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## **FEBRUARY 17, 2004 SPECIAL MEETING**

The Wethersfield Town Council held a special meeting on February 17, 2004 at 6:00 p.m. in the Town Manager's Conference Room at the Town Hall.

Present: Councilors Adil, Cascio, Czernicki, Forrest, Fortunato, Hemmann, Montinieri, Deputy Mayor Karangekis and Chairperson Morin.

Also present: Bonnie Therrien, Town Manager; Senator Fonfara (6:15); Senator Ciotto; Representative Doyle; Representative Guerrero; and Dolores G. Sassano, Town Clerk.

Chairperson Morin explained that the purpose of this Special Meeting with the State Legislative delegation is to allow the Council to share any of Wethersfield's concerns with them. Chairperson Morin thanked Representative Doyle, Representative Guerrero, and Senator Ciotto for attending the meeting and stated that Senator Fonfara would be arriving shortly.

Chairperson Morin explained that the Town of Wethersfield participates with the towns of Newington, Rocky Hill, and Berlin in a Mid-State Collaborative and the communities have had discussions regarding issues affecting them. Chairperson Morin said that items up for discussion at tonight's meeting include binding arbitration, the prevailing wage, emergency service volunteerism, Wethersfield Recreation Department's Daycare Programs, educational funding, as well as others.

### Binding Arbitration and the Prevailing Wage

Town Manager Bonnie Therrien explained that the Mid-State Collaborative has come up with some suggestions to amend the current Binding Arbitration laws. One suggestion is to have two members of the Council present at Board of Education negotiations and have full rights of participation. The Mid-State Collaborative feels that the fund balance should not be a part of the binding arbitration process. Lastly the Collaborative would like to see binding arbitration awarded on a total contract basis rather than on an issue by issue basis.

Senator Ciotto reported that Binding Arbitration will not be heard during the upcoming Legislative Session due to the fact that this will be a short session and fiscal matters will be the main topic. This could change, but as of the moment this information is accurate.

Representative Guerrero concurred with Senator Ciotto in that there will be no Binding Arbitration discussion during the upcoming Legislative Session.

Representative Doyle stated that not only Binding Arbitration, but also the Prevailing Wage will not be included in the upcoming Legislative Session. Representative Doyle commended the Mid-State Collaborative for their efforts in bringing these issues to the surface and offering valid suggestions.

Senator Fonfara stated that Binding Arbitration and the Prevailing Wage will not be addressed; however there may be an opportunity for the Planning & Development Committee to create a study committee to investigate the issues of Binding Arbitration and report back in January of 2005.

Chairperson Morin stated that he does not see Binding Arbitration being repealed, nor does he think it should be; however he appreciates any efforts to further study the issues pertaining to it.

### Emergency Service Volunteerism

Chairperson Morin stated that he believes that Wethersfield has the finest Volunteer Fire Department in Connecticut. He said that the communities of many larger, Fire Departments are putting restrictions on their paid firefighters regarding volunteering in their home towns.

Town Manager Bonnie Therrien said that the smaller municipalities will be in trouble as larger communities pass these restrictions.

Representative Doyle said that this is a state-wide contentious issue as it deals with paid unionized firefighters vs. volunteers. He said that a letter has been sent to Senator Fonfara asking him to raise a bill addressing this issue.

Senator Fonfara said that he has received the letter and that the Planning and Development Committee will be raising a bill tomorrow. He encouraged the public to participate in the hearing regarding the issue so that Legislators can hear how these restrictions affect smaller communities.

Representative Guerrero stated that the issue of Emergency Service Volunteerism restrictions is very, very important to the present delegation.

Senator Ciotto thanked Senator Fonfara for his assistance in the delegations endeavor to bring light to the issue of Emergency Service Volunteerism. He stated that volunteerism is the spirit of Connecticut and it cannot be dampened. Volunteerism in Wethersfield is a tremendous asset to the Town as it not only keeps costs down, but also shows the spirit of the community.

Representative Doyle stated that this issue will be a challenge as organized labor has opposed the public hearing. It is very important that the public attend and make their feelings heard.

