

MINUTES OF THE CHESHIRE TOWN COUNCIL PUBLIC HEARING HELD ON
TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2014, AT 7:30 P.M. IN COUNCIL CHAMBERS, TOWN HALL, 84
SOUTH MAIN STREET, CHESHIRE CT 06410

Public Hearing Subject Matter:

PROPOSED FISCAL YEAR 2014-2015 GENERAL
FUND OPERATING BUDGET, WATER POLLUTION
CONTROL FUND OPERATING BUDGET AND
COMMUNITY POOL FUND OPERATING BUDGET

Present

Timothy Slocum, Chairman; David Schrumm, Vice Chairman; Patti Flynn-Harris, Liz Linehan, Robert J. Oris, Sylvia Nichols, Thomas Ruocco, James Sima, Peter Talbot. Staff: Michael A. Milone, Town Manager; James Jaskot, Finance Director; Gina DeFilio, Deputy Finance Director; Arnett Talbot, Asst. to Town Manager; George Noewatne, PW Director. Supt. Of Schools Dr. Greg Florio; Asst. Supt. Of Schools Scott Detrick; BOE Chairman Gerry Brittingham; BOE Members Dixon, Pavano, Perugini, Heilrich.

1. ROLL CALL

The clerk called the roll and a quorum was determined to be present.

2. EXPLANATION OF HEARING PROCEDURE AND AGENDA

Chairman Slocum explained the procedures for a public hearing of the Town Council.

3. READING OF LEGAL NOTICE

The clerk read the legal notice into the record.

4. PRESENTATION ON HEARING SUBJECT

Town Manager Milone thanked members of his staff, especially Finance Director Jaskot, Assistant Director DeFilio, and Ms. Talbot for their work in putting together the budget and presentation.

Mr. Milone presented the FY 2014-2015 proposed operating budget.

General Operating Budget - \$104,284,620; an increase of \$3,953,600 or 3.94%.

There are five components of the operating budget – General Government, Education, Debt, C.N.R. and Contingency. The General Government component of the budget is for everything that is non-education. The C.N.R. is the cash fund to pay for some capital projects.

Tax Calculation – proposed mill rate of 30.7 mills; property is assessed at 70% of market value; mill rate x \$1000 of assessed value = taxes. For a property with market value of \$301,671, the assessment is \$211,170 = 211.17×30.7 mills = taxes of \$6,482.92.

Tax Payment-average taxpayer – Average assessment, real estate and two motor vehicles, at 30.7 mills the tax would be \$7,016, an increase of \$235 or 3.47%.

Net Grand List, 10/1/13 – the net grand list after Board of Assessment Appeals is \$2,698,424,308; a change of -\$183,193,338, or -6.36%.

Revaluation assessment changes – The Cheshire median for revaluation assessment changes in 2013 is -8.3% for residential, and -8.1% for commercial/industrial. This overall decline is much less than other municipalities. There are three components to the grand list – real estate, personal property, and motor vehicles. The motor vehicle values are updated by the Dept. of Motor Vehicles with the list sent to the tax assessor. The State requires a revaluation every five years.

Impact of Revaluation – the revaluation has resulted in a wide range of change in assessments from -1.71% to -17.41%; change in taxes range from 8.13% decrease to a 9.33% increase. At proposed mill rate of 30.7 mills, 37.3% of taxpayers will see a decrease in taxes; 11.2% will have a tax increase of less than \$100; and 17.9% will have a tax increase of \$500 or more.

Expenditures General Government – Mr. Milone reviewed the expenditures for the 8 components; total FY 2015 - \$104,294,620, increase of \$3,953,600, 3.94%.

Debt Service - \$7.502 of 7.2% of the total budget; this is a decrease of \$566,057 or 7.02%; debt service is projected to decline due to planned reduction of outstanding debt payment of \$116,057; anticipated savings of \$450,00 from bond refunding; the Town's strong credit ratings of AA+ with Fitch and Aa1 with Moody's.

