

SPECIAL MEETING MARCH 19, 2008

The Wethersfield Town Council held a special meeting on Wednesday, March 19, 2008 at 6:00 p.m. in at the Stillman Building - Lower Level, 126 Hartford Avenue, Wethersfield, CT.

Present from Council: Cascio, Console, Hemmann, Kotkin, Roberts, Walsh, Deputy

Mayor Montinieri and Chairperson Adil; Absent: Forrest

Present from Board of Education: Gina DeAngelo, Janis Malec, Marie Massaro, Michael McKenna, Tristan Stanziale, Vice Chairperson Julie Montinieri, and Chairperson Stacey Hodges;

Absent: Raul Rodriguez, Penny Stanziale

Also present: Bonnie Therrien, Town Manager, and Dolores Sassano, Town Clerk, Michael Kohlhagen, Superintendent of Schools; Karen Baldwin, Human Resources and Administration, Fred Bushey, Supervisor, Maintenance & Operations, Karen Clancy, Director of Business Services, and Andrew Lees, Interim Director of Special Services.

PRESENTATION OF THE 2008-2009 BOARD OF EDUCATION BUDGET -

Michael Kohlhagen, Superintendent of Schools, presented the 2008-2009 Board of Education Budget. He spoke of the three areas of central importance to the Board of Education: the outcomes and opportunities for our students; overall quality of our school system; and the school systems relationship with the Wethersfield community. Everything in the budget is to achieve SMART* Goals, that is, specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely to improve student achievement; improve communication systems; capital improvement; and financial management. Rigor and success for every student is the motto. They have been cited for not meeting certain criteria with middle school students scoring below 64.5 % proficiency in Mathematics and Reading and are working to be off the list soon. They will meet the Board and Superintendent goals, impact student achievement, maintain "current services" with respect to class size, student support services, learning resources, long-rang plans and fixed costs. Most of the students are "doing good" on the CMT 2007 overview, but he knows they can do great. Also, he would like to improve college admissions, while the number applying is fine, Mr. Kohlhagen wants to improve the number of kids applying to a four year college. He has high expectations for all students and there is a need to improve Guidance at Wethersfield High School. Mr. Kohlhagen also pointed out that 81 % of his budget is salary and benefits and that of the proposed increase of 7.9%, 7.44 % is directly related to fixed costs while .46% of the proposed budget increase is related to non-fixed costs.

Mr. Kohlhagen stated that the commitment to providing a quality education at a reasonable cost to the taxpayer and ensuring "rigor and success for every student" requires finding a balance between being fiscally responsible to taxpayers and giving education to the town kids in school today. It is about kids now, community now and in the future.

Questions from Council members were answered by Mr. Kohlhagen following his Power-point presentation.

Councilor Hemmann asked about the college admissions data concerning totals. Mr. Kohlhagen stated that there is a 90 % acceptance rate but that it could be improved upon. There are kids going to college and many are moving forward in a positive way but he is concerned about getting them into the better schools.

Councilor Cascio referred to the charts on pages 3 and 6. He noted the new initiatives and wanted to know if there was enough support staff in this budget for the inadequacies. Mr. Kohlhagen stated there is no support staff attending the training with the teachers at this time. He would use tutors to cover and allocate resources for support staff to attend training with other special education teachers. Councilor Cascio asked if Mr. Kohlhagen thought they could accomplish their goals without support staff. Mr. Kohlhagen stated they do have the support staff just do not have them training

with the regular classroom teach at this time. The support staff implements the teacher in the classroom. All teachers need some baseline training and retraining in the new protocols to assist students at every level, giving teachers support to different students in every class.

Councilor Cascio referred to the graph on page 4 concerning college admissions. He stated that last year there was an addition to Guidance at Wethersfield High. Mr. Kohlhagen stated that they were doing good but can do better. Mr. Cascio asked about career workshops held last year. Mr. Kohlhagen stated that they are doing more of it.

Ms. Karen Baldwin reviewed the staffing proposal stating that a request was made for a guidance counselor last year but that it was not funded. She stated they did fund a special education leader to join other leaders and a half time psychologist last year to assess children. The Guidance leader was working on career readiness and college planning; hopefully they will see improved outcomes in this regard this year. Mr. Kohlhagen is making plans to update those courses, working hard at career readiness. Councilor Cascio said that they should keep in mind we do have good kids compared to other districts but with climate changes kids need to be more social and have more interaction with other students, parents and staff.

Board of Education Stacey Hodges stated that they spend money for the teachers but now need to be sure the tutors receive training. They directly affect the children; if they are not trained it slows the process. Tutors, with the teacher help the children.

Councilor Console saw that the superintendent wanted to be in the 20 Best Schools and wanted to know why we have fallen short in the past. Mr. Kohlhagen said he always looks forward with "high levels of accountability for all of us, me students and teachers". He continues to make improvements to get better and wants the staff to work smarter, there are opportunities to service our students as much as possible. Councilor Console realized he has goals and thanked Mr. Kohlhagen for understanding the economy of the times.

Deputy Mayor Montinieri saw there was an increase to 8.5 % in non certified paraprofessionals and wanted to know how we got there. Ms. Karen Baldwin stated that staff gets added. They had a large pre K class and while a paraprofessional may come in at 20 hours sometimes they may go to 29 hours. The lower grades, 1st, 2nd and 3rd go longer. She stated that Line 1120 drives retirement and the percentage increase adds to the town pension plan.

