12,000 and it would take 42 years to pay it back. He said there are two private schools with tuition increases. He said if the budget goes through, the taxes will increase 1.3%. He said there are SPED increases from the pandemic and social media and wellness. He said he thinks there would be a bipartisan agreement to increase the BOE budget to include an efficiency study.

Sheila Marmion: She said it's a hard role and there are tough choices on both the Town-side and the BOE side. She said she heard from constituents that they need to invest and not cut. She said she is thankful as a parent and a taxpayer to have had three kids go through the school system in Fairfield. she said she is supportive of the original BOE budget. She said she is supportive of the Health and Human Services budget. She said town-side services will be looked at closely as well.

Craig Curley: He said he was moved by the passion of the speakers. He said he is glad he ran for the BOF so he can give back. He said the budget can't be approved without going through the process and the color of the commentary helped fill in the blanks. He said he is in favor of fully restoring the BOE budget. He said the Town and BOE did a great job presenting their budgets and with detail.

Lori Charlton: She said this is the first time this meeting has happened since 2019. She said the world has changed and effected everyone. She said in the 2018-2019 budget approval, the BOF looked at families moving, declining property values, reduced State aid and budget increases. She said now, there is an influx of families, property values are up and there is a flood of State and federal funding. She said we are also approaching historic levels of inflation. She wants to focus on the long term and not over correct. She said to invest in education and create an education budget that is adequate and not fund with surplus money. She said she appreciates her colleagues who have put in the work. Ms. Charlton thanked the First Selectwoman and her team for putting together a budget that is thoughtful. She said she will be advocating for changes in it. She urged everyone to stay engaged in the process as the budget goes to the RTM.

#### IV. Adjourn

Mr. DeWitt made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 11:54 am. Mr. Mitola seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Pru O'Brien  
Recording Secretary