Revenue Summary – Most of the revenue for the operating budget is from property taxes. In FY 2015, property tax revenue is projected to be \$82,367,079, +4.21% from FY 2014. PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) from the State is \$4,672,2317. The State has programs with prison towns to make up the tax loss on State property at 100% reimbursement. But, the reimbursement continues to decline each year, and the level is at 49% of the tax loss.

WATER POLLUTION CONTROL DEPT.BUDGET – FY 2015 budget of \$3,484,674, 3.64% increase.

COMMUNITY POOL BUDGET – FY 2015 - \$753,111, -\$160,011 or -21.65%.

Potential future revenue includes significant grant list growth, substantial building permits revenue, resolution of the DOC disputes for payment of WWTP upgrade and back-billing for excess effluent treatment.

Options – General Fund Equity is about \$8.8 million or 8.85% of the FY 2014 operating budget; debt service reserve fund balance of \$5.4 million; three reserve accounts with \$500,000 each; medical benefit trust fund balance of \$2.658 million (Town 1.52 million

and BOE 1.13 million); WPCD fund equity of \$680,000; Pool insurance claims proceeds of about \$350,000.

Major Projects – include the upgrade of the WWTP, pool construction, extension of the Linear Trail, Town/Schools energy upgrade, bridge replacements, road repaving, Town Center sidewalks replacement, school improvement projects, Mixville Pond dredging.

Operational Projects – include property revaluation, technology initiative, cable access technology enhancement, CAD/RMS, GIS system.

Budget Schedule – April 8, 2014, Council budget adoption; May 11, 2014 budget petition deadline; June 20, 2014, budget referendum deadline; June 27, 2014, final budget adoption deadline.

BOARD OF EDUCATION PROPOSED BUDGET – Dr. Greg Florio

Dr. Florio gave a short presentation on the BOE budget.

The FY 2014-15 budget is \$66,890,621; an increase of \$3.18 million, or 5%. The major areas of increase are in salaries - \$1.154 million; Benefits -\$1.231 million; full day kindergarten - \$856,000. \$1.2 million of the increase is for employee benefit obligations, maintenance of existing programs at \$1.12 million; teacher salaries is at \$28.7 million, a \$1.1 million dollar change over 5 years.

Full Day Kindergarten - \$856,000 total cost; 8 full time teachers and 8 full time instructional assistants; there would be a reduction in the transportation costs; initial investment (one time cost) for classroom renovations, food service equipment (Darcey School), classroom equipment and materials. Staffing needs - \$676,000; transportation reduction of \$125,000; initial infrastructure investment, \$305,000; total \$856,000.

Dr. Florio stated that the plan does not impact facilities except for the minor upgrades. Kindergarten students will be housed in the existing facilities.

Based on current enrollment, Dr. Florio believes there could be one less teacher and one less aide for the kindergarten program. Also, some of the infrastructure costs are capital projects and could be in the capital budget rather than the operating budget. The full day kindergarten program is significant for Cheshire, and the school system is excited about implementation for Cheshire.

Gerry Brittingham, BOE Chairman, thanked Chairman Slocum and Town Councilors for meeting with the BOE members, Dr. Florio and Mr. Masciana to discuss and review the BOE budget.

Chairman Slocum expressed appreciation to the BOE, Dr. Florio and Mr. Masciana for the open discussions on the budget, and for the budget presentation at the public hearing.

5. QUESTIONS AT THE DISCRETION OF THE CHAIR.

Dorf Kleist, 251 Lancaster Way, submitted a list of questions to the Council on various issues. He commented on \$1800 per child being \$10 per child per day as a fiscally sound cost for education services. He asked about State reimbursement for the kindergarten classroom retrofit; collection of taxes on FL and VT motor vehicle plates; collection of taxes on Elim Park apartments; the 9% raise to police officers; police overtime costs; police supervisors taking to officers with both sitting in the cruisers.

