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## **ADJOURNED BUDGET MEETING MAY 12, 2003**

An Adjourned Meeting of the Town Council (adjourned from May 8, 2003) was held on Monday, May 12, 2003 at 6:00 p.m. in the Conference Room of the Town Hall with Chairperson Kitch Breen Czernicki presiding.

**Present:** Councilors Cascio, Fitzpatrick, Gardow, Flynn, Hemmann, Morin, Sassano (8:25 p.m.), Deputy Mayor O'Connor, and Chairperson Czernicki.

**Present from the Board of Education:** Dr. Patrick Proctor, Superintendent of Schools; Robert Buganski, Assistant Superintendent of Schools; David Whall, Director of Business Services; Board of Education Chairperson Penny Stanziale, Vice Chairperson Claire Carney and members Janet Pilczak and Joseph Soja and Gerri Roberts.

**Also present:** Bonnie Therrien, Town Manager; Joseph Swetcky, Finance Director, and Dolores Sassano Town Clerk.

Chairperson Czernicki welcomed everyone to the budget meeting and asked Board of Education Chairperson Penny Stanziale to point out any highlights in the Education Budget.

### **EDUCATION 200 (C-64 to C-67)**

Chairperson Stanziale said that there are ten retirements built into the budget and there have been seven retirement notifications received. Chairperson Czernicki asked Chairperson Stanziale if she is comfortable that ten will retire and also if she has any insight toward any resignations. Chairperson Stanziale said that they are not aware of any at this point.

Chairperson Stanziale said that the insurance had been higher and came in at lower rates which enabled the Board to give a 6% increase in their budget. She cannot foresee any additional savings at this time.

Councilor Flynn asked Chairperson Stanziale to explain how the savings in health insurance costs was accomplished and how long it took to discuss the changes with the bargaining units. Dr. Proctor said that the rates were projected higher than the actual amount that came in. It was really nothing that the Board did, they were simply pleasantly surprised. The Connecticare plan is expensive and the Board offered a comparable plan with Blue Cross & Blue Shield to which many of the Connecticare participants crossed over. This resulted in a savings of \$87,500 or 6%. The Board met with the leadership of the bargaining units who met with their membership. Everyone has been very cooperative because this is something that serves the entire organization. To date, forty-six participants have changed carriers.

Chairperson Stanziale said that the federation approached her saying that they would work with the Board. Also, School Administrators went to Blue Cross & Blue Shield telling them that they needed comparable coverage so that members would not be losing anything.

Councilor Cascio asked how many members are still participating in the Connecticare plan. Mr. Buganski said that there are approximately 130, of which the majority is retirees. Councilor Cascio asked if the retirees have been approached and given the opportunity to switch over. Mr. Buganski said that the insurance program cannot be unilaterally changed; however, a letter was sent to each of the retirees encouraging them to switch. Paperwork is still coming in on this. The effective date of change will be July 1.

Councilor Flynn asked if since the insurance program cannot be unilaterally changed, and Connecticare were to end their coverage, would another option be offered. Mr. Buganski said that the Board's obligation would be to provide comparable coverage.

Councilor Cascio verified that the majority of Board of Education employees are out of Connecticare. Mr. Buganski

said that this is true.

Councilor Gardow asked if the school busses are run to full capacity. Dr. Proctor said that they do; however they are not always fully occupied. Councilor Gardow asked if the Board has looked into the consolidation of routes. Dr. Proctor said that this would be a complex undertaking. It is difficult to do and may not result in much of a cost savings.

Mr. Whall explained the four-tier system. The busses do a high school run followed by middle school, elementary and kindergarten. Most schools are doing a three-tier system or even a two-tier. Wethersfield is getting the maximum use out of their busses. The elementary busses are full; the middle school busses are more than half full. A high school run could be eliminated, but we would still have to pay for the bus. There would be very minimal savings in terms of labor. To consolidate runs would mean a fuller bus, but the bus has to travel twice as far. The problem is mostly at the high school level.

Councilor Gardow said that we're providing a service that is not fully utilized. He asked about the high school certified positions. He received a call from a resident who is concerned that there is no chemistry teacher. He asked if this situation will be fixed next year. Dr. Proctor said that there is a problem in the science department with regards to a biology teacher. One of the goals is to bring a full-time science teacher on board which will improve the science department. Mr. Buganski said that there are some teachers who are dual certified in both biology and chemistry. Because of the number of biology students this year, there was a need for the teachers in biology rather than chemistry. The goal is to get a biology certified teacher so that the dual certified staff can go back to chemistry. Councilor Gardow asked about the increase of 5.27% in non-certified wages because everyone is required to work an additional day. He asked why everyone is working an extra day. Mr. Buganski said that on a cyclical basis, some fiscal years have 262 work days rather than 261. This will account for the additional day for which they are paid by the hour. Councilor Gardow also asked about the additional five days added to the work year for secretaries. Mr. Buganski said that it is for certain ten-month secretaries to keep them up to pace with the twelve-month working Administrators. They will eventually go up to 214 days. Councilor Gardow asked about the Home School Liaison who is the parent-teacher coordinator and if the school staff relies on this position as part of the curriculum. Dr. Proctor said that the position is one of a number of cooperative relationships that exists between the Town and the Schools. This is a service provided by the Town.

