

## **ADJOURNED BUDGET MEETING MONDAY, MAY 12, 2008**

A Special Meeting of the Wethersfield Town Council was held on Monday, May 12, 2008 at 5:00 p.m. at the Pitkin Community Center, 30 Greenfield Street, Wethersfield.

Present from Council: Councilors Cascio (arrived at 5:10 p.m.), Console (via conference call), Forrest, Hemmann, Kotkin, Roberts, Walsh, Deputy Mayor Montinieri and Chairperson Adil

Also Present: Bonnie Therrien, Town Manager; Lisa Hancock, Finance Director; Dolores Sassano, Town Clerk, RaeAnn Palmer, Assistant to the Town Manager

Chairperson Adil began the meeting by asking if there were any additional amendments to be made to the 2008-09 Budget. Seeing none, he moved to the adoption of the budget.

Bonnie Therrien, Town Manager said that the budget as it is tonight, will be a 5.38 percent increase in taxes. The mill rate will be at 34.71. Additions to the budget are: money for keying half of the fire houses, \$100,000 for an architect for the High School and Hanmer renovations, \$10,000 for the 375th Anniversary Celebration, \$23,180 for Dial-A-Ride services due to the recent bid, \$13,000 for Elections for an August primary, \$17,500 for Data Service computers, \$21,600 for Data Service Office 2007 upgrades for the Town Hall, \$2,353 for property maintenance blight enforcement officer on a seasonal basis, and \$10,000 in lawn care overtime. Reductions to the budget are: \$15,000 for airbags for the Fire Department, half of the mosquito spraying for \$13,040, \$10,000 for Clean Energy Funding for next year because the funding was recently approved for our clean energy credits, \$1,800 for the salary increase requested by the Treasurer's Office, \$2,500 for the Park and Recreation pool staff reduction that was a result of school opening earlier than expected, \$200,000 in debt cost that will be issued the following year, \$50,000 in street lighting and all streetlights will remain on, \$25,000 for a radio consultant, and \$120,000 from the Board of Education budget.

Councilor Kotkin moved "**THAT THE TOWN COUNCIL ADOPT THE TOWN BUDGET AS SUBMITTED BY THE TOWN MANAGER ON MARCH 21, 2008 AND AS AMENDED BY THE TOWN COUNCIL LAST WEEK, IN THE SUM OF \$33,007,696 FOR THE FISCAL YEAR BEGINNING JULY 1, 2008**" seconded by Deputy Mayor Montinieri.

Councilor Hemmann read the following statement by Councilor Console:

As an elected official, I made a promise to all residents that I would "DO WHAT IS RIGHT" for this great town, I have called home since 1962.

In these very trying economic times the Council, now more than ever, have a fiduciary responsibility to take a hard look at all business areas of the town and think "out of the box", and thereby keep spending under control.

Expense control was, in my opinion, largely overlooked during budget discussions. An increase of 5.38%, as proposed, is excessive. This will become a hardship for many taxpayers for the upcoming year, and based upon the expected revaluation will be even greater the following year.

We need to re-think how we conduct business in this town and should run the town like a going concern/business/home with a budget.

I would like to thank my esteemed colleagues Councilperson Casio and Hemmann, for their efforts to bring to light issues of concern. Although I fear we will not prevail, I will not give up my efforts to let the people know what is taking place, in their local government.

I would also like to thank Councilperson Kotkin, for asking good questions and making suggestions to

modify the budget. Unfortunately the amounts should have been greater, but at least they are making a small difference.

This phrase comes to mind to sum up the budget process to date: "We are stepping over dollars to pick up pennies".

Board of Education expense increases of 7.63% and million dollar fire trucks are beyond what is practical in this environment.

In conclusion, in good conscience, I must vote "NO" on this year's budget.