Chairman Slocum responded there is no State reimbursement for the kindergarten retrofit; that Elim Park is a religious organizations and under State statute cannot be taxed; and the facility donates \$300,000 annually to the Police and Fire Departments.

Mr. Milone stated that the motor vehicle tax issue has been discussed with the Town Attorney, and the Town does not have the authority to tax out of state vehicles.

Regarding the 9% raise to certain police officers, Mr. Milone explained that Chief Dryfe reorganized the department into 3 divisions; eliminated 2 captain positions and 2 lieutenant positions; 2 remaining lieutenants took on the captain duties with more responsibilities; the reorganization is saving thousands & thousands of dollars, which is well beyond the 9% increase to the lieutenants. Police overtime is considered part of wages, and under the new contract extra duty will not be calculated into the wage base for pension benefit calculations.

Mr. Kleist stated his support for full day kindergarten.

6. PROPONENTS AND OPPONENTS STATEMENTS ALTERNATELY EXPRESSED.

Courtney Barbet-Devine, 6 Mulberry Court, stated her support of the full day kindergarten program, and asked the Council to adequately fund the BOE budget to support the program. She said the full day kindergarten better prepares students for school, better transition to first grade, higher academic achievement, etc. Her personal experience at Darcey School was good, but she wished her children had more time in kindergarten.

Joe Kulas, 1760 Tuttle Avenue, commented on a dentist and education working the same way, spending dollars early to fix a problem rather than waiting to fix the problem. He said it costs money to have students become good students; supports full day kindergarten, particularly for the lower performing students; and stated education insulates against poverty, poor performance, suicide, and many other problems for children. He asked the Council to take the time, spend the money, and give advantages to Cheshire children as they go forward...make the smart choice.

Joanne Quinn, Birdview Road, stated she would be more proud of Cheshire with the start of a full day kindergarten program. In the past children were tested before entering

kindergarten; there was a readiness program for children not ready for first grade; and she said Cheshire should be proud of its education system. She supports the BOE's proposal for full day kindergarten, and said 90% of the school districts in Connecticut have the program. Cheshire should have full day kindergarten because it is best for the children.

Diane Visconti, 795 Devonwood Drive, stated her support of the full day kindergarten program. She read excerpts from a letter she wrote to a local newspaper regarding the CL&P tree trimming program, and commented on the need for a balance between beauty and reliability. Ms. Visconti advised that if a homeowner has an issue with the tree trimming, they can contact the local Tree Warden and find out what the tree needs to be cut down.

Chairman Slocum reported on an increase in the tree warden budget due to the blight and infestation in the Ash Trees, some of which will be replaced.

Megan Beardsley, 1390 Old Lane Road, spoke at the last meeting in support of full day kindergarten, and thanked the Council for the time they dedicate to the community. With regard to people not attending Council meetings, Ms. Beardsley stated that Councilors are elected to represent and listen to the people, and they are being asked to support full day kindergarten. She said Councilors are not elected to make decisions on what they think, but elected to make decisions on what the citizens want them to do. She noted that this is the people's Cheshire not the Town Council's Cheshire. Since children cannot speak for themselves they need representation and people want what is better for the next generation.

Denise Terzakis, 226 Mixville Road, stated she is not in favor of full day kindergarten, and is worried the numbers are based on declining enrollment, and asked what happens to class sizes. With full day kindergarten more families will move to town, and she questions how more students will be accommodated in other classes when kindergarten will be moved into the elementary schools. She said Darcey teachers are doing a good job, and asked why we need to put more demands on 5 year olds.

