

Minutes of the Board of Finance Public Hearing for the 2016-17 Annual Town Budget

Suffield Middle School – April 27, 2016

Members present: Justin Donnelly, Ryan Anderson, Chris Childs, Eric Harrington, and Brian Kost.  
Alternates present: Tracy Eccles and J. Michael Stevens. Member Dr. Ann Huntington Mickelson and alternate John Sullivan were absent.

Also present: First Selectman Melissa Mack, Director of Finance Deborah Cerrato, Board of Education Chairman Jeanne Gee, Superintendent Karen Berasi, and Water Pollution Control Authority Vice Chairman Kris Barthelmess.

Chairman Donnelly called the Public Hearing to order at 7:00 p.m. He introduced the Board of Finance (BOF) members and thanked Ms. Bobbie Kling for her long and devoted tenure as Recording Secretary.

He thanked the Board of Selectmen (BOS), the Board of Education (BOE) and all personnel involved in the budget process. He noted that there will be no action taken tonight but there will be a vote at the Town Meeting on Wednesday, May 11<sup>th</sup> tentatively taking place at the Middle School so the meeting can be live streamed.

Chairman Donnelly explained that the proposed budget yields a 1.51% increase or a .42 increase in the mill rate from 27.28 to 28.20. He pointed out that the BOE budget presented was not changed and their increase is 1.56% or \$525,918. The BOS or general government budget was accepted as presented as well and the increase is 1.46% or \$216,444. Mr. Donnelly pointed out that debt service is down from the current year and doesn't include the bonded projects approved by voters in the fall (Town Hall, Roads and Bridge Street School Community Center). The total expenditure budget is up 2.89% (\$1,606,012) for a budget of \$57,257,670.

The net collectable Grand List increased by 1.38% (\$18,627,935). This coupled with a \$511,185 increase in expected revenues yields the .42 increase in the mill rate. It is proposed that \$175,000 will be transferred from the unassigned fund balance as a revenue source. Last year \$650,000 was transferred from the unassigned fund balance.

Chairman Donnelly explained that staffing changes included a new Police Officer, a new Records clerk, a new part time assistant Finance Director, lifeguards for Babb's Beach and additional hours for the Parks and Recreation Registration Clerk and the Public Works Executive Secretary. Regionalization of Animal Control and an unfunded inter-loan /reference position at the Library caused reductions to staffing.

Mr. Donnelly explained that there are \$4,489,856 in proposed Capital Expenditures which will be a net cost of \$3,217,489 to Suffield taxpayers after grants or other funding sources. Funding is recommended for 3 school roof projects, drainage and paving projects, fiber optic expansion from Town Hall to the Library, Senior Center and Ambulance buildings, \$250,000 for Farmland Preservation among others.

Kris Barthelmess, Vice Chairman of the Water Pollution Control Authority (WPCA) pointed out that the WPCA is a separate utility that provides sewer service to 3,400 accounts in the eastern portion of Town. The cost of WPCA services is not part of the tax bill and their budget handouts were provided for informational purposes only. The WPCA will hold a Public Hearing on May 10<sup>th</sup> to present and receive comments on their budget and rates.

Jeanne Gee, Chairman of the Board of Education thanked Chairman Donnelly and the BOF for their partnership. She also thanked the Board of Selectmen, Board of Education, Superintendent and school leadership for their work on a budget that supports student achievement.

Superintendent Berasi thanked all involved in this transparent, collaborative process which will produce children who achieve. She discussed a slide showing the many meetings that were held to create and shape the budget. Ms. Berasi said that investing in students is investing in Suffield's future. The budget was developed to attract highly qualified teachers, to develop competitive students and to invest in the Suffield community. She noted that projected enrollment is down by 19 students but it is spread across four schools. Ms. Berasi pointed out that there has been a large drop (-15.7%) in health insurance costs. She presented the Full time equivalent (FTE) Summary which showed reductions of 29.8 FTEs mostly in non-certified staff and an increase of 14.2 new positions which net a 15.6 overall reduction in staff. The new positions are mostly certified staff to support and coach the teachers. New proposed positions include three instructional coaches, 2 additional curriculum leaders, an assistant principal for Spaulding School and other additional instructional staff. The 1.56% increase (\$525,918) includes \$709,638 in salary increases, \$527,156 for Special Education (excluding salaries), Health Benefit Savings of -\$670,649 and other smaller changes. Ms. Berasi presented a slide with grant funding amounts. In 2016-17 there will be 25.41 FTEs funded in grants which is down from 29.87 in the current year.

