

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-8hl7OnMok>

Members of the Public: Due to COVID-19 & pursuant to Executive Orders 7B & 9H, the Town is holding this meeting via Webex & taking live public comment via Webex during the meeting.

✓ FairTV's webpage, <https://fairfieldct.org/fairtv/government>

Board of Finance Public Budget Hearing #1 Final Minutes
Thursday, March 11, 2021
7:00 pm

The Board of Finance Public Budget Hearing was held virtually at 7:00 p.m. on Thursday, March 11, 2020 in Fairfield, CT.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Edward Bateson, Jim Brown-Chair, Lori Charlton, Christopher DeWitt-Vice Chair, Mary LeClerc-Secretary, Sheila Marmion, John Mitola, Jack Testani, James Walsh
ALSO PRESENT: First Selectwoman Brenda Kupchick, CFO Jared Schmitt, Town Clerk Betsy Browne, FairTV Commission Chair Stuart Strelzer, Registrar Matt Waggoner, Registrar Steve Elworthy, P&Z Director Jim Wendt, Probate Judge Kate Maxham, Pequot Library Executive Director Stephanie Coakley, Pequot Library Finance/HR Manager John Gleckler, Operation Hope Executive Director Carla Miklos, Harbor Management Commissioner Ted Schwartzman, Kasandra Marshal, Kathy Braun, Community & Economic Development Director Mark Barnhart, Purchasing Director Gerald Foley, Assessor Ross Murray, Tax Collector Dave Kluczewski, FairTV Gerry Speno

I. Call to Order

Mr. Brown called the meeting to order at 7:04 pm.

II. Pledge of Allegiance

Mr. Brown led the Pledge of Allegiance.

III. Summary Budget Presentation by First Selectwoman

Mr. Brown welcomed First Selectwoman Kupchick who thanked everyone for their input into her budget. She said this budget services Fairfield's long-term liabilities, expands senior and disabled tax relief, and most importantly, preserves a firm foundation for the Town. She said this foundation is strengthened by paying off debt, maintaining the AAA bond rating, financing the important funds that keep our Town on solid financial ground, and increases spending for the Board of Education. First Selectwoman Kupchick said despite the challenges the pandemic brought, she was still able to initiate a reorganization of town departments, a restructuring of personnel, employee training, online permitting, and address root causes of corruption to ensure that it does not happen again. She then gave her Powerpoint presentation. Mr. Brown said the Board will look at the reorganization plan as members go through each department.

Mr. Mitola said they have to be careful about mixing words like tax increase and mill rate increase. He said if the budget passes it is the mill rate that will increase. He said spending increased significantly from last year because there was no increase due to the impact of the pandemic on taxpayers.

Ms. Marmion asked if the expenses were for the few employees who took the VERIP, but came back as part-time employees are being tracked. She said she wanted to know if the costs are in the upcoming budget. First Selectwoman Kupchick said they are not in next year's budget. She said there was significant savings in VERIP. She said those who came back to a department in part-time roles are referred to as consultants because they keep their departments afloat while the hiring process goes along and their pay is covered in the savings. Ms. Marmion asked about the consultant contracted to help the Conservation Department. She asked if that was part of the reorganization plan and how the Town is paying for the consultant. First Selectwoman Kupchick said the contract did not go before the BOS because it was an emergency. She said she hired SLR to assist Conservation in what the director and manager would do to maintain customer service in the department. Mr. Schmitt added that the cost for the consultant will be \$15,000-\$20,000 per month and will be absorbed by the savings in the department.

Mr. Mitola asked if the VERIP costs are in this year's budget or next year's budget. Mr. Schmitt said any costs related this year will be absorbed this year since they are not paying full time people. Mr. Mitola asked about DPW staff changes as the budget reflected eliminated positions for chief mechanic, maintenance repair and auto equipment operator. He asked if the same positions will be brought in, but employees would be paid them at a lower rate because eventually, they will be paid at a higher rate. First Selectwoman Kupchick said she will have Mr. Haselkamp clarify that for him.