Jeff Natale, 5 Cardinal Lane, agreed with statements made by other speakers, knows the Council looks out for the good of the town, and he supports full day kindergarten and the BOE budget. This budget makes sense; there is no fat in the budget; and he said full day kindergarten is necessary and should be implemented. Mr. Natale is pleased the BOE and Council are holding discussions. He noted that 87% of the people in town want the full day kindergarten program. The Council represents the people and 87% have stated the program makes sense. Regarding test scores, Mr. Natale believes that without the full day kindergarten students will fall behind in 3rd grade testing. In our DRG of 20 towns, only Cheshire and Farmington do not have a full day kindergarten program, and Guilford is voting on it this month. Mr. Natale asked the Council to do what is right for the children, spend \$305,000 annual cost for the program, which is not a lot to invest, show the support for the full day kindergarten and fund it.

Kristin Pannone, parent, taxpayer and early education teacher, said she understands the concerns of parents who do not support the full day kindergarten program and what the Council is saying. She addressed concerns about the long day, and has seen sand tables, lego tables, and fine motor related equipment removed from kindergarten classrooms, and said children have lost opportunities to interact, time to cut, time to play, role play, and that kindergarten is gone. She hopes the Council is listening to the people's concerns and comments. Ms. Pannone commented on Council members not attending BOE meetings, but is glad there are conversations between the BOE and Council. She asked if Council members are fully prepared with research and knowledge to make a decision which is in the best interests of the children.

In reply, Chairman Slocum stated that Council members have duties to perform, have liaison to the BOE, understand the school system, and he is a lifelong Cheshire resident, and his children went through the school system. The Council is reviewing and going through a budget that has an impact on all taxpayers with decisions to be made which impact people unevenly. Everything must be taken into account, and this is what the Council will do.,

Ms. Pannone asked Councilors if they have visited Darcey School, answered e-mails, seen research, talk to both sides on the issue. She stated that Councilors have expressed their opinion for and against the full day kindergarten program.

Those present were informed by Chairman Slocum that Councilors have not been invited to visit Darcey School. He noted that Council members all have full time day jobs; have attended 10 budget meetings and a public hearings on the budget; hold ex parte meetings with Town and BOE staff, and is working with due diligence and does care.

Ms. Pannone stated that things change, current research practices change, and there are people working behind the scenes putting the number into reality, education has changed, and the Council should reach out to the people. She encouraged Councilors to visit Darcey and reach out if more research is needed.

Chairman Slocum stated parents have experienced many things over the years with their children...there was readiness, phonetic reading, and there is the notion that some change is better. He debates the concept of why some research today is greater than the research of yesterday...and questioned when research will say we need grade 13 because we screwed up the first 12 grades.

Matt Levine, 25 Kelley Court, supports full day kindergarten and hopes the Council and BOE can find a way to implement the program. The Council members are volunteers, and Mr. Levine said there are volunteers in town working hard on many issues. He said full day kindergarten is needed because of the pressures facing kids today. 90% of the Connecticut towns have full day kindergarten programs and Mr. Levine hopes Cheshire will fund the program.

Alyssa Tessier, 50 Beaver Brook Court, has been involved for 2 years with advocacy for full day kindergarten, and people working together for a common goal. She supports the youngest learners in the school system, fosters a learning environment, growth in multiple areas, education, development, and asked the Council to take into consideration all viewpoints. She expressed willingness to assist the Council with any information so they find a way to support implementation of the program.

Charles Pollizano, 30 Hawthorne Drive, commented on surveys targeting those who support the program, and said they should be discounted. He does not support the BOE budget because of the full day kindergarten program. People should google all day kindergarten negatives and read the research which contradicts everything that has been stated at this meeting. Mr. Pollizano said the Council's decision should be based on logic and fairness, and he noted technology has changed but children have not changed...and they need play, self discovery, and not academic stress. He recommended people read the book "MisEducation".

7. REBUTTAL AT THE DISCRETION OF THE CHAIR.

8. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION by Mr. Sima; seconded by Mr. Schrumm

MOVED to adjourn the public hearing at 9:20 p.m.

VOTE The motion passed unanimously by those present.

Attest:

Marilyn W. Milton, Clerk