Chairman Donnelly said that salaries are the biggest budget drivers and many of the Town union contracts will be negotiated in the coming months. He asked the audience to approve the budget at Town Meeting as it represents a reasonable compromise and is prudent.

At this point, the meeting was opened up for questions and comments.

Dave Gauthier of Phelps Road thanked the BOF for their work and Dr. Chafetz for his editorial in the Observer about civility. He suggested that the budget increase was really larger since last year was a 53 week payroll. Mr. Kost replied that the 53rd week affects the Town unions only (not BOE) and probably had an overall impact of .25% on the budget. Mr. Gauthier also said he'd like to see all non-union employees have performance reviews and noted some increases of 6%. First Selectman Mack said she used Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM) data to compare each position to other nearby towns with similar populations. She said her goal is to attract and retain competent and motivated employees. She noted salary comparisons showed some positions were overpaid, some in line and others were grossly underpaid. She said she expects to have subjective performance reviews next year and noted that job descriptions must be updated to perform those evaluations. Mr. Gauthier commented that he supports performance evaluations. Mr. Gauthier also said he noted that fire apparatus was not funded in the budget. Chairman Donnelly said it was an intentional omission as there are many financing options available and the BOF will analyze and make their recommendation.

Ann Borg of 1310 Mountain Road commented that there was abatement for Bridge Street School included in the capital budget in the last few years and asked why it was not included this year. Mr. Donnelly noted that it was listed as a request but never funded in previous budgets. Chairman Donnelly said it was an intentional omission and it was his personal observation that the true cost of remediation has not been determined although it's estimated at \$2Million. He said it was unfair to burden this budget without firm figures. He said there are different methods of financing available which need to be analyzed once a true cost is determined. There is a request for proposal issued and the actual funding estimate needed will be known soon.

Denny Krepps of 709 Newgate Road questioned why pavement management monies were in the capital budget vs the operating budget and was concerned if the Town Engineer could manage all of the work. It was noted that the Pavement Management budget is consistent with treatment in prior years. He also questioned whether \$360,000 was sufficient for contingency with the library move back up in the air and the Town Hall move dependent upon it. Chairman Donnelly noted that the temporary space costs were in the bonding project and First Selectman Mack said that the Town Hall full move out wasn't planned until the end of June. Mr. Krepps also asked about whether the financial effect of the possible expanded Tax abatement for farms was included in the budget. First Selectman Mack said there will be a Town Meeting scheduled to discuss and possibly approve the phased in abatement. She said the tax impact will be positive over time with the new Four Seasons hydroponic tomato farm. Mr. Krepps also stated his concern for a reduction of 21 academic support and para professionals In the BOE budget. He asked who would do the work. Ms. Berasi pointed out that 5 out of the 15 positions were added to the budget last year and were vacant. She said that Suffield has more non-certified staff than districts twice our size. Superintendent Berasi said every special education student needing a para professional will have one. She said that some paras were general education staff and said that teachers need support from certified expert staff like curriculum and instructional coaches, psychologists, etc. rather than non-certified staff. Ms. Berasi said she has faith in our teachers. Chairman Gee said that as superintendents change different procedures and goals are put into place. She said the BOE is thankful for all of the employees who have worked for the Suffield school system.

Dawn Metcalf of 49 Cedar Crest Lane was concerned about the choice to focus the Center for Children with Special Needs (CCSN) consultant in pre k – 2 which would leave grades 3 -12 at risk. Superintendent Berasi said extra support will be provided to all grades. Specific classes are planned for high school children with emotional disabilities and there will be additional psychologists available for McAlister and the High School too. Ms. Berasi pointed out that the CCSN will be expanded to all grades over the next five years. Ms. Metcalf said she is concerned that current grade 3-12 children will miss out.

