

Town Council  
Public Hearings on School and Municipal Budgets  
April 24, 2014 – 6 p.m.

Present: President Gary Cote, Vice-President Kerry McGee, Councilwoman Carlson, Councilman Laboissonniere, Town Manager Thomas Hoover, Town Solicitor Frederick Tobin

School Committee Chairwoman Kathy Patenaude, member David Florio, Superintendent Michael Almeida, Solicitor Katherine Duncanson

Pledge of Allegiance led by Coventry JROTC  
Moment of Silence  
Review of Emergency Evacuation Plan

A motion was made by Vice-President McGee seconded by Councilwoman Carlson to open public hearing. Roll call vote. All voted aye.

Manager Hoover presented municipal budget, giving an overview on the tax revaluation effect on the Coventry Levy which shows a total property value loss of \$216,343,809 from FY 14 to FY 15. As a result, the tax rate would have to be adjusted to maintain the current rate or to accommodate an increase.

Of the \$1,256,731 increase the town is facing, 96% of that increase represents ARC contributions along with added debt requirements of \$236,769. Increases in municipal and estimated police salary of \$51,560 represents the remaining 4% of the budget. The major budget items driving the tax increase are mandates from State of RI, requiring that unfunded pension liabilities, both police and non-uniformed, must increase the ARC on a yearly basis.

In addition to the municipal request, the school is requesting \$1,582,077 and the total request of would yield a tax increase of 4.41%, exceeding the cap per Senate Bill 3050. I have proposed level funding the schools.

Our current levy is \$64,549,067; the town's proposed increase is \$1,263,046, which gives a proposed levy of \$65,812,113 at a 99.5% collection rate. Impacts on the tax rate would be 1.96%, maintaining a \$500 motor vehicle exemption. For example, residential rate would go from \$18.66 in FY 14 to \$20.38 in RFY 15. (See power point presentation)

Although Manager Hoover did not recommend any capital program for this year, he showed a listing of what each department needs, with department totals of \$14,714,375. A major portion of this figure (\$12 million) being for a direly needed new police station.

As requested by the Town Council, Manager Hoover prepared a picture of what a 0% tax increase would look like for the town, necessitating a reduction of \$1,207,905. He explained the impact of a 0% tax increase, including:

- No Sunday hours at Library
- Eliminate one-third of IT staff, which would create a slow down in network development and service to various departments
- Eliminate one/fifth of the Tax Assessor staff, which would slow processing tax appeals and citizen inquiries
- Eliminate one of seven parks maintenance personnel, putting a burden on sports leagues and creating safety issues
- Eliminate all non-self-supporting Parks and Recreation programs, such as student camps, summer programs; close the teen center and the park security program
- Elimination of contractual Town Solicitor and hire internally, which could impact litigation issues with a less experienced attorney
- Eliminate one of three social workers in the Department of Human Services, where each already has a case load of twenty-five
- Eliminate one of four individuals in the Town Clerks' office and counter activity, public inquiries, land evidence functions would be affected
- Eliminate one of four individuals in the Planning Department, a person who administers CDBG, securing federal and state grants, an Economic Development program, and provides support of boards and commissions
- Eliminate five and one half positions in DPW, which would affect safety and welfare, things that are taken for granted such as street repair, street sweeping, striping and drainage repairs

- Eliminate Saturday hours of the DPW transfer station, effecting bulk pickup and illegal dumping
- Reduce tree trimming and removal, increasing safety hazards
- Drastically reduce yard waste collection, may require more private collection by residents
- Eliminate one of two police BCI detective positions, which is high priority
- Eliminate the purchase of a police cruiser

He also noted lost tax revenues from the tax freeze and income exemptions for the elderly and disabled. Originally that ordinance was put in place to keep elderly people in their homes with the intent that it would be revisited with regard to income based exemptions, but that was not done. Currently there are 2348 eligible taxpayers receiving the tax freeze, yet many have sufficient means to pay their taxes. The town is proposing to look at this as one of our alternatives. This particular program does not consider income at all for the freeze. He explained how this program works, but anybody of lower income would basically get an exemption on their taxes. The town could work with the Department of Human Services to come up with income guidelines and eligibility.

