



REPRESENTATIVE TOWN MEETING

JANUARY 29, 2024

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This report was received in Committee.

**ITEM NO. 6 ON CALL:** REPORT FROM THE JOINT RETIREMENT INVESTMENT BD

This report was received in Committee.

**ITEM NO. 7 ON CALL:** MINUTES OF THE DECEMBER 18, 2023 MEETING

Laura Karson, District 4 moved this item as distributed with the Call, duly seconded.

**VOTE:** The December 18, 2023 minutes were approved by unanimous voice vote.

**ITEM NO. 8 ON CALL:** APPOINTMENT OF JEFF GALDENZI (D) TO THE HVAC INDOOR AIR QUALITY BUILDING COMMITTEE

This item was on the consent calendar.

**ITEM NO. 9 ON CALL:** APPOINTMENTS OF ELHAM FATEHI (U) TERM NOV. 2023-2027 AND RONALD BLUMENFELD (D) TERM NOV 2022-2026 TO THE SOLID WASTE AND RECYCLING COMMISSION

This item was on the consent calendar.

**ITEM NO. 10 ON CALL:** REAPPOINTMENT OF ARTHUR N. GRAVANIS (U) TERM NOV. 2023-2028 TO THE HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

This item was on the consent calendar.

**ITEM NO. 11 ON CALL:** REAPPOINTMENT OF JAMES P. BOHAN (R) TERM NOV. 2023-2028 ALTERNATE MEMBER TO THE HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION (TO FILL VACANCY)

This item was on the consent calendar.

**ITEM NO. 12 ON CALL:** APPOINTMENT OF GEORGE E. CLARK JR (R) TERM NOV. 2021-2026 TO THE HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION (TO FILL VACANCY)

This item was on the consent calendar.

**ITEM NO. 13 ON CALL:** APPOINTMENT OF SUSANNE TEITELL (R) TERM JULY 2023-2026 TO THE FAIRTV COMMISSION (TO FILL VACANCY)

This item was on the consent calendar.

**ITEM NO. 14 ON CALL:** REAPPOINTMENT OF CAROLYN L. TRABUCO (D) TERM NOV. 2023-2028 TO THE EMPLOYEES' RETIREMENT BOARD

This item was on the consent calendar.

**ITEM NO. 15 ON CALL:** TO HEAR, CONSIDER AND ACT UPON THE FOLLOWING RESOLUTION AS RECOMMENDED BY THE BOARD OF FINANCE: “RESOLVED, THAT UPON A RECOMMENDATION BY THE BOARD OF SELECTMEN, THE RESOLUTION ENTITLED, ‘A RESOLUTION APPROPRIATING \$3,729,800 FOR THE COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE REPLACEMENT OF THE DUCK FARM ROAD BRIDGE, AUTHORIZING GRANTS TO REIMBURSE \$2,983,840 OF SUCH APPROPRIATION AND AUTHORIZING THE ISSUANCE OF BONDS TO FINANCE A PORTION OF SUCH APPROPRIATION,’ BE AMENDED AND RESTATED SO AS THE APPROPRIATION BE INCREASED TO \$3,819,176, THE GRANT AUTHORIZATION BE INCREASED TO \$3,023,341, AND THE BOND AUTHORIZATION BE INCREASED TO \$795,835.”

This item was on the consent calendar.

**ITEM NO. 16 ON CALL:** TO HEAR, CONSIDER AND ACT UPON THE FOLLOWING RESOLUTION AS RECOMMENDED BY THE BOARD OF FINANCE: “RESOLVED, THAT THE RESOLUTION ENTITLED, ‘A RESOLUTION APPROPRIATING AN ADDITIONAL \$1,429,950 FOR COSTS RELATED TO CONSTRUCTION, REMEDIATION, AND ADDRESSING THE NOTICES OF VIOLATION AT PENFIELD PAVILION,’ BE, AND HEREBY IS, APPROVED.”

Steve Berez, District 7 said the most utilized part of Penfield Pavilion is the shaded picnic tables. More beach and less pavilion is what is needed. He voted against the funding before and will vote against it again.

Chris Shea, District 2 asked for clarification that the plan that exists will be in compliance with FEMA regulations. First Selectman Gerber said the repairs will be in compliance with FEMA regulations when it was built, not the current FEMA code. The Town is allowed to keep it at the current height because we are at the 50/50 threshold.