Ms. Charlton asked if there would be additional reduction in personnel. First Selectwoman Kupchick said she will need data to know for sure, but customer service is extremely important.

Mr. Brown mentioned that last year the Board was deliberating a COVID-impacted budget. He said he was proud as a Board that members worked together in a bipartisan manner. He said the Board knew it was creating funding cliffs. He said the RTM also agreed in a bipartisan vote and made additional cuts to bring the tax rate to zero under the economic circumstances. Mr. Brown complimented the First Selectwoman because he said she funded the spending cliffs. He said she listened to the Board and funded the long-term liabilities. He said the Board will discuss it to see how they want to move forward to present a bipartisan budget to the RTM to do what is in the best interest of the Town and taxpayers.

IV. Discussion on the Following Budgets:

Administrative and General

1010 First Selectwoman's Office

The First Selectwoman's budget was reviewed above.

1030 Town Clerk

Town Clerk Betsy Browne said the increase in some line items is directed to election costs. She said she doesn't know what to expect as the voter roll increases to over 40,000 voters. She said she does not know if absentee ballots will be happening again, but last election her office received

grant money from the State because it was a federal election. Ms. Browne said she bases the costs in this budget by what happened with the last election.

1040 FairTV

Mr. Strelzer said he would like to add \$4,200 to Gerry Speno's salary. He said the Commission voted unanimously to add it if it is possible. Mr. Brown asked him to please put this in writing. He also asked him to write down the one time equipment purchases requested in the budget. Mr. Walsh asked for a list of the one-time equipment purchased made in last year's budget as well.

1070 Registrar of Voters

Steve Elworthy said the budget was down 4% because there will not be a primary so the reduction is in seasonal payroll. Mr. Waggner said the next fiscal year there will be redistricting from the State that will impact Fiscal Year 2022.

1090 Zoning Board of Appeals

Jim Wendt presented a budget that did not change from last year.

Mr. Walsh recused himself from the next two departments and the ZBA.

1110 Town Plan and Zoning

Mr. Wendt said there was one position eliminated pursuant to the re-organization plan reviewed by the First Selectwoman. He said it was actually two positions eliminated that were combined into one position. He said fees are down from last year, but revenue projections for this year are on target. He said university fees will bring in revenue that will go toward affordable housing.

1130 Probate Court

Probate Judge Kate Maxham said her budget is flat this year. She said items were moved around and so she was able to keep the budget the same.

Miscellaneous - Not for Profit Organizations:

2130 Pequot Library

Executive Director Stephanie Coakley & Finance/HR Manager, John Gleckler thanked the Board for funding and supporting Pequot Library and the roof that needs to be replaced urgently. Ms. Coakley said the library will still be short in the roof replacement, but it is looking into fundraising now. She said the library could not do its usual fundraising last year due to COVID. She said the endowment money is used to pay the \$125,000 in annual costs.

2492 Operation Hope

Executive Director Carla Miklos said this is the first year the BOS approved funding and she thanked the Town for the opportunity to go before the boards. Ms. Miklos said it is a privilege to serve the community and residents who are struggling. Mr. Testani wanted to know how Operation Hope communicates what is available to the homeless and residents. Ms. Miklos said there is a good pantry and community kitchen and the non-profit does outreach through the school system and a strong media presence. She added that the First Selectwoman's newsletter also has links to Operation Hope's services. Ms. Miklos said Operation Hope is the only food pantry in Fairfield. She said homelessness is a different issue and often get calls from 211. She said her staff will do the intake interview to help prevent homelessness or to get a person to a shelter. She

said the goal is to help people so they do not become homeless. She said the money the Town gives Operation Hope will go toward operating costs.

Administrative and General

1370 Harbor Management Commission

Harbor Management Commission member Ted Schwartzman said the Commission is requesting \$23,000 and there was no increase from last year.

Mr. DeWitt told the Board that the Historic District Commission had not been included on the budget review. The Commission has a budget request of \$11,618 which was no change to last year's budget. Mr. Brown explained later in the discussion that the HDC had a meeting tonight and were unable to attend.