Councilwoman Carlson asked for the status on the dog park development in the requested capital budget. Manager Hoover stated that the majority of the Council voted to move forward and take bids and pursue estimates, but any contract to accomplish the work would have to come back to Town Council. This is a CIP proposal which I did not recommend at this time. Vice-President McGee commented that there has not been a vote to give financial assistance at this time, just to give land for their use. Recreation Director Lefebvre added that this is just a proposal at this time, like any other capital item. We are just developing estimates.

Councilwoman Carlson also asked about wind turbines. Mr. Lefebvre indicated that these are small devices, where they might have been a way to look to the future for electricity expenses in the park. Manager Hoover added that funding has not been recommended, but these are small, rooftop turbines.

Mrs. Carlson asked about charging a higher fee rather than eliminate non-self supporting parks and recreation programs. Manager Hoover stated that would be an alternative, but the fees are relatively high now. Director Lefebvre agreed and said that he doesn't think higher fees would be accepted.

Mrs. Carlson also feels that rather than eliminate the transfer station on Saturdays, that a day during the week should be looked at instead. DPW Director McGee replied that we can't cut during the week because we provide sanitation pickup during the week and need to have the transfer station open.

Vice-President McGee realizes that there are people who really need the elderly and disabled exemption. But if you make substantial money, then you don't need it. Is there any way you can find out how many taxpayers this would involve. Manager Hoover believes we have the data to be able to make a recommendation. In the end it would be up to council to decide what the cut-off point would be. President Cote asked that information be compiled and sent to Town Council, then we'll see if members want to discuss it.

Councilwoman Carlson asked about lost revenue from the \$300,000 loan to Central Coventry and when it will be repaid. Manager Hoover said there was a recent filing by the receiver to pay back some debts. Of those recommendations not one was to pay back that \$300,000. We asked Solicitor Tobin to file a motion to object to that because the Judge had previously ruled we would have priority status. The General Assembly recently passed legislation to stop liquidation, imposing the Fiscal Stability Act. Solicitor Tobin indicated that this matter has been continued to May 1.

## SCHOOL

Dr. Almeida shared the School Committee's recommended budget. He presented a budget with a \$1.5 million recommended increase. Manager Hoover has not included the schools in his recommended budget and I am asking you consider making an allocation for the schools.

There are approximately 5000 students and Coventry spends less than the state average per student. Special education is also not spending the average. We are at the bottom third in the state per pupil spending. Coventry is also below the state median in SAT scores.

We also spend less than other districts with significant differences in instructional

support. Over the last 5 or 6 years our federal revenue has decreased along with RI state aid. Municipal support has increased only 1.4% for operations over the last six years. The school department has made great efforts not only to reduce but to absorb over the past five years or so. (See more detail on power point presentation). The budget is showing a \$2.2 million increase with a \$20,000 revenue source and a state aid increase of \$637,153, (funding formula) leaving a \$ 1.5 million request.

There have been unanticipated expenditures, out of district tuition and certified pension increases from 14.85% to 16.01% percent and we did not expect that to happen. The major portion, \$1.2 or \$1.3 million, is related to out of district tuition and pensions. Statewide transportation has increased significantly. Today we received additional information that our state grants will be reduced by \$80,000, which is not even included in this presentation.

Listed are some types of things that could be considered to be cut, and they are serious and devastating. These are \$1.582 million of cuts in no particular order:

- Middle school athletics at \$44,000
- Jr. Varsity Athletics at CHS at \$50,000
- Various elementary school clubs at \$25,000
- Clubs at middle school - \$15,000
- Clubs at high school \$40,000
- Textbook line eliminated - \$75,000
- Administrator at \$120,000
- Math interventionists at \$300,000
- Custodians at \$100,000
- Behavior specialists at \$300,000
- Professional Development Coordinators at \$225,000
- Clerk at \$60,000
- Reading Teacher \$100,000
- Other staff - \$100,000

With some of these cuts we would not be able to maintain the level of success moving forward and some would very likely violate the basic education plan. Coventry is an underfunded district and a decision to not fund the School Committee's budget request will result in deficit spending beginning July 1, 2014. I am requesting \$1,582,077 and ask that the Town Council consider our budget requests. Dr. Almeida noted that Coventry is ranked 32 out of 36 for per pupil spending in Rhode Island.