Councilor Cascio said that the Town received a grant to have a coordinator at the Middle School to help the parents. Parents aren't as involved at this age range and the grant helps to include and inform parents of school activities. The grant is now gone and the Town has picked up the funds to continue the position.

Councilor Gardow addressed the replacement of seats in the High School lecture hall. The total amount for repair/replacement will be \$30,000. Councilor Gardow asked if it is true that the lecture hall is not being utilized to its full capacity. He was told that this is true. He asked if having the lecture hall fixed would help with the logistics of what goes on at the High School. Mr. Buganski said that it would help a little bit, but in the total scheme of things it is only one room. Councilor Gardow doesn't understand why we are purchasing typewriters in such an advanced technology environment. Mr. Buganski said that there are certain governmental forms that cannot be run through a computer. Councilor Gardow referred to the controversy last year of high school students paying for parking. He asked if this made any income for the school district. Mr. Whall said that the income amounted to approximately \$18,000 which is \$100 per student per year. Lastly, Councilor Gardow looked up information on the Connecticut education web page pertaining to the amount of money spent per pupil. He found the 2001-2002 net current expenditures per pupil. Wethersfield spent \$8,884 per pupil which ranked us 87th. He also found the education reference groups which puts Wethersfield into group "D" which includes twenty towns in district twelve. Wethersfield is number five in this group. Surrounding towns in this group include Rocky Hill at \$9,000 per pupil, Berlin at \$8,200 per pupil, and Newington \$8,500. Wethersfield Connecticut Mastery Tests results are not bad. We are 5.5% lower than the State average and he wonders if spending \$8,884 per pupil is too much.

Chairperson Stanziale said that parents in Wethersfield want to be just like Avon, Farmington, Simsbury and West Hartford. No parent wants to be like Rocky Hill or Colchester. Councilor Gardow said that it seems that parents would like a Glastonbury palette with an East Hartford budget. We are 5th out of 20 in group "D" which is not bad at all.

Councilor Flynn asked about the Highcrest modular classroom and that the Board of Education budget reflects the transfer of the lease payment from the Town's budget. He asked if the Board anticipates the need for additional modulars. Mr. Buganski said that he does not anticipate this.

Councilor Morin said that we need to be careful about ranking numbers. Wethersfield is a very desirable community for families with school-age children. He is not comfortable with thirty-four in a chemistry lab classroom. He's not comfortable paying for his kids to play sports and they receive uniforms that are torn and tattered. Booster groups help to fund these needs. We need to keep on top of ordering the most recent text books. We have to live within our budget, yet remain a desirable community. We need to tend to the core needs.

Councilor Hemmann asked about the condition of the floor in the lecture hall. She wonders if there would need to be a replacement or resurfacing of the floor in order to replace the seating.

Councilor Cascio said that the lecture hall in its current condition is a mess. The bolts are sticking up and the rubber and carpeting is torn and loose. When refurbishing the lecture hall with new tables and chairs, will the pipe in the ground and carpeting need to be removed?

Mr. Buganski said that the amount requested in the CIAC budget will restore the room to a functional area.

Deputy Mayor O'Connor stated that the per pupil spending number can be misleading. It's not the money that solves the problem; the school system spends what the community is willing to support. There was a time when Wethersfield was spending more per pupil than West Hartford and West Hartford's CMAT scores were higher. He is concerned that the budget items that have gone down tend to deal with children's services and there was a mammoth \$900,000 increase in Personnel Administration. He asked if this was strictly contractual. Dr. Proctor said that it is contractual and also the new positions that are being filled. Deputy Mayor O'Connor asked if the Board has deemed that the positions outweigh psychological services, ESL and other children's services. Dr. Proctor said that in previous operating budgets those numbers included all the salary costs as well as a pro-rating of the health insurance premiums to each program. This year, all of the health insurance dollar amounts have been removed from the individual programs and put into one program titled Personnel Administration. This is why there is such a large increase in that program. The other accounts, such as children's services, appear lower because the health insurance dollars have been removed. The salaries for the teachers are in each program; however the insurance costs are in the Personnel Administration amount.