Councilor Adil asked when the hearings will be held on this issue. Senator Fonfara said that this has not yet been decided, but will be announced once the dates are set.

Councilor Fortunato said that the restrictions pose a safety risk to the Wethersfield community and asked if there is staff available at the OLR to research the impact on other communities and possible alternatives.

Representative Doyle said that he has received OLR reports recently and that this type of prohibition has been in place in the communities of West Hartford and East Hartford for ten to twenty years. Only recently has it shown an impact on smaller communities such as Wethersfield. Representative Doyle said that this is a nation-wide issue and that the nation-wide unions have taken a stand in support of the prohibitions.

Representative Guerrero stated that Senator Dodd is also working on a bill on the Federal level which will provide funding to towns that have Volunteer Fire Departments.

#### Wethersfield Recreation Department's Daycare Program

Chairperson Morin explained that there has been a recently cited violation with regard to the Wethersfield Recreation Department's Daycare Program.

Town Manager Bonnie Therrien said that the present Statute provides waivers for the Board of Education, but not on the municipal side. The State-wide Park & Recreation Association is looking to have the Statute allow municipalities also to have a waiver from the Daycare licensing as well.

#### Storm Water Management

Town Manager Bonnie Therrien stated that the storm water management plan needs to be tweaked to allow municipalities to acquire equipment for storm water utilities.

Chairperson Morin asked if this has anything to do with the Phase 2 storm water issue. Town Manager Bonnie Therrien said that it does in the sense of setting up an enterprise fund so that monies can actually go toward storm

water management.

### Conveyance Tax

Town Manager Bonnie Therrien said that the Town of Wethersfield would like to see the conveyance tax increase remain in place after June 30, 2004. She requested that Town Clerk Sassano provide information on the amount of additional funds the increased conveyance tax provided. Town Clerk Sassano said that the income from the increase has doubled. Town Manager Bonnie Therrien said that this greatly assists the Town especially during budget crunches.

Senator Ciotto said that every Town in the State is going to try to raise their conveyance tax from the .11% to .25% and that there is room for discussion of this issue.

### Ethics Proposal

Chairperson Morin said that ethics have to be scrutinized very closely. He said that some of the issues in the proposed ethics legislation are almost crippling however.

Town Manager Bonnie Therrien said that the proposals will affect all Town volunteers and employees and she fears that many could decide to part company with the Town. She is concerned about the release of personal information to the public. The Town Manager feels that the proposal is needed but not to the extreme at which it is stated.

Senator Fonfara said that he understands the concerns of the public and the legislature with regard to the current situation in the State Government, but unfortunately the good have to pay the price along with the not-so-good. He hopes that the public will voice their opinions by means of letters to editors and through comments at public hearings as to how far they will tolerate ethics proposals. Legislators are reluctant to say that ethics should not be reviewed as this could unfortunately personally cast a shadow of suspicion on them.

Representative Guerrera said that a happy medium needs to be reached as volunteers do not want to reveal all of their assets.

Senator Ciotto said that people will continue to break laws no matter what they are. He predicts that if these ethics proposals are passed, they will be relaxed by the legislature within ten years. Senator Ciotto said that everyone in any given profession is not perfect, and ethics are currently very important in Connecticut politics because the issue is all over the headlines.

Representative Doyle said that the State of Connecticut currently has one of the toughest Ethics Laws in the country. The Ethics Laws can be cleaned up, but last year he voted against the current proposal as he does not feel that it is appropriate for all Town Officials. Representative Doyle said that he will most likely vote against the proposal again this year although this could cast suspicion on him.

Senator Fonfara commented that Representative Doyle has been very thoughtful of this issue for many years and he does not believe that the average citizen will cast suspicion on him because he does not agree with the current ethics proposal. Senator Fonfara hopes that the public will understand the negative impact this bill will have on the ability for towns to attract quality volunteers to critically important yet thankless boards and commissions positions. Senator Fonfara does not support the proposed restrictions.

Councilor Hemmann said that it is important to remember that this will affect all boards and commissions and not just "elected" officials. The compliance is intensive and while she fully supports ethics, she is concerned that this will hinder citizens' desire to volunteer for boards and commissions. Councilor Hemmann said that there certainly needs to be guidelines and enforcement; however she is concerned about the proposed level of detail.