Vice-President McGee said that the schools are asking us to raise taxes approximately \$300 - \$500 per household. The town just cannot afford this. You can raise this money by teachers and administrators taking a cut in salary. The last seven or eight administrations did not raise taxes. That is not always a good thing. Former Town Councils did not pay their obligation to pension reform. That was a great break for the taxpayers, but it has all caught up to us now. We need everybody to get together on this. This is not personal, but the town cannot afford it.

Superintendent Almeida indicated that we are a district that does not have all day Kindergarten, and you may see property values drop for that reason. Councilwoman Carlson disagreed that all day K would result in property value drops.

Council member Florio is liaison to JROTC, and feels that it is a great program, leading to a lot of career tracks and opportunities. Parents are in the process of raising funds so that the kids can continue in this program. I would like to ask the Town Council to appropriate \$100,000 toward JROTC. President Cote indicated that he cannot answer that question tonight, but it is a worthwhile program and wouldn't have a problem with that request.

Vice-President McGee also agrees that it is a great program. He is a graduate of ROTC himself and it would be a sin to lose it; it is a worthwhile program.

Mr. Florio added that these kids have the opportunity to go to an aviation program in Warwick and is concerned that if we lose those kids, we will lose a lot of money.

Councilwoman Carlson questioned out of district tuition and why 2014-2015 is less than the year before. Ms. Pelletier said last year those were estimates. FY 14 is an actual and FY 15 is a projection of where we are now. At this point FY 15 is an estimate.

Manager Hoover added that although he answered the Council's question as to what a

0% tax increase would look like, he does not recommend it; he does recommend a 1.96% tax increase. What is driving this budget most is pensions. We have entered into a modest contract with AFSCME and over a three year period they will be paying more toward their pension obligations than getting pay raises and the town will come out ahead on this. We have asked for the same type of concessions from IBPO, have had a long arbitration and are expecting an answer any day. That decision will impact this budget one way or the other.

President Cote remarked that he is sure everyone would like to see a zero percent tax increase, including himself, but sometimes it is a necessary evil.

### Public Comment

Kelly Erinakes, CTA President, wanted to make it clear that per pupil expenditure includes salaries and supplies, and it is all broken down by pupil. Coventry is well below the state average. Towns and cities go to union employees and ask them to give more and more. Teachers gave back a 3% raise to avoid closing Oak Haven School and it closed anyway. You are well aware that in the last contract round we lost money, you want to save ROTC, but have included no money for that in the budget.

Potential school cuts include reading and math interventionists; you propose to cut a dog park on the town side. When is this going to be about the kids? You have proposed an increase of \$1.2 million with nothing going to the schools. The schools are facing cuts of \$1.5 million, and I understand the town needs to pay their pension obligations, but so does the school. I am asking you to fund the school budget and let the taxpayers decide.

President Cote commented that the town's capital projects were not appropriated, it was just a wish list and is not being funded, and the dog park was on that list.

Bob Giampietro, Sunapee Court, spoke in favor of not cutting sports programs, especially Junior Varsity, as they feed the Varsity sports program.

J. Michael Downey, AFSCME representative, indicated that AFSCME has done as much as we can, they have stepped up to the table, and these people can't lose their jobs. We have given all we can give. You need to find a way to balance this budget but not on the backs of the workers of the town.

Sandy Clunan, 37 Enzo Drive, a teacher in Coventry, has seen several schools close in her 22 year teaching career. Why haven't we talked about NECAP tonight as much as ROTC? We have people who work very hard to take care of the kids who live in this town. You are facing potential cuts of math interventionists when actually you need more interventionists than Dr. Almeida is requesting.

Lisa Finneran, 4717 Flat River Road, president of the dog park association, commented that although it is not approved by council yet, they did vote to pay for a dog park fence. Manager Hoover responded that a vote was taken in October to move forward. We have yet to take bids, and then those results will have to go back to Council for approval. Ms. Finneran remarked that the association will maintain the park, has found a landscaper and has been approved for liability insurance.

Becky Hames, 3 Peninsula Court, stated that if this is really about the children, then we need to use that \$1.2 million increase for the schools and our children.

