

BOARD OF SELECTMEN PUBLIC BUDGET HEARING #2 FINAL MINUTES
Thursday, February 24, 2022
10:00 am
Via Webex

The Board of Selectmen held a Public Budget Hearing at 10:00 a.m. on Thursday, February 24, 2022 via Webex in Fairfield, CT.

A recording of this meeting can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yK-vPOx-C3g>.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Brenda L. Kupchick, First Selectwoman, Thomas M. Flynn, Selectman, Nancy E. Lefkowitz, Selectwoman

OTHERS PRESENT: Ross Murray, Tax Assessor, Jared Schmitt, CFO, Caitlin Bosse, Controller, Christine Vitale, BOE Chair, Mike Cummings, Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Zakia Parrish, Executive Director of Operations and Processes, Courtney Laborious, Executive Director of Finance and Business Services, Dr. James Zavodjancik, Executive Director of Instruction, Curriculum and Assessment.

- 1) Call to Order-First Selectwoman Kupchick called the meeting to order at 10:00 am.
- 2) Pledge of Allegiance-First Selectwoman Kupchick led the Pledge of Allegiance.
- 3) Budget Hearings
 - Follow-Up on Town-side proposed budget

Selectwoman Lefkowitz had follow-up questions for the Tax Assessor regarding the Assessment Appeals and any revenue lost as a result. Mr. Murray said there were 650 appeals heard last year through the BAA (Board of Assessment Appeals) and 110 went to Superior Court. He said this year, 150 appeals will be heard by the BAA in March. Selectwoman Lefkowitz asked about assessment revenue loss and Mr. Murray said last year the total appeals were reduced by almost half. He said the BAA reduced the assessed values by approximately \$30,250,000. He said the total appraised value of what is being appealed is \$20 million. Selectwoman Lefkowitz asked about outside counsel being used. Mr. Murray explained that outside counsel is only used if cases go to Superior Court and if necessary for Court, he would possibly use an outside appraiser.

Selectwoman Lefkowitz asked First Selectwoman Kupchick what was different from last year's First Selectwoman's Office budget and this year's budget. First Selectwoman Kupchick said regular payroll was up due to raises which the Board of Selectmen voted on as the increases are in line with the unions. She said she also added \$3000 for training on top of regular training for staff.

Selectwoman Lefkowitz asked about the CAO position and wanted to get an update of the job which was discussed when the position was first added. First Selectwoman Kupchick said the CAO position was added three years ago and noted that every budget year this position is discussed. She said Mr. Bremer handles a lot of additional items and works directly with department heads on her initiatives. She said he is the point person on the fill pile and FEMA issues with Penfield Pavilion. Selectwoman Lefkowitz said she would like to get periodic reports from Mr. Bremer so his position doesn't need to be addressed every budget season.

Selectman Flynn added that Mr. Bremer has been his main conduit to information regarding the fill pile and remediation and he has worked with Mr. Bremer last year on the Capital Plan. He said Mr. Bremer is taking the lead on a lot of the discussions with FEMA and the issues the Town is having with Penfield. Selectman Flynn said negotiations need to be made with FEMA and the State. He added that since the Risk Management position was eliminated, he thinks it is beneficial to have Mr. Bremer, with his legal background, involved in insurance particularly in property and liability. He said Mr. Bremer is also assisting with purchasing policies. Selectman Flynn feels this position is very valuable and hopes it can expand in the future.

Selectwoman Lefkowitz assured the Board that she is not questioning the value of the position or Mr. Bremer, but said she thinks it would benefit the Town and the public to hear from him on a regular basis. First Selectwoman Kupchick stated that Mr. Bremer, along with the Chief of Staff, provide her with information and attend meetings when she is unavailable. She said their support is invaluable and allows her to do her job effectively.

Selectwoman Lefkowitz had questions about the Legal Services budget as she is advocating for the public to see what goes into the budget. She said the Town is facing big issues with the fill pile, lawsuits, and general day-to-day business. Selectwoman Lefkowitz asked about Town Counsel versus outside counsel. First Selectwoman Kupchick said there are a tremendous number of items that need legal attention. She said the Town hires outside counsel because Attorney Baldwin cannot do everything by himself. She said the Town contracts for tax appeals, fill pile environmental items, FEMA issues, conservation issues and also for the Conservation Commission. She said Town Attorney Baldwin also spends a considerable amount of time answering questions from various Boards and the First Selectwoman's Office. Selectwoman Lefkowitz asked if the Legal Services budget could be broken down for the public to know how it all works.

Budget Director Frank Magneri broke down Legal Services:

- General Litigation \$320,000
- Litigation for Conservation \$25,000
- Tax Appeals \$190,000
- Employee Union Contracts \$147,000
- Expenses for Charter Revision counsel and the Town Attorney's salary. Neither of whom are employees of the Town of Fairfield.