Councilor Hemmann said that as a volunteer she devoted many hours to doing what is right for Wethersfield. At the budget workshop on May 8th, she was disappointed on the stance taken regarding consolidation of services being considered a joke. This is something that she believes strongly in. She wanted to work it into this year's budget. She is also concerned with the incorrect information related to the correct budget amounts. She appreciates that mistakes are made but this created an unanticipated problem for the Town Council's process on Thursday. At the beginning of the term, Councilors talked about the process and some committee positions were changed because of it. A conflict of interest was mentioned with having a member of the Board of Education and Town Council member related and in leadership positions with the concern being around the budget. The potential conflict appears as she thought it would, when the Deputy Mayor seconded the motion to cut \$120,000 from the Board of Education budget and spoke about having many conversations with his wife about the budget. This is why she abstained on the Board vote on Thursday. She said that other Councilors had no knowledge of the dollar cut or what it might entail. The Board of Education Finance Director and Human Resources Director were also not aware of the cut on Friday, May 10th. On Friday, Councilor Cascio contacted the Superintendent of Schools, Board Finance Director and Town Manager to discuss issues related to the budget. He also gave some additional ideas to review within the budget. Councilor Cascio served on the Board for ten years during tough times and is qualified to give suggestions. She said that she believes there are serious issues regarding communication amongst the nine members of the Town Council and Board of Education. She said that the bullying tactics of the majority party do not serve the interests of the Town well. She said that the minority party is not willing to remain silent and is not afraid to speak up. The citizens deserve to understand what happens in their community related to the Town government.

Councilor Kotkin said that this was a tough budget to go through. He said that he recognizes what the increase means to homeowners. The work that takes place to determine what services homeowners are willing to pay for is not a decision that is made at 11:00 p.m. on a Thursday night before the Council is about to adopt a budget. It begins well before that when the Town Councilors go through the budget and look at the obligations the Town has to the Town's people. It begins with a look at the labor contracts and obligations that the Town has. It is looked at for months ahead of time. The group does not make rash decisions but takes a look at what drives the cost of running this Town and educating our children. It is a 12 month process. It was a tough year because the increase this year is a lot more than the increase last year. The increase is due in part to less revenue coming in, including interest revenue and State funding. He said that he believes the nine Town Councilors work well together. All of us need to work hard to see where services can be streamlined to keep these costs down in the future. This will have to take place over the next 12 months, not in one night or one week. He said that he hopes all nine members of the Town Council and Board of Education can take a look at it. The next budget will be even more difficult than this one and the Town Council will have to look at everything and identify what the Town's people can afford. As head of the Budget Committee, he said that he has worked with both Democrats and Councilor Console who is on the Budget Committee to find out what the Town can afford and where the Town Council can find savings. He said that he hopes the Town Council can go about it in a bi-partisan way like he thought they had today.

Deputy Mayor Montinieri said that he echoes many of Councilor Kotkin's comments. He said that he thought he entered into discussions with all members of Council with great respect for each other. He said that he listened to all points of view and proposals for the budget. He said it is a tough budget year. He said that he does take issue with Councilor Hemmann's inference and suggestions that his discussions with Julie in any way represent anything improper or suggest to the public that his ability to have a discussion with my wife represents any conflict of interest. He said that neither he nor his wife have any vested interest in the outcome of the Board of Education budget. Any discussions

he has had with his wife are to educate himself on the parameters of the Board, how the budget is determined and to assist in any way in trying to identify the most cost effective way to maintain the education system in Town. He has heard on two separate occasions publicly an inference, suggestion, and innuendo that suggests his discussion with his wife creates a conflict. He challenges anyone to present something of substance on that matter. He said that he believes he has always acted in the best interest of the Town and he will never apologize for having conversations with his wife about the Board of Education.

Councilor Cascio said that in regards to the budget in front of the Town Council tonight, throughout the budget deliberations, the most important thing that he feels that the Town Council has working for it from this point on is the future of Wethersfield. One important thing is that Wethersfield has become very complacent to the services that they receive within their tax dollar, many of which are mandated by Charter. For the future, from this budget forward, Wethersfield needs to come together as far as what is mandated by the Charter, what residents are used to receiving and what it is that the Town is sustaining and charging for services. Many Councilors wanted to make sure that programs are self-sustaining. There is an aggressive menu of services that the Town offers, therefore the Town Council needs to examine what it wants to have for Wethersfield. He knows that the Town Manager will do this for the Town Council. He said that because the Town Councilors are in such a visible position as volunteers for the community, they need to act as a total body. He said that he doesn't oppose leadership discussions but what he does oppose was the fact that Board of Education members were not aware of a reduction in their budget before the meeting. As a past member of the Board of Education, he reviewed the process that he is familiar with. He said that in the past there is a discussion with the Superintendent, Town Manager, Mayor and Chairperson of the Board of Education at which they would discuss options and bring them to the total Council to look at what percentage they would like to see the Town be at a tax increase and then the Town Council and Board of Education would direct paid staff to cut to that level. He said that the Town may have moved away from that but should go back to it. Everything in the budget is important. He said that he hopes his comments can be taken constructively. Communication is key for the Town Council and Board of Education. He said that when he had a discussion on Friday with the Town Manager, Superintendent of Schools, and Business Managers on Friday and they were not aware of the \$120,000 cut, he was taken by surprise. He said that the Town Council should move on from here and learn from its mistakes. He said that the Town Council must realize how important it is to maintain services that are now on the table. The Town needs to look at what core services it wants to offer.