Tammy Duxbury, 2 Orchid Trail, asked Dr. Almeida about inventory control with regard to the purchase of chromebooks and whether the students will use them over the summer break. He responded that ID numbers will be in place tying the chromebook to the student information system. We also have an insurance program. A final decision has not been made yet on how this will be controlled if a student leaves the district over the summer.

Ms. Duxbury questioned the \$100,000 budget for the School Committee and asked what that includes. Finance Director Pelletier indicated that the largest cost is that of liability insurance at \$55,000; also there is a stipend amount of \$18,250; travel at \$5,000; dues at \$13,500, support staff at \$6,500 and supplies at \$3,200.

Ms. Duxbury questioned whether the School Committee feels that they have to travel to a conference for professional development or can they accomplish that within the State of Rhode Island. Is it not as effective to stay local rather than use hotels and air fare? In her own profession, Ms. Duxbury is urged to avoid travel and do p.d. in-house whenever possible. School Committee Chairwoman Patenaude responded that when they travel and return, they do believe that their collaboration with other School Committee members around the country

makes it a worthwhile trip, as they learn interesting things that can be brought back and they learn and see what other School Committees are doing. The last conference I attended I accomplished 18+ hours of professional development on a Saturday and a Sunday. I think this is very valuable. In addition, as Ms. Patenaude is President of the RI Association of School Committees, her professional development has been paid by the association, not by Coventry Schools.

Ms. Duxbury asked how many lawsuits the town and school are engaged in; Solicitor Tobin replied that there are 48 on the town side, and that does not include arbitrations or grievances. Dr. Almeida stated there is one pending on the school side.

When asked how much the schools saved by using an in-house attorney, Ms. Pelletier responded with what was spent in 2010/11 - \$286,500; in 2011/12 - \$224,000; in 2012/13 - \$397,000 (the biggest piece of this is just under \$350,000 due to a settlement); 2013/14 - \$100,000 in-house and in addition this attorney is also the human resource director.

Ms. Duxbury addressed elimination of Saturday hours at the transfer station and suggested an alternative should be considered.

She asked Dr. Almeida about costs per pupil and the trend in school population over the last five years. He responded that there has been a decline in enrollment and it has been pretty flat for the last five years. We are 4,976 students at this point, but that doesn't really have any impact on cost per pupil.

Ms. Duxbury indicated that she is trying to understand if we are funding the school at the same amount of money with a lesser amount of students and how you arrive at that number. Finally, she believes that ROTC is a worthwhile program, should not be cut. If everybody in administration did some cutting or didn't take a raise, I think that you could give that \$167,000 to ROTC.

James Pierson, 8 Nichole Lane, asked if the money that was spent by the School Committee to go to New Orleans could have been done at a lesser cost, and the money saved been given to ROTC? I think the answer is yes. He also asked if Ms. Patenaude attended Stand UP for Public Schools, which campaign is a political activist effort, and whether she attended on taxpayer dollars. Ms. Patenaude responded that she did not attend.

Alan Lawrence, 84 Blade St., Warwick, union steward for Department of Public Works and the Parks and Recreation Department, understands that this is only a proposal at this point, but DPW will have an issue with losing 7 workers. It would be a detriment to lose two sanitation collectors, they are out there in all kinds of weather, including terrible heat and would put a major strain on them. We are in dire need of mechanics, they work hard and have to lay in two inches of water sometimes in the garage to fix the trucks. This was a rough winter, some guys were here up to 34-40 hours without going home. If a zero percent increase passes, the town as a whole will feel this impact. I know times are tough, but we can't continue to go on with 0% increase. In addition, if these people lose their jobs, how will they provide for their families?

It would be wrong to remove any people in the Town Hall, or the Special Duties Clerk in DPW. They are very busy at the counters and taxpayers are always looking for a lot of information.

Mark Barter, 4 Sonja Drive, commented on the proposed budget, that these problems have been made by the adults, we all need to take some responsibility. To cut kids programs is not the answer. Working this out and finding a way to make this work is a necessity. The kids are innocent victims. Kids are motivated by many of these programs that you propose to cut. We need to keep them outside and active, not inside on video games.

Joe Stalaboin, 13 Cote Court, remarked that there is no more federal funding for ROTC and we need just over \$200,000 to keep this program funded. We basically need 13 out of district students in order to fund it.