Councilor Flynn said that at the Budget Hearing it was suggested that the Town consider a bus fee. He asked if we are prohibited by law to charge such a fee. No one had an answer to this.

Councilor Cascio said that the addition of a bus to the Highcrest School district was because of the enrollment increase. The Straddle Hill and Windmill Hill area have a bus of their own because there are so many children in that area. Dr. Whall said that a bus had to be added to the Highcrest area because the busses in that area were exceeding the legal capacity limits. The bus also was used at the kindergarten level.

Mr. Soja said that the students not using the busses are at the high school level. Parents came up with the parking fees because kids either get dropped off by a parent or drive themselves into school.

Chairperson Czernicki asked if other than the GED program, are all of the Adult Education programs self-sustaining. She was told that they are. She asked what the number of hours is that department heads teach. Dr. Proctor said that they do not teach. Chairperson Czernicki asked if there are plans to have them spend time teaching. Dr. Proctor said that there are no such plans. Chairperson Czernicki asked about the stipends for after school coaching, etc. Mr. Buganski said that by contract, anyone who receives any type of compensation for clubs or extracurricular activity has to compensate for time above and beyond their normal work day. Many clubs and activities hold meetings and practices on weekends and meetings and the compensation is for such. Chairperson Czernicki asked if contractually we cannot have community volunteers coach sports, even though they may be well trained to do so. Mr. Buganski said that there are some volunteer coaches for the football team along with the stipend coaches. Chairperson Czernicki asked if teachers have first option to be coaches. Mr. Buganski said that teachers have contract language that says that

they are given first preference for coaching positions. Chairperson Czernicki asked if there are any coaches on the varsity and junior varsity level who are not teachers. Mr. Buganski said that we do. Chairperson Czernicki asked what furloughs would mean to the Board of Education in terms of custodial, secretarial and paraprofessional positions. Dr. Proctor said that all options are on the table. Chairperson Czernicki said that Wethersfield is no longer an affluent town. We are a middle-class town. As we move forward, it is the responsibility of the Council to bring in a tax increase that Town residents can bear. She asked what a decrease of \$600,000 to the proposed school budget would mean to the schools. Dr. Proctor said that he would have to make cuts across the board and that he would have to cut staff. He said that maintaining classroom size is a top priority. That is why there are additional positions in the proposed budget. Any cut will affect the kids in one way or another. There would be reduced services in a variety of areas.

Chairperson Stanziale commented that it is not the Board who considers Wethersfield to be an affluent town, but rather the arbitrators. This is a big problem.

Chairperson Czernicki said that our legislators have been asked to look into how binding arbitration would affect Wethersfield.

Mr. Soja said that the 6% is due to increases in wages and benefits. We need to look at these areas in future contract negotiations and decide what we can afford.

Deputy Mayor O'Connor asked if the Webb School is currently being used by the YMCA as a daycare facility and where is the income showing up for the rest of the facility. Dr. Proctor said that they are not charged. Mr. Buganski said that this is a cooperative relationship for before/after school programs. The primary users of the program are parents of kindergarten children.

Ms. Carney said that the program would be more expensive and less affordable if we were to charge the YMCA for the use of the facility.

Deputy Mayor O'Connor is concerned that we are not charging the YMCA for the use of the facility. The YMCA charges for their programs and we're providing them a service for free. Dr. Proctor said that this is being provided as a community service. Deputy Mayor O'Connor said that we're dealing with a tight budget and the YMCA is not being affected by it at all. Even Youth leagues have to pay for janitors. Why isn't the YMCA paying? Dr. Proctor suspects that the YMCA would not be able to provide the service if they were to be charged for the use of the facility.

Councilor Cascio said that there are a number of programs that use our schools and are not charged a fee. The PTA and PTO groups are not charged fees for use of the buildings. Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts are not charged either. The Board of Education has a list of over a dozen agencies that are allowed to use the buildings free of charge.

Deputy Mayor O'Connor said that members of those organizations are not paying for the service provided. All those involved are volunteers. The YMCA is not volunteers. They charge a fee and pay their employees. This situation is an opportunity for the Board of Education to collect funds. What prevents others from coming in and wanting the same deal that's provided to the YMCA?

Councilor Gardow asked about the contractual raises for all existing staff resulting in an \$860,000 or 5.39% increase. Since negotiations don't begin until this summer, he asked what number is built into these amounts. Dr. Proctor said that the negotiations this summer are for the 2004-2005 school year. Councilor Gardow asked if there are concessions or give-backs written into the current contract. Dr. Proctor said that concessions or give-backs have to be bargained for and there were none for the current contract. Any changes for 2003-2004 would be mid-term bargaining and would require the consent of both parties. Councilor Gardow asked what the increase is for this year. Dr. Proctor said that the general increase is 3.45%.