Councilor Walsh said that he was glad to hear that Councilor Cascio believes everything in the budget is important. He thanked everyone for the countless hours that were put into the budget. He said that running the Town is a lot like running your home. He said that he knows it is a crunch time, he sees it at home and at the Town level, too. The State funding didn't come in at the rate the Town had wanted and investments are down, too. The services the Town maintains are essential. The money adopted in this budget will keep the Town on track and keep it where it should be. He said that next year, the Town Council will have to reconsider some services that residents are accustomed to if times continue to be tough.

Councilor Roberts said this was a tough budget year. All nine Town Councilors understood that. She said that she saw a lot of collaboration this year. It just goes to show how many people see things differently. In response to Councilor Cascio's comments, as a more recent Board of Education Chairperson, the process has changed. She said as a Board of Education Chairperson, she relied on the Superintendent to tell the Board of Education what cuts were possible. It sounds like that is what happened this year. The Board of Education makes cuts based on the Superintendent's advice. She understands that there was another retirement as late as last week. To say early on that a reduction of \$10,000 here or there, really doesn't make sense because there are always last minute adjustments. She said that the Town Council relies on the Town Manager, a paid employee, just as the Board of Education relies on the Superintendent of Schools, also a paid employee. Other people may not have known about the cut to the Board of Education budget, but the Board of Education will determine where the cuts are made. She said that the Town Council budget meetings were more focused this year and everyone had a chance to give input. She said that not everyone is happy with the tax increase but the increase is based on the cost of services, health insurances, and behind the scene expenses like fuel and heating oil.

Councilors Forrest, Kotkin, Roberts, Walsh, Deputy Mayor Montinieri, and Chairperson Adil voted AYE. Councilors Cascio, Console and Hemmann voted NAY. The motion passed 6-3-0.

Deputy Mayor Montinieri moved **"THAT THE TOTAL APPROPRIATIONS FOR LIBRARY PURPOSES BE SET AT \$1,704,585 FOR THE FISCAL YEAR BEGINNING JULY 1, 2008"** seconded by Councilor Kotkin.

Councilors Forrest, Kotkin, Roberts, Walsh, Deputy Mayor Montinieri, and Chairperson Adil voted AYE. Councilors Cascio, Console and Hemmann voted NAY. The motion passed 6-3-0.

Councilor Roberts moved **"THAT THE TOTAL APPROPRIATIONS FOR SCHOOL PURPOSES BE SET AT \$48,217,633 FOR THE FISCAL YEAR BEGINNING JULY 1, 2008"** seconded by Councilor Walsh.

Councilors Forrest, Kotkin, Roberts, Walsh, Deputy Mayor Montinieri, and Chairperson Adil voted AYE. Councilors Cascio, Console and Hemmann voted NAY. The motion passed 6-3-0.

Councilor Forrest moved **"THAT THE TOTAL AMOUNT TO BE RAISED BY TAXES FOR THE TOWN, LIBRARY, AND SCHOOL PURPOSES COMBINED BE SET AT \$69,535,271 FOR THE FISCAL YEAR BEGINNING JULY 1, 2008"** seconded by Councilor Roberts.

Councilors Forrest, Kotkin, Roberts, Walsh, Deputy Mayor Montinieri, and Chairperson Adil voted AYE. Councilors Cascio, Console and Hemmann voted NAY. The motion passed 6-3-0.

Councilor Walsh moved **"THAT THE TAX RATE ON ALL REAL AND PERSONAL TAXABLE PROPERTY BE SET AT 34.71 MILLS FOR THE FISCAL YEAR BEGINNING JULY 1, 2008"** seconded by Councilor Forrest.

Councilors Forrest, Kotkin, Roberts, Walsh, Deputy Mayor Montinieri, and Chairperson Adil voted AYE. Councilors Cascio, Console and Hemmann voted NAY. The motion passed 6-3-0.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

At 5:35 p.m., Councilor Forrest moved **"TO ADJOURN THE MEETING"** seconded by Councilor Kotkin.

All Councilors present, including the Chairperson voted AYE. The motion passed 9-0-0.

Dolores Sassano  
Town Clerk

*Approved by vote of Council June 2, 1008*