Michelle McCabe, District 4 said the RTM was given only one opportunity to vote on Penfield in March 2023; she voted no. The construction insurance costs are almost \$400,000. She will vote yes tonight because it’s their only choice. Ken Astarita, District 1 said there was a presentation to all three Bodies on August 21, 2022. He explained the reason he got involved was because of the incompetence and mismanagement of the Penfield Pavilion project years ago. Laura Karson, District 4 recalled that the prior First Selectwoman said she would make the decision because she did not want the town fighting. Sharon Pistilli, District 5 said decreasing the scope was not an option brought to the RTM.

Dru Georgiadis, District 9 said she voted no on the one option brought forward although she would have supported reducing the size. She will vote yes tonight because she does not want to see people in town lose their flood insurance discount.

First Selectman Gerber thanked project manager Eli Ghazal for his efforts and for meeting with FEMA, whose lack of trust in the Town is apparent. The Town must provide photographs throughout the course of the project. We are on a very tight timeline.

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Jeff Steele, District 2 agreed that Eli is very impressive. Penfield Pavilion is a center point of the town. The vote tonight is not because of the prior administration. It is because of the incompetence of the administration before that.

**VOTE:** The resolution appropriating \$1,429,950 for costs related to Penfield Pavilion was approved with 37 in favor, 1 opposed (Berecz) and 1 abstention (Donne).

**ITEM NO. 17 ON CALL:** TO FORM THE RTM SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON ENERGY INITIATIVES.

Laura Karson moved the item as distributed, duly seconded.

**VOTE:** The resolution to form an RTM Special Committee on Energy Initiatives was approved by unanimous voice vote.

**ADJOURNMENT:**

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 9 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Elizabeth P. Browne, MMC, MCTC  
Town Clerk

**STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS  
FIRST SELECTMAN BILL GERBER  
JANUARY 29, 2024**

**INTRODUCTION**

Members of the RTM, Distinguished Guests, and my Fellow Citizens:

It is a tremendous honor to be here, as First Selectman, continuing this tradition of giving the annual State of the Town address to the Representative Town Meeting.

I have been in office for just over two months, and I am prouder than ever to be a Fairfielder. I feel particularly fortunate to find myself working with so many talented and dedicated employees, department heads and volunteers. There are too many to name individually, but I want to thank each one of them for the warm welcome they've given me and for their commitment to serving the public.

Many of our current residents grew up in Fairfield, or went to college here and stayed here. Take it from me, this speaks volumes for what Fairfield has to offer. I don't hear many young people say "I'm out of here and never coming back" when they graduate high school.

So yes, things are good here, but our increasing popularity brings challenges. Looking ahead over the next decade where do we want to be?

**My vision is that we want to be a community where people WANT TO AND CAN AFFORD TO live, work and retire.**

- We want to maintain the quality of our schools. Not only are they educating our future leaders, but our education system drives our property values.
- We want to become a more walkable, bikeable and sustainable town, so all ages and abilities can enjoy healthier lifestyles and greater attachment to their community.
- And we want to live amid vibrant business districts to drive employment, revenue and convenience.

How do we do that? We have to be **more strategic about our planning and investments.**

In the next 15 minutes or so, I'll describe where I think we need to focus our long-term planning efforts and how I see a budget developing to support that. I'll also touch on some specific issues and initiatives that are timely.

**LONG-TERM STRATEGIC PLANNING AND INVESTMENT**

Let's begin with commercial and residential development.

Fairfield was already a great town when I moved here 28 years ago. But, in my opinion, "great" for Fairfield is underachieving. Fairfield can be much more.

My wife, Jessica, and I choose to move here in 1996 *despite* the fact that downtown businesses were struggling. The Fairfield Store had just closed. The Howard Johnson's on Post Road closed within several months. There weren't many choices for eating out with the kids - mainly Sidetracks and McKenzie's. For adults, there were only a few nice choices in town, so we usually went to Westport on date nights.

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The opening of Joe’s American Bar and Grill signaled a new day for young families, and there were times we waited 45 minutes to get in. The re-development of the Fairfield Store property was another milestone. The success of our vibrant neighborhoods and commercial districts is tied partly to recent demographic shifts. Our underlying home property values are inextricably linked to our excellent public school system. Other impacts on our success are a highly educated workforce, access to rail and airports, our position along the I-95 corridor between NYC and Boston, two private universities and top-notch public services.

Our Town offers urban style amenities in a suburban style setting.

### **Commercial Development**

Some prior administrations have taken positions controversial at the time, that ultimately turned out to be positive for the town. The Metro Center is an example. There were epic battles about whether that project in any form should be allowed to happen. Now, in the opinion of many including myself, we are looking at a very exciting area that ...

