BOARD OF FINANCE PUBLIC HEARING
NATHAN HALE-RAY HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM
TUESDAY, APRIL 16, 2024 AT 7:00 PM
VIA YOUTUBE LIVE

Participating:

Board of Finance Members:

Joseph Corbett
Eric Kolasinski
Todd Gelston
Maureen Goff
Harvey Thomas
Rebecca Whatley

Others:

Valerie Belles, Finance Director
Dr. Teresa DeBrito, Superintendent of Schools
Denise DiStephano, Citizen
Rosemary Evans, Citizen
James Francese, Citizen
Terry Garrity, Citizen
Irene Haines, First Selectwoman
Debbie Langdon, Citizen
Abigail Martin, Student Citizen
Patricia Stricker, BOE Chairwoman
Kiera Thompson, BOE
Ken Tosi, Citizen
Laurel White, Citizen
And other members of the public

CALL TO ORDER AND PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Mr. Corbett called the meeting to order at 7:01 p.m. and the attendees said the pledge of allegiance.

Mr. Corbett read the Pubic Hearing legal notice and he, First Selectwoman Haines, Board of Education Chairwoman Stricker, and Superintendent Dr. DeBrito provided opening comments.

GUESTS AND AUDIENCE COMMENTS

Mr. Corbett read emails from the following citizens:

- Robert Simmons – in response to a question raised by Mr. Simmons, Dr. DeBrito reviewed a partial list of unfunded state educational mandates and advised that they added an estimated "hundreds of thousands of dollars" to the Board of Education's budget.

- Robert Grenier – in response to questions raised by Mr. Grenier, Mr. Corbett advised that the Town is statutorily required to set a mil rate no later than July 1 of each year. He stated that they did look into the possibility of returning/crediting the FY2023-2024 over-payments to tax-payers but were advised by legal counsel that the Town could not do that. Mr. Corbett confirmed, however, that the approximately $545k carryover had been applied to this year's budget. Regarding the Town's purchase of the Kronberg property, he advised that the decision to purchase the land for open space followed the prescribed legal process and was approved by a majority vote at referendum.

- Elizabeth Fiechter – in response to questions raised by Ms. Fiechter, Mr. Corbett reiterated that the approximately $545k in property tax over payments has been applied to this year's budget. He further advised that the budget calendar for FY2024-2025 had been adjusted to allow more time for additional referendums prior to July 1st, if needed.

The following comments were raised at the meeting:

- Rosemay Evans – shared her recent experience of seeing her home town and high school in Florida in poor condition and commented that, in contrast, the Town of East Haddam and its schools are well-maintained. She stated that her family is very proud to live in the Town of East Haddam and to have attended, and worked in, its public education system. She emphasized that the Town should not put off required maintenance of its infrastructure or educational programs. She thanked the Board members for everything that they do for the community.

- Abigail Martin – provided comments in support of the BOE budget and discussed the importance of funding athletic programs and clubs.

- Laurel White – Thanked the Board members for their efforts and discussed the risks of cutting programs in the schools. She noted the importance of offering trades-based classes as well as college-based classes.

- Denise DiStephano – in response to a question raised by Ms. DiStephano, Finance Director Belles stated that back-up detail regarding the FY2024-2025 Transfer to Capital Reserves and Projects is available on ClearGov. She provided some clarification concerning the transfers and agree to post the information in PDF format on the Town's website.

- Jim Francese – advised that he is a retired educator and cautioned the Town against cutting budgets below what is needed to provide appropriate services. He stated that there is always an additional premium that has to be paid if preventative maintenance is continually put off.

- Kiera Thompson – stated that she is a member of the Board of Education and spoke in support of its budget. She encouraged citizens to pass the FY2024-2025 budget at the first referendum.

- Terri Garrity – stated that she is also a BOE member and advocated for special education funding.

- Ken Tosi – In response to Mr. Tosi's stated concern about underfunding the BOE budget, Ms. Stricker noted the FY2024-2025 budget is very lean, that they would like to offer new programs; however, they are cognizant of the community's concerns about increases in their property taxes. She stated the BOE is trying to maintain a challenging balance and thanked him for his awareness.

- Rebecca Whatley – advised that she is a member of the Board of Finance, but was speaking as a taxpayer and parent of elementary school children. She expressed concern about the Intersex Inclusive Progress Flag (i.e. Pride) stickers she has observed in the schools. She stated that she learned that Prism Counseling Support had come in on a professional development day and provided teachers with the stickers. She voiced her opinion that the Pride stickers are not appropriate in the elementary school and requested the BOE provide parents with more transparency about the schools' professional development spending.

- Debbie Langdon – commented on the increase to the Registrar of Voters FY2024-2025 budget and noted the impact of the state's mandated early voting initiative. She suggested the Town utilize regular staff members to help during the additional voting days. Ms. Haines responded to Ms. Langdon's comments and identified several challenges to having staff members from other departments assist at the polls. She noted that she and several other state representatives have petitioned the Secretary of State about the cost to municipalities of supporting the early voting initiative and reminded her that she promised it "would not be a burden on the towns". Ms. Haines advised that she does not have an answer to what will happen but stated that she hopes more funding is forthcoming.

- Jim Francese – noted that, following the previous budget season, some people felt that there was a core distrust concerning whether the BOE was using its funds wisely. He stated that he is a member of the BOE and, although he feels such distrust is unfounded, he summarized a number of policy changes that the BOE has instituted in response to those concerns.

- Sean Morrissey – advised that he is a new member of the BOE and stated that he had expected to find some waste or areas that could be cut in their budget. He noted, however, that he found that over the past seven years the BOE budgets have been very lean and, he commented that this year's budget is also "bare bones".

Mr. Corbett noted that additional emails had come in and he read the following comments to the Board and citizens:

- Walter Roguski – made several recommendations for additional information to be added to Citizen's Guide to the Budget. Mr. Corbett thanked Mr.Roguski for his input. He noted that end-of-month financials are generally discussed at the BOF's monthly meetings and are public information. Ms. Belles advised that the audited financials are the best source of information on reserve fund balances which are available on the Town's website or in hardcopy from her office.

- Elizabeth Fiechter and AJ Olabi – noted that they were unable to attend the Public Hearing; however, they would like to participate in the proposed straw poll. They advised that they would vote as follows:

    - Should the proposed budget be adjusted? 2 yes votes.
    - Which part should be adjusted? 2 votes to cut the BOE budget.

Mr. Corbett closed the Public Comment section of the hearing and the following straw poll questions were presented to the participants:

1. Do you want to see the proposed budget adjusted?
2. Is the Town's budget too high to provide appropriate services to taxpayers in our community?
3. Is the Town's budget too low to provide appropriate services to taxpayers in our community?
4. Is the Board of Education's budget too high to provide appropriate services to taxpayers in our community?
5. Is the Board of Education's budget too low to provide appropriate services to taxpayers in our community?

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Corbett adjourned the Public Hearing at 8:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
/s/
Todd Gelston
Secretary