Kaitlin Stalaboin, in her 3<sup>rd</sup> year of ROTC, notes the pressure on the ROTC program to recruit 13 cadets to keep the program going. This is a problem that was created by adults and needs to be fixed by the adults.

A resident of 523 Washington Street spoke of the help she received from town programs, particularly Department of Human Services, when she was homeless. She has utilized the DHS, recreation department, teen center, relied on these as a single parent while

she was able to go to school and finish her education. She supports the ROTC program, her son is in the program.

Dotty Jackvony, 552 Carr's Trail, realizes the position the town and school are in with the budget and hopes everyone can meet in the middle. She told Dr. Almeida that she has talked to RIDE and they indicated that every cadet in the ROTC program has the opportunity to attend an aviation program located in another town. If ROTC is not saved, we were told that the cadets could attend the aviation program and Coventry would be required to pay their tuition. Dr. Almeida will call and verify.

Gary Beaudoin, 45 Fairview Avenue, feels it would be a sin to cut on the town side. A Town Council a few years back kept 0%, 0%, 0%. To present another 0% budget would be going backwards. As far as the School Department, as a former teacher I am familiar with the budget. My point is that this can't be the answer every time there is a budget problem. On the school side I would like to see you adopt a budget with no cuts. Don't do what other councils did, you have done a wonderful job, adopt a budget with no giant cuts.

Jason Martin, Sisson Road, Director of Physical Plant at School Department, Director of Technology, supports no custodian cuts. These are hardworking people. In addition we need to support JV sports and any programs that students need to be successful.

Kim Mathis, 15 Catalpa Way, can't take any more of a tax increase. I have three kids. I work for Blue Cross and have not got a raise in 6 years. I have a \$6,000 deductible on my Blue Cross and pay \$12,000 a year. My husband works two jobs, I work full time, I support my mother. I would probably have to give up my house if taxes increase. My income has decreased. My needs come first, wants come later.

Ralph Izzi, 34 Fieldstone Drive, is a lacrosse coach and urged Council to find a way to make this work. You cannot take this away. Lacrosse has been self-funded for several years. We need to think creatively and outside the box. It's about finding ways to make it work. I know you always have the best interest of the kids in mind.

Louis Diamonte, President Local 3484, in the 27 years I have been here, we have taken numerous cuts to keep our members employed. In the last two contracts I have lost at least \$10,000 and just gave back to the town again. Our local gave up to keep our employees working and just can't give any more. I understand times are tough, we are doing the best we can, but can't give any more. A 0% budget would be devastating to DPW and I am asking you to reconsider putting the 1.96% back.

Ron Gizzarelli, 55 Harrington Road, believes employees have sacrificed enough. He suggested suspending benefits where you can regarding the school department, but we need no tax increase because the employees can't sacrifice any more. 62% of the total town budget is school. There's got to be a way to live within this budget.

Charlene Miller, 9 White Oak Ct, is happy with the schools and teachers. Don't want to raise taxes, but if it means my child will get what he needs, then I will pay the taxes.

Cindy Fagan, Phillips Hill Road, defended the Planning Board regarding elimination of the CDBG Coordinator, as she brings in a lot of money, works for the elderly, provides low income housing, assists with loans for septic systems, obtains grants and helps people. Don't cut that department.

Cheryl Kane, 185 Read School House Road, is very disappointed not more people are here. I have worked for the town for 25 years, and am in Local 3484. If I were single, I couldn't afford to live on my own. I do not have a car loan, do not get my fingernails done and buy my clothes on sale. Town employees have even purchased shirts and added a town logo because they cannot afford to buy clothes due to budget cuts. We have individuals working for the town who have lost \$800 a month in their paychecks. My husband is out of work. I try to keep things together and it is very difficult. I have lived here for 50 years and these problems have not arisen overnight. The actuaries have told the finance directors to fund the pensions and the Councils have just disregarded it and let someone else take care of it.

When I started working for the town 25 years ago, I knew I was making less money than I could have, but it was good for my family to be in town. I know times are rough, but we have already given back many times. Take it from someone else or somewhere else. Think of us when funding the budget, we need to fund the budget or we might find ourselves asking for help from Pat Shurtleff too when we are homeless.

A motion was made by Councilwoman Carlson seconded by Vice-President McGee to adjourn. All voted Aye.

---

Town Clerk