

A **SPECIAL JOINT MEETING** of the Board of Finance and the Board of Education was held on Tuesday, May 5, 2020. In response to the Governor's Executive Orders regarding COVID-19, this meeting was held remotely using the ZOOM online meeting platform. Participants included Mayor Elinor Carbone, Board of Finance Members James Wright, Laurene Pesce, Lance Boynton, Christopher Beyus, Mark Bushka and Christopher Anderson, and Board of Education members Fiona Cappabianca, John Kissko, Ellen Hoehne, Edward Corey, Armand Maniccia, Jessica Richardson, Molly Spino, Cathy Todor, Gary Eucalitto and Nikki Fappiano.

Corporation Counsel Victor Muschell, City Treasurer Daniel Farley, Public Works Director Raymond Drew and Torrington Public Schools Superintendent Susan Lubomski, Interim Director of Business Services Ed Arum, Human Resources Director Kimberly Schulte and Executive Director of Student Services Laura Klimaszewski also joined the meeting remotely.

Mayor Carbone called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

PRESENTATION OF COMMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC

City Clerk Carol Anderson and Assistant City Clerk Jonathan Draper read aloud comments from the public regarding the proposed Torrington Public Schools budget for the fiscal period from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021. (Public input was solicited during the days prior to the meeting and all written comments were distributed to the Board of Finance and the Board of Education prior to the start of the meeting). A total of 34 written comments were submitted to the City Clerk's office and read aloud at the meeting.

McClure Whiting, Matthew Otis, Stacey Pollock, Diane Hart, Veronica Gelormino, Danielle Verderam, Philip Apruzzese, Christina Augliera, Robin Magistrali, Jason Lafreniere, Keri Hoehne, Jeff Putnam, Samantha Wald, Jennifer Thomas, Christine Morneault, Jennifer and Douglas Archer, Diane Holland, Carrie Cassady, Sandy Mangan, Heidi Laus, Mary Jane Whitehill, Kimberly Petzel, Michael McCotter, Alexa Keener, Krystal Wall, Marie Puzinski, Mindy Pratt and Jerinne Grant expressed support for the proposed TPS budget.

Patti Harris, Carla and Dave Perlotto, Marianne Sabia, Joseph Sabia, Tim Cipriano and Tom Kalinowski expressed their opposition to the proposed TPS budget and called for no increase to the City's tax rate.

PRESENTATION & DISCUSSION ON PROPOSED FY 2020/2021 TPS BUDGET

Supt. Lubomski presented the proposed budget for Torrington Public Schools for the fiscal period from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021. She discussed the budget process, budgetary needs, recent accomplishments, improvements in special education and the impact of COVID-19.

The boards discussed the proposed operational and capital budgets, the impact of COVID-19 and the revenue projections for the upcoming fiscal year.

Mr. Anderson requested estimations for how COVID-19 could affect the TPS budget. Supt. Lubomski expressed the need for additional laptops to assist with distance learning and estimated that they would cost approximately \$200 per device. Ms. Cappabianca explained that it would be difficult to project the impact of COVID-19 for the 2020-2021 fiscal year because the district does not yet know what the students' return to school will look like.

Mr. Beyus requested clarification regarding the amount of laptops that TPS still needs and Ms. Cappabianca explained that the school district will need 2000 more devices in addition to those obtained through the State's assistance program.

Mr. Bushka asked whether any cost savings resulted from closing the schools since March, 2020 due to COVID-19. Mr. Arum estimated that there would be a surplus in savings of approximately \$70,000 when all factors are considered. He explained that reductions in electricity usage and closing down the athletics programs drove much of the savings, while contractual obligations, insurance, social security, Medicaid, cafeteria costs and a decline in the reimbursement rate for the excess cost grant prevented further savings. Mr. Bushka also asked whether the Board of Education was continuing to pay the bus company and Mr. Arum reported that they were, per Governor Lamont's direction, but the Board of Education was actively negotiating a credit for the 2020-2021 contract.

Mr. Eucalitto discussed the importance of investing in the education system.