1230 Conservation

First Selectwoman Brenda Kupchick said the budget presented to the BOS reflects the re-organization. She said \$30,000 is for a Dodge Caravan in Capital Outlay. She said there is a reduction of the administrative assistant and manager positions that were eliminated. She said the Wetlands Compliance person went from part-time to full-time.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Resident Kasandra Marshall of 112 Judd Street read her letter into the record weighing in on the Conservation Department reorganization. In the letter, she said Conservation is very important in the Town and spoke of her experience with the department. She said the department works with five other boards and commissions and runs complex environmental programs. She said she is concerned that reducing staff will weaken that work that's so important to Fairfield. She said she doesn't know if there is a perception that the department is overstaffed, but testified to the competent work it does. Ms. Marshall gave an example of High Street and noted how the department had put together a 21-page document that was very detailed and had scientific knowledge. She said cutting a position will compromise the quality of the department's work. She said she is very concerned about the staff recommendation because there are very complex projects that require full-time attention as well as local knowledge. Ms. Marshall said she is really worried about cutting the position or outsourcing the position which will weaken the department and said a robust department is paramount to Fairfield. She said she does support hiring a new director and having a fully staffed department.

Resident Kathy Braun of 245 Sunnyridge Avenue said that she supports the First Selectwoman's proposals to automate the town and bring it up to modern times and said she appreciates that as a member of the ZBA and as an environmental lawyer. She said she is a tree hugger, has a MBA and currently practices real estate law and is very concerned about the environment. Ms. Braun said she is troubled that no one on staff can come and speak about the budget; the director resigned and the second in command was removed and the new consultant doesn't have the time or exposure. She said she also wants the Board to know what the department does and the short and long-term fiscal impacts. She said it is hard to put a dollar amount on the value of the environment. Ms. Braun said she believes the program started because of open space which requires environmental stewardship. She said this is the 50th anniversary of the Conservation Department in our town and is sad to her no one is here to support the budget. She said she hopes the Board recognizes there is a fiscal impact. She said wetlands is a state regulatory role and has to protect resources where they are. She said there will be changes to our zoning laws which are being diluted as we speak now. She said the Conservation Commission when it wears a regulatory hat is very important. She said

she hasn't see in other town she's been to the history of parcels and impact of development. She said there is no one left in the department to do this kind of work and she doesn't believe outside consultant hired has the level to perform field work, research, and compile the history. She said every other department is getting an increase, staying the same or is facing a minor decrease. She said the Wetlands Agency pays for itself. Ms. Braun said years ago, the Agency set fees to cover the budget, but now with decreased staffing it doesn't need that anymore. She said regarding litigation, staff recommendations are relied upon heavily by the Commission. She said other programs help the Town with the Grand List and she said she doesn't know how that will be handled with two people in the department. Ms. Braun said other programs will degrade if they are not getting attention. She asked the Board to please restore the position and said she will send a letter on what she spoke about to the Board tonight.

1250 Shellfish

First Selectwoman Brenda Kupchick said the shellfish budget is flat.

1290 Miscellaneous Contingencies

Mr. Brown asked Mr. Schmitt what the money was used for in last year's miscellaneous contingencies. Mr. Schmitt said expenses that come up unexpectedly, but they are not big expenses. He said there are unexpected matters that come before the Town.

1350 Community & Economic Development

Director Mark Barnhart said he need \$60,000 to revamp the Town's official website. He said he also has a request to upgrade a staff position but it doesn't add money. He said he is looking for someone with marketing experience to fill the position as soon as possible. Ms. Marmion asked him about the status of Fairfield right now amid the pandemic. Mr. Barnhart said he's had to pivot and re-focus more attention to businesses. He said some businesses did not make it through COVID, but many have. He said the Town provided federal grants to 70% of local businesses. He said the Town needs to make sure smaller businesses will be here post-COVID.

Finance

3030 Purchasing

Director Gerald Foley said the most notable change in his budget is for an additional buyer. He said if approved, he fully intends to give back savings.