- could and should be a significant driver of our grand list and tax revenue,
- could create a unique retail, restaurant, social and arts scene, with connectivity to an increasingly vibrant Black Rock section of Bridgeport, and
- is easily accessible by train and automobile.

### **Residential Development**

We have had a lot of residential development in Fairfield, and there is legitimate concern over zoning applications under State Statute 8-30g which allows developers to bypass most local zoning laws for residential complexes if at least 30% of the units meet the state’s definition of “affordable”. The town expects that this year we will obtain the 433 points we need to achieve a four-year moratorium from 8-30g. That’s good news. But, four years will go by very quickly. During that period, we must use every tool we have in our toolkit to work towards our next moratorium with housing that is affordable and attractive for all ages, including seniors, and also doesn’t negatively impact the feel of our neighborhoods.

### **Sewers**

A few important things were developed around WWII – penicillin, radar and our town’s sewer system. Fairfield has avoided appropriate investment in this area for decades. Now, our sewage system has become a limiting factor to growing our Grand List.

The “flow”, as it’s called, from planned and proposed development is too much for some of our existing lines.

Development at the Metro Center, for example, cannot proceed without a new trunk line, work that is currently in progress. Additional development on the Post Road corridor from Westport into town is also limited by our sewer system.

Our town sewage treatment plant may be nearing its capacity, but that is in large part due to a collection system that is permeable to rain, ground and, at times, salt water. Inflow and infiltration, as this is known, can be more than 50% of what flows through our lines.

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Flushing your toilet is something we pretty much take for granted. We would like that to continue and so Town bodies will be discussing tens of millions of dollars of necessary investments in our Water Pollution Control Authority's infrastructure over the next 10+ years. **Long-term strategic planning for our sewer system is critical** - both for our current usage and to enable future growth.

### Schools

Paying for our school system is largely a local responsibility in Connecticut, and the Fairfield Public School budget accounts for about 60% of our total budget. Starting in the 1980s, as school enrollment declined, Fairfield began closing and repurposing schools as a way to save money. Mill Hill, Osborn Hill, Oldfield and Grasmere Elementary Schools were closed. Instead of building a dedicated senior center and affordable senior housing, Oldfield and Grasmere (both almost completely walker schools) were permanently re-purposed. Ludlowe High School was closed and Warde expanded to absorb those students. Then what happened?

Over the following years, as the population again rebounded, Mill Hill, Osborn Hill and Ludlowe High School had to be re-opened, a new elementary school, Burr, had to be built, and about 60 portables installed. What was the tab for all of this? About \$140 million in 1980s, 90s and early 2000 dollars. You could safely double that amount, or more, to get a sense of the cost in today's dollars. This town spent an exorbitant amount of taxpayer money **that could have been avoided by better long-term strategic planning.**

### Traffic

One cost of our popularity is increased traffic and dangerous rights of way. Today, all over the country, town planners are realizing that connecting neighborhoods through safe and attractive rights of way leads to healthier and happier societies. You will hear the term "connectivity" a lot over the coming years. Streets can be redesigned to slow down automobiles, and well-designed sidewalks, bike lanes, and paths can reduce our dependency on cars, driving foot traffic to our commercial areas, and increasing economic activity.

It may take Fairfield 20 years to be a "Complete Streets Town" but **we must start the planning now** if we are to deal with the increased population growth that we've seen over the last 20 years. We need to ensure a sustainable, livable town for everyone- from children to seniors.

### Flood Resiliency

We have one of the longest coastlines of any municipality in Connecticut, and resiliency to flooding is one of the biggest challenges we face as a town. We will be making large investments to repair and replace existing flood resiliency infrastructure over the coming years. **Long-term strategic planning** is essential for our residents near the coastline and within our river basin system to mitigate flooding and damage.

## THE BUDGET

I've described five areas where long-term planning is vital to our success...

1. Commercial and Residential Development
2. our Sewer System
3. Schools
4. Traffic
5. And Flood Resiliency

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Let's talk now about the impact on the budget and ultimately, taxes.

At a high level, we face some challenging cliffs in the fiscal 24-25 budget that are left from prior years. Over the past four years, we had significant increases in our Grand List, an average of 2% per year, much of that from rising appraised values of existing real estate. This translated to an average increase of \$6.5 million of tax revenue per year. One way to think of this is Fairfield was able to collect more tax dollars from property owners without impacting the tax *rate* (called the Mill Rate) to the same extent. The math for this translates to the following in our town budgets: over the past four years, the average annual increase in the Total Expense Budget Line was 3.05%, while the Mill Rate increased by only 0.67%. This year, by contrast, the current Grand List growth estimate is about one-quarter of one percent, so we will not realize the valuation benefits seen in recent years.