Councilor Cascio said that the problem is that if we open up a bargaining contract, everything goes on the table. This could be a bad thing. The Board of Education did open up a contract at one time and we lost. Mr. Buganski said that mid-term negotiations are not subject to State rules as regular contract negotiations are.

Chairperson Czernicki asked if the 3.45% increase includes the steps. Mr. Buganski said that it is a general increase. The increase for the steps comes out to 5.18%. Mr. Buganski said that there are eleven steps in the teachers' salary schedule. The general wage increase applies to all the steps and someone at a higher step will get that increase as well as any increase pertaining to moving to a higher step.

At 7:15 p.m., Councilor Cascio moved **"TO ENTER INTO EXECUTIVE SESSION"** seconded by Councilor Flynn. All Councilors present, including the Chairperson, voted AYE. The motion passed 8-0-0.

At 8:09 p.m., Councilor Flynn moved **"TO EXIT FROM EXECUTIVE SESSION AND RETURN TO THE BUDGET WORKSHOP SESSION"**, seconded by Councilor Cascio. All Councilors present, including the Chairperson, voted AYE. The motion passed 8-0-0.

Councilor Hemmann said that with regard to the Recreation and Parks Summer Programs, we should either shorten the number of weeks provided or increase the costs charged.

Deputy Mayor O'Connor said that the YMCA charges plenty for their programs and asked how different the Wethersfield Recreation & Parks programs are from the Y's.

Councilor Morin shared his experience with the summer programs. He agrees that we need to look at the programs as suggested by Councilor Hemmann. Councilor Morin thinks that the Wethersfield programs do not provide enough structure.

Chairperson Czernicki said that the Town does a lot for children. She said that she had asked for program information to justify the 6.8% increase. Some residents can afford the increase and some cannot.

Councilor Gardow said that he wouldn't mind totally eliminating the playground program.

Councilor Hemmann said that next year we should charge fees for the playground programs.

Councilor Cascio said that the Board of Education's services would be reduced to arrive at a bottom line of 6%.

Town Manager Bonnie Therrien said that she has provided Councilors with a list of possible budget reductions.

Councilor Sassano arrived at the meeting at this time (8:25 p.m.).

Councilor Morin said that if the Board of Education budget is cut, they will use tactics meant to scare parents in order to receive support.

Councilor Cascio said that the Council needs to be an advocate for the Town as well as the Board of Education.

Deputy Mayor O'Connor asked Councilor Sassano if he is saying that cuts must be made the same to the Town as well as the Board of Education.

Councilor Sassano said that this is true. The Board of Education needs to be disciplined.

Deputy Mayor O'Connor asked if anyone wants a 6.8% increase.

Councilor Hemmann hopes that there can be a collaborative approach to the Town & Board of Education relationship with the Town's new Superintendent and Town Manager.

Deputy Mayor O'Connor said that the taxpayers feel that they've done a lot already through capital improvement referendums. A 6% increase will not fly with them. He would like to see a bipartisan effort to avoid this.

Chairperson Czernicki said that all Councilors need to work together with the Board of Education.

Councilor Morin said that he is not comfortable with a 4% increase. He would like to see a 5-5 1/2% increase for the

Town and he does not agree with proposed program cuts.

Councilor Cascio said that Council should give Town Manager Bonnie Therrien a bottom line amount and she needs to live with it. Council needs to vote on a bottom line.

Chairperson Czernicki suggested that Councilors review the list provided by Town Manager Bonnie Therrien and present any additions or deletions to Council at the next meeting.

Councilor Gardow would like to see a 3% total tax increase.

Councilor Cascio said he'd like to see a 4-4 1/2% increase.

Councilor Hemmann would like to see a 4-5% increase.

Deputy Mayor O'Connor said that all these percentages are too high.

Councilor Sassano said that he feels we can't go below a 6% increase without providing a lower level of services. It will take ten years to get back to our current level of services. He'd like to see the savings that will be realized with Dr. Stilwell's Dial-A-Ride proposed cuts. He also would hate to tinker with the Board of Education budget.

Councilor Flynn said that he doesn't have any overall numbers, but would probably go with 4.5-5%.

Councilor Gardow said that when schools open in each year, the Board of Education will need staff and their budget will go higher each year. We must manage costs.

### **ADJOURNMENT**

At 9:19 p.m., Councilor Flynn moved "**TO ADJOURN TO THE BUDGET WORKSHOP SESSION ON MAY 13, 2003 AT 6:00 P.M. IN THE CONFERENCE ROOM OF THE TOWN HALL**" seconded by Councilor Cascio.

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

Dolores Sassano  
Town Clerk