

RTM Finance & Budget Committee - regular scheduled meeting minutes 04//28/2014

Present: J. Davis, M. Banks, R. Cardone, S. Anderson, T. Duffy, J. Palen, B. Ball K. Hoffman, D. Ritchie, A. Millar, M. Thorne ,A. Rycenga

Absent: G. DuPont, B. Hayes, J. Boulton

Guests:

Board of Education: chairwoman B. Haggerty-Ross, H. Shea, M. Harman, K. Stein, C. Sullivan, C. McNamara

Board of Finance: chairwoman L. Mao, B. Orr, J McLaughlin

Education Administrators: Superintendent- Dr. L Pierson, Ombudsman - J. Verre, Director of Finance M. Feeney, Assistant Superintendent T. Canty

RTM Moderator- Sarah Seelye

With 12 of 15 members present consisting of quorum , Jim Palen called the meeting to order at 7:40 p.m.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the proposed Town of Darien budget for 2014-2015.

The first area of questions and discussion were on the Board of education portion of the budget. A question was asked by S. Anderson regarding the request to add 6.6 SSEF (specialized special education facilitators). Dr. Pierson stated the request to add the positions was a result of the recommendations stemming from the Gamm report which analyzed the current special education climate and procedures. A qualified administrator is required for each PPT meeting. Assistant principals had been filling these roles but they were not trained for these highly specialized roles and it is taking away from their responsibilities outlined in their original job descriptions. Ombudsman Verre also provided further input.

Another question regarding the cost of out of district special education students was raised by the committee. Mr. Verre felt as improvements to the SPED system are phased in this could help stem the rising costs as more SPED students return to the district but it could not be determined if this would occur. Mr. Feeney stated procedures are being put in place to ensure the district is reporting accurate information for SPED excess cost reimbursement. Many changes are still being studied and analyzed so it was hard to determine what recommendations and improvements to the SPED program would eventually be put in place. The discussion was lengthy and further details can be seen from the broadcast which was publically aired on channel 79.

Another area of questioning was regarding the technology in the schools and the overall management of the technology in the district by B. Ball. BOE Chairwoman B. Haggerty-Ross stated there would be an outside consultant firm NSEDC which would be conducting a study on the overall technology use and make any necessary recommendations once completed. The committee suggested that any technology studies should also include town departments for increased efficiency.

Excess cost reimbursement for SPED from the State of Connecticut was also addressed. Currently the estimate in the budget is that the district will receive \$1.8 million back from the state but the way the numbers are tracking it could be a higher amount of \$2.1 - \$2.3 million. This year the State of Connecticut is funding the reimbursement pool with a higher level of funding but there are no indications this will be an ongoing increase. There is no way to determine what the final number returned to the town will be until all state school districts have submitted their numbers to the State. It was noted that the Board of Education may need to come before the RTM in the next few months to request approximately an additional \$700,000 to fill a gap in the current year's budget as a result of the costs associated with the various audits and reports surrounding the SPED program.

The members of the BOE left the meeting and the focus turned to the Board of Finance. Chairwoman Mao discussed the BOF decision to draw down the general fund to pay for capital projects and the projected BOE deficit. The BOF has a targeted general fund balance of 10% of the previous year's budget. Currently the general fund stands at \$17.4 million. The premise of taking money from the fund was to hold down the overall budget increase to 5.7% with the current return on interest being so low. Should the town receive a larger increase than expected from the SPED cost reimbursement from the State the excess monies would be returned to the general fund, possibly \$200,000. It was also noted the town has seen increases in revenues from building permits which could add back as much as \$1 million back into the general fund. The BOF felt the town credit ratings would not be affected by the drawdown of the general fund to roughly \$14 million.

A question was raised on the capital spending for the emergency radio system servers. It was noted there are still several "dead spots" in town and this upgrade was needed to replace the 15 year old system. The Board of Finance felt would be better for taxpayers for the item to come out of the general fund rather than remain in the proposed budget.

A lengthy discussion regarding the request to add a civilian dispatcher to the Police Department budget was held. There were concerns that the added positions which could eventually grow to 9 civilian dispatchers would increase headcount and future Police department budget requests. BOF members said the position would be monitored closely and the Police will soon be entering into a new contract negotiations. Additional discussions addressed the request for Police overtime in the budget.

D. Ritchie asked about sidewalks in the budget. The BOF said that it was the Selectman purview to put it the budget or not and they are continuing look into the overall town sidewalk planning. Flooding and the Intervale project were also discussed. Currently the Intervale project which has already been approved and monies allocated has stalled due to easements required from surrounding property owners.

M. Banks indicated that the proposed budget for 2014-2015 increases significantly above the current rate of inflation. The budgets for the two previous years also increased at rates significantly above the rate of inflation. She suggested that for future budgets maybe the BOF, BOS, and possibly some representatives from the RTM should meet to determine a target budget rate increase. Departments would have to manage that increase or make a convincing case why their budget should be allowed to increase above the target rate. It was noted that \$4 million dollars of reductions in the current budget proposal would be required to see a meaningful impact on the budget of 1%.

A motion to call the meeting to an end was made by J. Palen by all at 10:19 pm.