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## **SPECIAL MEETING MARCH 17, 2003**

The Wethersfield Town Council held a special meeting on March 17, at 6:30 p.m. in the Council Chambers of the Town Hall.

Present Town Council: Councilors Cascio, Fitzpatrick, Flynn, Gardow, Hemmann, Morin, Deputy Mayor O'Connor (6:40) and Chairperson Czernicki. Absent: Councilor Sassano.

Present Board of Education: Christine Fortunato, Thomas Grottke, Michael McKenna, Janet Pilczak, Gerri Roberts, Joseph Soja and Vice Chairperson Claire Carney. Absent: Chairperson Stanziale and Board member Stacey Hodges.

Also present: Joseph Swetcky, Jr., Interim Town Manager; Dr. Patrick Proctor, Superintendent of Schools; Robert Buganski, Assistant Superintendent of Schools; David Whall, Board of Education Director of Business Services and Dolores G. Sassano, Town Clerk.

### **BOARD OF EDUCATION FY 2003/2004 BUDGET PRESENTATION TO TOWN COUNCIL**

Dr. Proctor addressed the Council stating that he has enjoyed his first six weeks as Superintendent of Schools. Wethersfield has a wonderful school system of which we should all be very proud. Dr. Proctor referred to the PowerPoint presentation of the Board of Education's Annual Operating Budget for Fiscal Year 2003-2004 which shows a 6% increase. In his overview of the proposed Budget, Dr. Proctor made five points. The first was that the budget has undergone due diligence by the Board of Education and the Administration. There were 32 formal queries made to this budget with formal staff responses. Three Superintendents have reviewed this budget. This is one of the most thorough budget reviews Dr. Proctor has seen. The format of the budget has been changed so that it is very "user friendly". Every increase in the budget has been clearly explained.

Secondly, Dr. Proctor gave a brief overview of the document. The budget is approximately \$34.8 million which is a 6% increase over the current year's budget of \$32.8 million. The budget was originally proposed with a 6.9% increase but was reduced by Board of Education at a recent meeting. The main contributors to the budget are "salaries" and "benefits" which account for 83% of the total. The remaining 17% are single digit components of the budget. The same percentages apply to the breakdown of the increases in the budget. Dr. Proctor characterizes this budget as a current services budget. This budget is predominately a budget which allows the Board of Education to do business and carry it over through to next year without significant change. Of the 6% increase, 4.34% or 72% of the increase is fixed costs. The remaining 28% represents new expenditures exclusively for priority needs. There were numerous requests by staff that were not funded in this budget.

The third point is that the Board of Education and Dr. Proctor believe that this is a reasonable budget request. The average budget increase within ERG D Comparisons is 6.3%. Wethersfield is at the median at 6%. With respect to the State comparison, Wethersfield is in the bottom third with the State average being 7.03%. Mr. Proctor's fourth point was in regard to a request made by a Board member to look at inflation adjusted per pupil expenditures (PPE) over a period of time. From the early 1980's to the early 1990's, Wethersfield's spending pattern showed a fairly sharp increase over that period of time. From 1990-1991 to present, there is a decline of 14% in real spending (inflation adjusted spending). During this same period of time, enrollment has increased approximately 23%. Wethersfield is currently spending 5.5% less than the current State rate, ranking Wethersfield at 85th in the State. In 1994-1995, Wethersfield ranked 17th at a rate of 13% higher than the State rate or per pupil expenditures. Over time the State has increased both its real and current expenditures while Wethersfield has seen a decline. If Council approves the 6% increase, it would represent in inflation adjusted dollars an increase over last year of approximately 0.7%. Dr. Proctor believes that this budget request is moderate, responsible and reasonable given the context of where we are and where we've been with respect to real and current spending.

The fourth point is that this budget addresses key priority needs. The three needs are:

1. The issue of class size at the secondary level at the middle school and high school. Some class sizes at WHS are over 30 students. Many classes have over 25 students which is the cut-point of what is educationally acceptable. Given the complexity of today's educational programming and the diversity of student needs, this is something that needs to be immediately addressed. The New England Schools and Colleges has reported that a concern with Wethersfield is the issue of class sizes.
2. Technology. Wethersfield has made strides in the past; however we are still behind State numbers with regard to the number of students per computer. This budget proposes 160 new computers across the system for students which will close the gap in both the elementary and high school levels. The Silas Deane project has its own focus on the equipment needs at that school. That school is intended to be a state-of-the-art school.