Mr. Magneri said the Legal Services is tracking on budget. Per Selectwoman Lefkowitz's request, CFO Jared Schmitt said he will put the breakdown in the Budget Book for the public to see. There was a discussion about legal fees for the fill pile and what accounts are paying those fees. This discussion can be accessed on the meeting recording. Selectwoman Lefkowitz asked for the breakdown to be included in this year's budget book so the public could access it. Mr. Schmitt said he would add it.

The Board of Selectmen had questions regarding the ECC budget and why it was separate from the regular budget. Mr. Schmitt said the Board of Finance thought it would be better to create a separate fund to track revenue and expenses. Selectman Flynn had other questions regarding the finances for the ECC, but he said he would want to discuss this in Executive Session.

There was a discussion about the “off budget” funds like the one that is being used to subsidize the police cars. Selectman Flynn asked for a breakdown of that budget. There was a discussion about the source of the money and who was using it. Mr. Schmitt and Ms. Bosse said they will provide the Board with actual numbers from that fund. Selectwoman Lefkowitz stated for the record that the discussion the Board just had demonstrates the reason why “off budget” funds should be part of the budget.

Selectwoman Lefkowitz also had questions regarding Pension and OPEB. CFO Jared Schmitt referred to budgeted amounts on page 230. He said all amounts are done by the actuary. He said OPEB projections are over a two-year period. Mr. Schmitt said at the bottom of page 231 fiscal year ending 2022, is the plan for the Town and on page 232 is the plan for Police and Fire. He said the Pension breakdown is on page 229 and was finalized the end of last week. He said those numbers are done annually. Mr. Schmitt said he will forward the presentation from the Actuary who did not have that report when the budget book was printed.

Selectman Flynn had a question about Debt Service (Dept 10030 \$24,210,208) on page 225. Mr. Schmitt reviewed the breakdown of the bonds which an outside service puts together. There was also a question about the increase in the FairTV budget and it was explained that due to the virtual meetings and anticipation of the hybrid installation, there will need to be an increase in staff in order for the system to function properly.

Selectman Flynn motioned to go into Executive Session at 11:17 am to discuss the ECC. Selectwoman Lefkowitz seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

Selectwoman Lefkowitz motioned to come out of Executive Session at 11:41 am. Selectman Flynn seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

The Selectmen took no action.

Selectman Flynn motioned to recess at 12:00 pm. Selectwoman Lefkowitz seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

First Selectwoman Kupchick motioned to come back from recess at 12:30 pm. Selectwoman Lefkowitz seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

- BOE proposed budget

Before sharing the BOE presentation, Superintendent Cummings stated that the last couple of years have taxed all resources both personally and professionally in the Fairfield Public Schools. He said the budget presented today reflects the challenges from the past two years. Mr. Cummings said as the school system moves through the pandemic, it will be dealing with ramifications from students and staff. He said the original budget presented had a 6.2% increase. He said the BOE reduced the budget to 5.42%, taking out \$1.5 million using funds from the ARP ESSER and ESSER II. (American Rescue Plan & Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief). Mr. Cummings said the slides at the end of the presentation have all the details and he encouraged everyone to look at them after the presentation.

Mr. Schmitt requested a breakdown of Special Education costs. Courtney Laborious said she will work directly with Mr. Schmitt on this.

There was a discussion about the First Selectwoman's proposed reduction in the BOE budget and how it would affect the BOE. The BOE will have a presentation of the first draft of potential cuts on March 4th.

First Selectwoman Kupchick asked about the surplus that the BOE had at the end of last year. BOE Chair Christine Vitale explained that it was a very different year due to the pandemic and the fact that schools couldn't have Professional Development saved on transportation because students were at home and the BOE expanded on the open choice program and revenue to comply with the Racial Imbalance Program. Mr. Cummings said he will get a breakdown to the First Selectwoman. First Selectwoman Kupchick said the average increase submitted in the BOE budget has been 4% and it has usually gotten 2%. She said this year, she has put in her budget a 4.12% or a \$7.9 million increase from last year's BOE budget.

There were lengthy and important discussions on initiatives and structural changes, effects of the pandemic on the school system and cost increases, as well as finding ways to cut costs while still serving the students of this Town. The full discussion can be heard by accessing the above recording link.

First Selectwoman concluded by saying she served on the BOE and knows and respects what goes into its budgets. She said the pandemic was very challenging for the schools and town. First Selectwoman Kupchick said she believes changes can be made while keeping the level of education this Town is used to. She said she is still investing in Fairfield's students and the very qualified staff. First Selectwoman Kupchick said she respects all the BOE and staff and thanked them for all they do.

4) Public Comment – There was no public comment.

5) Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 1:15pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Pru O'Brien
Recording Secretary