1050 Administrative Services

Mr. Foley said the increase in the budget is for the outsource mail operation center. He said he put a placeholder for an increase of 2%. He said that since the budget was submitted, he learned there will be no increase, so the budget is flat.

3050 Assessor

Tax Assessor Ross Murray said IT software is up \$5,000 for the two software services, QDS and Vision Appraisal. He said Fees and Professional services dropped \$150,000 due to completing the revaluation. Mr. Brown said it looked like he was changing out some personnel. Mr. Murray said the idea is to upgrade the current secretary A job to secretary B and have someone with a background in Personal Property to take it from a field person who will have more time to focus on the Real Estate. Mr. Mitola wanted to know why the change in the position is not reflected in the First Selectwoman's budget. He asked for the budget changes to be reflected in First Selectwoman's budget.

3090 Tax Collector

Tax Collector David Kluczowski said his budget was flat. He said any increase in his budget is driven by salaries and positions in the tax office have reached the maximum increases. He said the collection rate is going well. He said taxes are in deferment currently per the Governor. He said he is not concerned with the revenue coming in and should be on schedule for April.

3130 Board of Finance

Mr. Brown said the budget is basically flat and they didn't have any questions.

Mr. DeWitt made a motion to move the voting date from April 1 to March 31. Mr. Testani seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

Mr. Brown acknowledged Mr. Speno who wanted to comment on his increase request in the FairTV budget. Mr. Speno explained the expenses on some of the money questioned earlier that was for one-time equipment. He said this year, the Commission applied for \$97,000 in grants to replace equipment and other production expenses.

Mr. Brown announced that the meeting on 3/23/21 will include the following non-profits: Sullivan-McKinney Elder Housing, The Kennedy Center, Pilot House and Center for Family Justice.

Public Comment submitted via email:

From: Alyssa Israel

Sent: Wednesday, March 10, 2021 12:01 PM

To: Carpenter, Jennifer <JCarpenter@fairfieldct.org>

Cc: BOF <BOF@fairfieldct.org>

Subject: Testimony to the Board of Finance

Dear Board of Finance,

I am writing for several reasons and my main points are bulleted below:

- I would like to applaud the First Selectwoman for requesting the addition of a grant writer position.
 - In 2003, I was hired by the Town of Trumbull to answer the question, "Should Trumbull hire a grant writer?" The short answer to that question was a resounding YES! I interviewed full-time grant writers with the Towns of Ansonia, Shelton and the City of Bridgeport. I determined that there are many benefits to hiring a full-time grant writer. Full time grant writers have the time to research funding opportunities and establish relationships with federal, state and private funders. In addition to writing grants, the grant writer can also assist the town with data collection, program/project evaluation, and report writing.
 - I recommend that the grant writer also have extensive experience in process, impact and outcome evaluation. This important expertise can be used to not only evaluate certain programs and projects, but also to evaluate the quality of work by consultants to the Town such as SLR Consulting and Municipal Valuation Services.

- This is a segue into my second major reason for writing. After conducting extensive research for our property tax appeal, my husband and I noticed significant problems with the revaluation by Municipal Valuation Services (MVS), including a “blanket reduction” of homes in the beach area following the informal appeals. Of the 16 comparable homes we tracked, 5 (31%) were grossly UNDER-appraised by an average of \$339,960 per home. These 5 already grossly UNDER-appraised homes then received an additional reduction when MVS made the “blanket reductions” in the beach area.
 - I was told by a professional who works as a consultant to the City of Danbury, that 650 BAA appeals is enormous! He told me that Danbury receives at most, only about 80 appeals even during an evaluation year. Clearly MVS has done a terrible job.
- I fear that many homeowners will be overtaxed, even more will be UNDER-taxed...and ultimately the Town will suffer an overall loss in property tax revenues.
- A professional grant writer with process, impact and outcome evaluation expertise (needed for grant writing) could also investigate and report on the performance of consultants like MVS.

Sincerely yours,

Alyssa Israel
679 Rowland Road
Fairfield, CT 06824

V. Adjourn

Ms. Charlton made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 11:17 pm. Mr. Testani seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Pru O'Brien
Recording Secretary