Text and materials need to be updated. There have been negotiations with text book companies resulting in considerable savings. The value of text and materials to be purchased is nearly \$348,000, but the cost to Wethersfield is \$134,000. This is a significant savings. The new dollars in the budget to do this would be \$61,595.

Lastly, Dr. Proctor spoke of the challenge of the future in respect to Wethersfield's educational needs. We need to continue to address emerging needs in the school system. The Board of Education is in the process of developing a 3-5 year plan to bring Wethersfield education forward and help it become state-of-the-art with respect to technology. Class size is the most expensive item in the budget and this will continue to be addressed. Hiring additional teachers to reduce class size is a very high priority. Materials and resources will continue to be a priority. Curriculum instruction and professional development will ultimately improve student performance. If we are to afford all of these things, we need to look carefully at the core budget and look at cost reductions in terms of restructuring. Dr. Proctor admits that he has not been here long enough to know where those cost savings are, but he pledges to find ways to reduce costs within the core of the budget. We need to maintain and advance Wethersfield's high quality of education and keep it affordable.

Councilor Flynn stated that the Wethersfield Town Charter specifies precisely how the Board of Education budget is to be organized. Section 704 of the Charter states that it is to include in parallel columns an item by item comparison of the proposed budget with the actual receipts and expenditures for the last completed fiscal year and the estimated receipts and expenditures for the current fiscal year. The proposed budget shows the adopted figure as opposed to the actual expenditure amounts. He asked Dr. Proctor to explain this. Dr. Proctor said that the Actual Expenditures for 2002-2003 can be obtained and are reported at each Board of Education meeting. He will provide this information to Councilor Flynn. Councilor Flynn also expressed concern over the \$225,000 contingency reduction being taken in anticipation of staff turnover. Dr. Proctor said that the Board of Education is anticipating a salary savings based on ten retirements. This projection is reasonably reliable. Councilor Flynn asked about the \$65,000 pension contributions amount. Dr. Proctor said that because of the stock market performance having changed so dramatically in the past couple of years, we need to step up the payments to the pension system. This is the recommended number agreed to with the Town. The \$65,000 is the Board of Education's share of the amount Interim Town Manager Swetcky provided to the Town Council.

Deputy Mayor O'Connor asked when the actual expenditure figures would be provided to the Council. Dr Proctor said that the figures would be provided by the end of the week.

Councilor Morin commented that he supports the reduction of class size at Wethersfield High School. With specific classes like chemistry which require a lab, it is difficult to accommodate a large class. Councilor Morin is glad to see this area being addressed. Dr. Proctor said that all classes with over 30 students are being looked at.

Councilor Cascio stated that the issue of class size is nothing new and that the Board of Education has wrestled with this in the past. He asked what percentage of classes offered are not run because of enrollment being ten students or under. Dr. Proctor could not provide the exact numbers. The bulk of the classes are within the upper teens to low twenties. There are a very large number of classes over twenty-five. The Social Studies department, without the requested 1 1/2 positions for next year, will have nine classes with 30+ students. It will have twenty-seven classes with 25+ students. If the new positions are introduced, there will be no classes with 30+ students and only two classes with

26 students. The rest of the classes will be under 25 students. Councilor Cascio addressed core requirement classes which would have increased enrollment. Dr. Proctor said that he doesn't believe there would be an increase in class sizes as a result of this. Councilor Cascio asked if block scheduling helps with the class sizes. Dr. Proctor referred the question to Mr. Buganski. Mr. Buganski said that the implementation of block scheduling has not contributed directly to larger class sizes. Along with block scheduling is a rotating schedule so that there are fewer classes meeting each day distributing the students more equitably.

Chairperson Czernicki asked if the ERG comparisons are on proposed budgets as opposed to adopted budgets and Dr. Proctor verified that this is true.

Chairperson Czernicki thanked the Board of Education Administration and members for attending the meeting.

Mr. Buganski referred the Council to the PowerPoint document which includes a page at the end showing the Governor's budget proposing to increase the Education Cost Sharing Grant for Wethersfield by 5.65% or \$211,376.

Chairperson Czernicki announced that there would be a five minute break to provide Councilors the opportunity to review paperwork at their seats.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

At 7:00 p.m., Councilor Cascio moved "**TO ADJOURN THE MEETING**" seconded by Councilor Flynn. All Councilors present, including the Chairperson voted AYE. The motion passed 8-0-0.

Dolores G. Sassano  
Town Clerk