Senator Ciotto asked if Wethersfield currently has an ethics code. Councilor Czernicki said that Wethersfield has an Ethics Board. Town Manager Bonnie Therrien said that this is part of the Charter and there is also subtext within the Code. Senator Ciotto, in order to guide him along with the proposal, asked the Council if they feel that the current ethics code is sufficient.

Councilor Czernicki stated that the Ethics Code could be tweaked and feels that House Bill 5023 is onerous in that it does not specify just "elected Officials" or those serving on boards or commissions, but also spouses and dependent children. She feels that the proposal is an intrusion of government to some extent. She'd like to see the Wethersfield Ethics Board review the proposal and suggest a happy medium. Councilor Czernicki believes that the ethics proposal, just as the fire fighters restrictions, kills volunteerism on every level.

Senator Ciotto said that it is helpful for State Legislators to gain feedback from citizens to guide them and provide them with ammunition.

Representative Doyle said that, as elected officials, the Legislators agree to scrutiny; however volunteers to boards and commissions should not be subject to the same high level of scrutiny as it is too burdensome.

### Central Connecticut Health District

Chairperson Morin stated that funds have been significantly cut to the Central Connecticut Health District.

Town Manager Bonnie Therrien explained that the State is trying to get communities to do regional efforts and in doing so there is now a reduction in the per capita funding rate. She had thought that there were bio-terrorism funds coming to the Health Districts from the State. Chairperson Morin asked Town Manager Bonnie Therrien to provide the dollar amounts to the delegation.

Representative Doyle said Wethersfield Health District Director Paul Hutcheon has made his concerns known to him. Representative Doyle said that this is a frustrating issue as it is a part of the whole budget and not simply one piece of legislation. This will be pushed forward as a priority; however it is in the whole pot of the budget.

### Education Funding

Chairperson Morin said that Wethersfield is a unique Town as most revenues are collected by residential property owners and he would like to see an increase in special education funding as mandates for such continue to grow. Chairperson Morin formally requested that the delegates keep Wethersfield in mind as further mandates are handed down to municipalities.

Senator Ciotto stated that the delegates are just as concerned about education as anyone in the Council Chamber and there is a Democratic proposal to raise the tax on millionaires to bring in an additional \$170 million of revenue dedicated to municipalities for educational needs.

Representative Guerrero said that the past session has been very difficult as money has not been coming in and decisions had to be made that the Legislature thought would never have to be made in their political careers. He hopes to maintain the same standards as last year and stressed the importance of the Mayor to have meetings such as tonight's in order to keep the delegation up-to-date with issues and requests.

Senator Fonfara agreed that Wethersfield has a battle every year with property tax and the Town's budget. Education advocates feel that Wethersfield should be investing more of the level of taxation in the Town's education system. Senator Fonfara invited the Mayor and Council members to attend an upcoming Planning & Development meeting to speak on a Comprehensive Tax Reform Initiative that will lower property taxes across the board in the State of Connecticut by 30%. The minimum requirement for Town's to cut their mill rates will be by 60% and spending would be no more than 40% of that number. This provides for an opportunity for a mill rate reduction and an increase in spending in the Town. The funds will come from a \$2 billion initiative with revenues coming from the State Income Tax. Senator Fonfara said that this Initiative will not pass this year, but property tax reform is discussed each year and there has yet to be a single, comprehensive property tax reform initiative move through the legislature. The Initiative will ultimately change Connecticut's reliance on property tax.

Representative Doyle pointed out that, during his political career, State aid to Wethersfield has been a top priority. He stated that amidst all the difficult financial times, Wethersfield did receive a net gain from the State last year. He said that the four delegates present continue to be committed to at least maintain if not increase the commitment for next

year.

Councilor Montinieri said that Senator Fonfara has been sharing his ideas for the Property Tax Reform Initiative with the Wethersfield Parent Council. She stated that Senator Fonfara will be attending an open meeting at Hanmer School on March 11, 2004 to further discuss the issue and invited all interested residents to attend.