Deputy Mayor Montinieri asked about unfunded mandates. Ms. Baldwin stated that it is a mandate if the team deems it important for the student. He asked that perhaps in future years it could be shown differently-issues not in our control create a difficulty. He would like to see what it is because this is a problem not just for us but for the State. Mr. Kohlhagen said he could provide a list of unfunded mandates. Teams are working to understand mandating paraprofessional and specially equipment.

Councilor Cascio referred to page 7, the chart depicting current and projected enrollments district-wide. He wondered if, since Webb is near Highcrest it could be used to house more students. Mr. Kohlhagen stated that last May, after the budget was adopted, they added a class at Charles Wright. They are monitoring class size and making recommendations by looking at every classroom at every building. Sometimes they offer additional support because they cannot open another session. Mr. Bushey is looking at home schools to be sure they can fit additional desks into the space. The Board of Education and Superintendent of Schools are married to neighborhood schools, not looking to redistrict rather for a creative solution. Mr. Cascio thought Highcrest and Webb are intertwined neighborhoods. Mr. Kohlhagen said they are opening two additional classrooms for this coming September.

Councilor Cascio asked about the new initiatives and if there are consultants for different areas. Mr. Kohlhagen stated consultants may be grant funded, used for short term for specific purposes to train staff on saving money. Consultants are helpful to our staff, strengthen staff services and will be budgeted for or grant funded. Mr. Cascio asked if they were the same consultants. Mr. Kohlhagen said some consultants have completed their work and some will be returning. Expectation in every area is to improve.

Councilor Kotkin was concerned about the Health care and insurance costs. The past 12 months have been terrible with 18-19 % increase. How many retirements do you have built in?

Ms. Baldwin responded they know of 10 certified positions by January 15, 2009. If the retiring person tells the Board of Education earlier they receive a retirement allowance. They have six (6) retirees, two have already retired, and the other four to come. Councilor Kotkin wanted to know the savings to which Ms. Baldwin responded that most of the retirements come from areas which have shortages and consequently the pay scale for their replacements will not be entry level as they command a higher premium. Councilor Kotkin asked what openings they would be having and Ms. Baldwin stated they are in English, Math, Science and Special Education and they are keeping those salaries whole.

Councilor Kotkin observed that he would like additional information on the life insurance account. Pension and retirement costs are higher than expected amount due to an increase in employee earnings, driven in part by more hours worked by paraprofessionals. Ms. Baldwin said that they share the costs and are paying for the retiree's part B. It is the Board's responsibility. Councilor Kotkin was also questioning line 1120 and the FICA. Ms. Baldwin said the fund had been under funded in the current year's budget.

Councilor Kotkin stated there was an 18 % increase in heat and energy. Mr. Bushey stated that the degree days are what caused it. Ms. Karen Clancy, Director of Business Services, stated it was based on actual consumption. 2006-2007 they locked in a rate increase and for the distribution rate there was a slight increase. Councilor Kotkin said he assumed they budgeted each year on an average number of heating degree days. He said he wanted to know, if they replaced boilers at Emerson-Williams, what savings in the heating account they should expect. Mr. Bushey said he hopes to drive down with a variable speed controls-not ramping up to full speed. It is the same with natural gas and oil. They are the best boilers to capture as much heat as possible and it is a good step moving forward, if they should approve it.

Councilor Kotkin also discussed transportation and asked if they could look at consolidating bus routes as people are driving their kids to school. And Hanmer School non-instructional, if voters approve will Mr. Bushey still be replacing equipment up to renovations? Mr. Bushey stated he would like to see it in the renovations, if passed, but he plans to maintain the 3 year cycle to replace, be proactive and move forward. Ms. Clancy would like to refurbish the desks in the classrooms.

Chairperson Adil spoke of the boilers at Emerson Williams-- that one is not in good shape and that the school administration is looking for two. He sees only one is listed. When trying to go green, one half of the building is water and one half is steam. We should go the most energy efficient way as possible. It might need to be preplanned. Mr. Bushey said it may not be possible to put the two together. Chairperson Hodges said it is an issue when trying to buy replacement parts. Mr. Bushey had requested one because it was leaking profusely and he could not get the section replaced. These sections are obsolete. He did try to fix it to hold until it could be replaced. It has worked so far but may not for much longer.

Chairperson Hodges spoke of the economic climate and how the Superintendent made a find in partnering with the YMCA. He is looking for grants and programs and looking to see if we can consolidate. Mr. Bushey has changed shifts, rather than 11-7 there is a 5 to 1 with no one in the buildings overnight. They understand the hard climate they have to operate within but it is costly to educate kids. They are working on it. Ms. Hodges said the Board of Education is trying to work together with the Town and do the very best to educate our kids. They want to be transparent with the budget and know that great schools educate the kids.

GOALS OF THE TOWN COUNCIL AND BOARD OF EDUCATION FOR 2008/2009

The goals are discussed in Shared Services Committee meetings and include energy efficiencies for the entire town, funding an energy consultant if the Town Council approves it and to look at the State programs being offered. Everyone was asked to look and think about the issues and report to Shared Services.

FIRESIDE CHAT TOPIC - SHEFF VS. O'NEIL

This will be set up after the current budget process is completed, including a discussion on magnet schools.

ADJOURNMENT

At 7:30 p.m., Councilor Roberts moved "**TO ADJOURN THE MEETING**" seconded by Councilor Kotkin. All Councilors present, including the Chairperson voted AYE. The motion passed 8-0-0.

Dolores G. Sassanob
Town Clerk

APPROVED BY VOTE OF COUNCIL MAY 5, 2008