Warren Packard of 2 Oxford Drive thanked all of the volunteers on all Town Boards and Commissions. He asked what would happen of the State cut 20% (or \$2-3 Million) of their aid to the Town. Mr. Kost said the Town budget must be finalized before the state budget and the latest \$650,000 expected cut was factored in the budget. He said if there was a one-time adjustment the fund balance could be a source but not for multi-year cuts. Mr. Packard questioned adding positions when we possibly may need to cut them if a budget crisis occurs. Chairman Donnelly said that the most time spent on budget discussions was for the additional police officer position. He said the records clerk position was justified easier. He noted that Captain Brown provided lots of input and the public was very supportive of the additional officer position. First Selectman Mack said she spent a lot of time with the Director of Finance to take a close and critical look at the budget and did find savings like contributions to a charitable organization for addiction services.

Janet Davis of 8 Wisteria Lane asked about the Animal Control budget. First Selectman Mack said that our Animal Control costs were higher than other towns and she is negotiating with another town to provide regional services. Ms. Davis questioned response time with our large geographic area and the addition of chicken zoning. First Selectman Mack said our call volume supports this action and that Animal Control is restricted to domesticated animals only. Ms. Davis said he objects to this idea.

Sam Cochran of 754 North Street was concerned about the decrease in the non-salary items in the Police Department operating budget. First Selectman Mack and Captain Brown replied that energy costs were reduced along with a cruiser. Chairman Donnelly added that the Police Department and Police Commission supported the budget.

Sue Davis of 42 Wisteria Lane said that she understood that front loading the CCSN was needed but that \$300,000 was expensive for a small population. Superintendent Berasi replied that a lot of services were included in the \$300,000 including professional development for general education and special education teachers. Training for special education para professionals across the district is also included. Ms. Berasi added the price also includes a BCBA employee, consultant work, etc. and the cost is really a bargain. Ms. Davis asked if there was thought to hiring another BCBA and Special Ed (SPED) teachers. Ms. Berasi said the intensity of caseloads doesn't warrant another now but may if there is an influx of students needing services.

Lauren Life of 2910 Mountain Road questioned the omission of Bridge Street School abatement costs from the capital budget. She noted that the abatement project was combined for both Town Hall and Bridge Street School and is out to bid. She asked how it would get funded if it is not included in the budget. It was pointed out that Town Meeting would need to approve any transfer over \$140,000.

Lester Smith of Marbern Drive asked what a BCBA was. Superintendent Berasi explained that it is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst who would analyze and shape student behavior differently.

Ernie Pekovich of 40 Valley View Drive thanked the BOS and BOF for their work. He said the Town is poor at doing anything for the long term. He noted that job descriptions were talked about 20 years ago and 6 or 7 Human Resource Directors haven't accomplished that goal. He said he'd like to see union and non-union employees get a performance evaluation. He said this is another example of why a Town Manager form of government is needed, He challenged the leadership to get performance metrics added to contracts.

Debra Dudack of 315 Prospect Street was concerned about the cut in peer role models for the integrated preschool. She spoke against excluding "ber" babies (children born in months ending in "ber") from preschool as well.

Kim Worthington of 21 Clay Creek said she cares about the schools but is concerned about the reduction of para professionals and academic support positions. She said that Ridgefield has increased their Special Ed budget by 572% this year and has 53 special education legal settlements from 2012-2015. She said she hoped the Superintendent's expertise that we're relying on is correct and cited that Ridgefield has needed to repair things that weren't done correctly in the past.

Dawn Metcalf of 49 Cedar Crest Lane said the goal of education is to create happy, healthy, literate and employable contributing adult members of society. Spending \$300,000 for preschool and not for grades 3-12 is questionable and irresponsible. She says we have a staffing problem, a hiring problem, a retention problem, a stress level problem, and are getting an unfortunate reputation as a district.

There being no more public comment, the meeting was adjourned at 8:41 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Lisa Trase