Councilor Cascio spoke about unfunded mandates with regard to education. He said that there are a lot of programs in Wethersfield that are funded the first year and then mandated without any further funding. He thanked the delegates for the funds provided to the Town of Wethersfield for the Showmobile and the High School Football Field. He asked who requests such funding and how even more can be received.

Representative Doyle said that the funds come from the State Bond Commission and are doled out by the Speaker of the House. Representative Doyle requested the funds of the Speaker who approved the request and the process takes its course. Representative Doyle said that the Council can work with him and other members of the delegation to obtain additional funds for other projects in Town. There is; however, limited funding available.

Councilor Adil thanked Representative Doyle for the monies received for the Moeller Home as well. He brought attention to the need for funding for open space and the Mill Woods fields projects.

Representative Doyle stated that there are restrictions for the receipt of funds. The Football Field happened to fortunately fit into the restrictions.

Councilor Czernicki asked Representative Doyle if he had any say as to where the funds received for the Football Field would go and if the Field was indeed his highest priority for funds within Wethersfield. Representative Doyle said that he did have limited discretion and requested funds specifically for the Football Field and this has become a very controversial issue in Town. Councilor Czernicki also addressed the Underage Drinking Ordinance and asked that the delegates take this Ordinance to the State level rather than as an individual community.

Senator Ciotto said that several years ago he introduced this as a bill on the State level and there was a cry against allowing the Police to go onto private property and that it would be better for each Town to fight for such an Ordinance on their own rather than on a State-wide level. Senator Ciotto stated that he hopes the Ordinance passes in Wethersfield.

Councilor Czernicki asked that the delegates continue their efforts to keep funding at the current level for the Regional Action Councils as the locals will lose a large sum of money to fight substance abuse if the State cannot match the Federal funding.

Councilor Fortunato thanked Representative Doyle for his assistance in obtaining funding for the Town Hall and Library. She asked all of the delegates present to keep their eyes open for additional funding in this category. Councilor Fortunato stated that one reason the Board of Education budget is over is because of Special Education costs and there is a legal requirement to meet the educational needs of these children.

Senator Ciotto asked if the Town of Wethersfield has received any Special Education funding from the Federal Government. The Town was promised 60% and has yet to receive any.

#### Silas Deane Revitalization Committee Presentation

Town Manager Bonnie Therrien stated that Mr. Courchaine and other members of the Committee are present to provide a presentation of the work they have been trying to accomplish on the Silas Deane with the help of the D.O.T.

Paul Courchaine, Chairman of the Silas Deane Revitalization Committee, provided a summary of the Silas Deane project. This summary includes the project goals, relationship to other projects, project description, project strengths, the project committee, the realization of the dream, stake holders, projected budget for the STP Grant, budget revisions, project concerns, current phase activities, and support documents.

Senator Fonfara recognized and thanked Mr. Courchaine for all of the work he has done regarding this project. He spoke with the Chief Engineer for the project and asked him why the D.O.T. is making the project so difficult. He hopes that there will soon be a face to face meeting.

Senator Ciotto asked if the proposed project for the Silas Deane has already been approved by the Council as he suggests that the Council has to come up with exactly what their needs are in order for him and the other delegates to be able to help. The Town Council needs to work together with the delegates. Chairperson Morin stated that the Council is looking at the Silas Deane as a whole and therefore Wethersfield would like to work together with Rocky Hill and Hartford. Senator Ciotto said that he would like to do whatever he can to move forward with the project, but the Council needs to first decide what they want done.

Mr. Courchaine said that the Silas Deane Beautification project is a well thought out plan and the next step is to work with the Town Planner, the EDIC, and Planning & Zoning to review the 1987 plan.

Chairperson Morin thanked Senator Fonfara, Senator Ciotto, Representative Guerrero, and Representative Doyle for attending tonight's meeting and hopes to do this more often. This meeting was a good opportunity to share concerns and update the legislators on current status of issues involving Wethersfield.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

At 7:30 p.m., Councilor Czernicki moved "**TO ADJOURN THE MEETING**" seconded by Councilor Fortunato. All Councilors present, including the Chairperson voted AYE. The motion passed 9-0-0.

Dolores G. Sassano  
Town Clerk