At the same time, Fairfield borrowed *significantly less* in recent years by employing American Rescue Plan Act (or ARPA) funds towards projects that would typically have been bonded or paid for out of the operating budget. Our cost of borrowing was down by \$2 million last year. ARPA funds have been allocated and borrowing rates are now significantly higher. Our borrowing amounts will have to return to normal levels and will cost more than in the recent past.

The Board of Education teachers' contract was renegotiated this year. Last year, our superintendent gave us the heads up that our teachers were significantly underpaid versus our peers, and our retention and new hire rates were dropping as a result. The new contract includes a three-year increase of about 4.4% per year on average. The Board of Education proposed budget increase currently stands at about 5.4%. What does that mean? Well, the Board of Ed budget is about 60% of the total Fairfield budget so that's a large increase.

These are some of the challenges we face, and we are looking for ways to offset as much of these headwinds as possible. However, we know we can't compromise the level of services Fairfielders are used to and deserve.

### **EFFICIENCY**

I just explained how important a long-term outlook is for planned growth. An equally important element is **improving efficiencies throughout the town**. We are blessed with many dedicated and talented employees, but in some areas we are hamstrung by antiquated systems and processes. Recently, some of these deficits have led to well-publicized issues around internal controls. Addressing such problems effectively takes resources - not just money, but also time and attention of employees with the appropriate skill sets. Making appropriate investments to increase efficiencies and controls will ultimately save our taxpayers money.

### **ISSUES**

Finally I'd like to talk to you about **some issues that my administration is working on**.

**The Fill Pile** – a quick update on the fill pile. All but two sites have now been remediated and the remaining work is happening now. Construction on the Pavilion is scheduled to begin shortly with work expected to be completed in the January - February, 2025 timeframe. We continue to work with CT DEEP on how to address the fill pile itself to achieve a permanent resolution.

### **Diversity, Racial Equity and Justice**

At Wednesday's Board of Selectmen meeting, I will be accepting into the record the Racial Equity and Justice Task Force's Blueprint that was originally submitted to the BOS in January, 2022. Members of



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that Task Force worked for 18 months on this Blueprint and this work has never been adequately acknowledged. Two years later, most of this Blueprint remains very relevant.

At Wednesday's meeting, I will also be reading a proclamation regarding racism as a public health crisis. A few years ago, I received my Masters in Public Health, and through my course of studies became more aware than ever about the impacts of racism on public health. I am also committed to forming a permanent body to discuss issues of race in Fairfield and to propose solutions to make Fairfield a more inclusive community.

### **Arts Commission**

Is the arts scene thriving in Fairfield? You bet it is! We have so much artistic talent in Fairfield, including in our schools. I urge all of our artists in town to reach out to the newly formed Fairfield Arts Commission and let them know you are here. The mission of the Fairfield Arts Commission is to promote and celebrate the Arts in the town of Fairfield, and we can brand and promote our arts scene to make Fairfield known as a destination for the arts.

### **Charter**

Let's celebrate and support our form of highly participatory, municipal democracy, but commit to making improvements where we can. I do believe that we need to reopen the Charter revision process soon. The last Charter referendum included one single question that combined many separate issues, and may have failed for that reason. Some proposals were worthy of being broken out as separate questions, and I believe, could have passed had they been. Many other needed changes were not proposed, but should be, as separate questions, for the next referendum.

### **United Illuminating Monopoles**

Finally, a matter of great importance to all of us in Fairfield. There has been much discussion about United Illuminating's proposal to build massive monopoles through Fairfield and into Bridgeport, requiring permanent easements on over 19 acres of private property, both residential and commercial, and cutting down over six acres of trees and vegetation. I have made my views on their proposal clear in many different forums. I view UI's current proposal to be a significant economic threat to Fairfield and am committed to fighting it. We now have some of the best legal representation on these matters in the State and our administration confers with our lawyers on every aspect of this case regularly. I hope that you as RTM members and all of our residents will continue to support us by writing to Governor Lamont expressing your views.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I want to say that as a former financial executive and a former RTM member, I believe we have a great combination of talent in this town to lead us into a bright future. We have two universities, a vibrant business community, quality schools and services that support our residents at every stage of life. By focusing on strategic long-term planning at the same time that we improve the blocking and tackling of running the town, I think we will be well positioned to capitalize on all that Fairfield has to offer.

I ran for office to solve problems and get things done. I hope to engage ALL elected and appointed officials, and all residents in finding solutions because I truly do believe that we are better when we work together.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you. It is a tremendous honor.