Mrs. Pesce requested an explanation regarding the funds allocated for health insurance claims and Mayor Carbone explained that the funding level was agreed upon based on existing data and trends. Mrs. Pesce also requested clarification regarding Medicaid reimbursements for telemedicine and Ms. Klimaszewski explained that live one-on-one therapy is reimbursable while evaluations are not.

Mr. Boynton expressed his satisfaction with the progress that TPS made in the area of Special Education and urged the Board of Education to develop a strategy to reduce contractual obligations and build more flexibility into their budgeting process. Ms. Cappabianca explained that contracts are negotiated with the union and stated that TPS salaries would have to be competitive with other districts.

Mr. Beyus requested clarification regarding conflicting statements that the total number of students receiving special education services went down, yet it was reported that for every one TPS student moved out of special education, the district received three new students in need of those services. Ms. Klimaszewski explained.

Mr. Beyus also expressed his desire to bring the funding level for insurance claims back up above 100%. Mayor Carbone explained that the City and Board of Education have adequate reserve funds to cover a surplus of claims and she noted that the number of claims has dropped since employees are holding off on elective surgeries and are visiting the doctor less frequently due to social distancing measures resulting from COVID-19.

Mr. Eucalitto stated that he was not in favor of reducing the proposed TPS budget to a 2.5% increase over the current fiscal year and stated that greater budget flexibility could be achieved in the long-term by enhancing the in-house special education services and adding new and diverse programs for all students.

Mr. Maniccia also discussed the exorbitant cost for student outplacements as a result of school choice and special education services. He explained that the labor contracts for teachers are determined by statewide averages and warned that the district could be forced to pay more if future contracts go to arbitration. In addition, Mr. Maniccia expressed his frustration that the TPS budget increased at a lower rate than the cost of living from 2014 to present. Mayor Carbone credited the modest budget increase over that time period to the State fiscal crisis which strained many municipalities.

Mr. Bushka requested clarification regarding funding from the State through ECS and the Alliance District program. Mayor Carbone clarified that ECS funding was frozen at 2013 level and Supt. Lubomski provided additional clarification regarding the Alliance District designation and ECS funding amounts.

Mrs. Pesce expressed her concerns about the deficit in state budgets for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 fiscal years and the potential impact on funding for municipalities.

Mr. Beyus asked what the impact would be on the mill rate if the level 2 City budget and TPS budget, as presented, were adopted and the Mayor estimated that there would be a mill rate increase of approximately five mills. Mayor Carbone added that a 2.5% increase for the TPS and City budgets would likely result in an increase of approximately .75 mills but she cautioned that revenues are uncertain. Mr. Beyus stated that he does not intend to approve any increase to the mill rate and Mr. Eucalitto expressed his frustration.

Mrs. Pesce requested an update on the City's fund balance and Mayor Carbone reported that the two million dollars that were appropriated to offset the current fiscal year budget was not used.

Mr. Eucalitto described some of the capital improvements needed at Torrington's public schools and stated that a partial mill rate increase would be justifiable.

Mr. Corey expressed his frustration with the funding allocation for Torrington Public Schools in recent years and questioned whether the Mayor and Board of Finance had already decided that they would not approve any increase to the mill rate. Mr. Bushka, Mr. Wright and Mr. Anderson stated that they would not make a decision on any budgets or the mill rate until they have all of the information available to them, including revenue figures.

Ms. Cappabianca requested to be included in the next steps of the budget process and emphasized the detrimental impact that additional budget cuts would have on TPS and their students.

Mayor Carbone outlined the next steps of the budget process, including a joint meeting with the City Council and Board of Finance on May 18, 2020. Mrs. Pesce questioned whether the Board of Finance would need to set the mill rate at its meeting on May 19, 2020 and mayor Carbone clarified that the City Council did not approve a 30-day extension for budget adoption. She also cautioned against setting the mill rate too close to the deadline for sending tax bills out.

Lastly, Mr. Bushka and Mayor Carbone commented on the success of soliciting written comments from the public on the proposed budget.

ADJOURNMENT

On a motion by Mrs. Pesce, seconded by Mr. Anderson, the Boards voted unanimously to adjourn at 9:51 p.m.

ATTEST:

Carol L. Anderson
CAROL L. ANDERSON, MMC
CITY CLERK