

Town Council Meeting
April 28, 2016
Budget Hearings

TOWN COUNCIL MEETING – 6:00 p.m.

Present: Councilwoman Duxbury, Councilman McGee, Vice President Carlson, Councilman Laboissonniere, Town Solicitor Gorham, Town Manager Waters. President Shibley was absent.

School Committee members David Florio, James Pearson, Donna Kalunian, Chairwoman Katherine Patenaude, Superintendent Michael Convery, Asst. Superintendent Craig Levis. School Committee member Ann Dickson was absent.

Pledge of Allegiance

Manager Waters presented his recommended FY 16-17 budget. Recommendations include fully funding the school's request of \$1.2 million; the police contract (IBPO) \$688,000; an additional \$200,000 in debt service; an increase in the police pension annual required contribution of \$90,000; salary for the new associate planner including fringe benefits of \$68,000. He is also recommending that the use of the fund balance (\$293,000) is appropriated as 75% of the surplus funding capital purchases and 25% continuing to fund the town's pension liability.

He went on to explain the next several slides, the first slide showing four different options that describe impacts on the tax levy and tax rate. The next slide, using a dollar bill as an example, shows the distribution of the tax levy as broken down per the manager's proposed budget for FY 17, with 62.9 cents on each dollar going to school department, 14.8 cents to police, 6.4 cents to DPW, etc.

The next slide shows the effect on real estate values (FY 16 v FY 17) with a 3.15% tax increase. An example used is a home with a real estate value of \$150,000, resulting with a slight tax increase of \$98.25. This rate is tentative and subject to change and we do predict that the 3.15% will decrease when the FTM takes place.

Mr. Waters went on to advise that the most costly new major items for FY 17 includes all day Kindergarten, school contractual obligations, police contract updates and new debt service, all items totalling \$2,655,156. Next are capital requests with DPW asking for \$422,090; the Police Department \$14,084,000, most of which is for a new police station; Parks and Recreation at \$174,000; Human Services \$410,000 for a building addition with all capital requests totaling \$15,090,090.

Manager Waters prioritized six items for the capital budget as follows: remote controlled gate for Parks and Recreation \$25,000; fuel dispenser for DPW at \$59,960; restroom construction at the police department \$50,000; detective/admin vehicles at the police department \$34,000; fleet management solutions for DPW \$30,000 and Parks and Recreation roof replacement Foster Park \$10,000.

School Department

Superintendent Convery summarized the school department's recommended budget of expenses and revenue. He talked about the FY 16 current year budget of \$66,050,456, projected figures for next school year of \$68,442,965, a net increase of \$2,392,509. However, the entire amount is not being requested from the town.

There are three main areas of increase: all day kindergarten with costs of \$1,267,661 that are entirely personnel based and is an annual cost. We are also looking at funding the third year of teachers contract and SRP contract, which together add up to \$658,483. Anticipated inflationary costs such as health care and pension, an out of district tuition increase of \$88,000 along with other cost increases of \$62,600 all comes to total cost increase of \$2,392,500 for next year (this includes a slight decrease of two staff members at the middle school of \$150,000).

Regarding revenue, we expect \$844,000 in an anticipated state aid increase under the funding formula, which continues through next year and an additional \$481,000 for all day K students. This is a total of \$1,325,788 and would continue each year. We also have realized an increase in Medicaid billing this year of \$25,000 more than last year, a tuition decrease of \$110,000 exclusively from our career and tech center. We had 39 out of district students last year and this year we have 31. That number usually fluctuates, so it is possible that it will go up. There is a slight surplus in the fund balance of \$49,000, so our total revenue increase is \$1,190,914 more than last year. The total increase in anticipated expenditures minus the increase in revenue gives us a request to the town of \$1,201,586.

A distribution graph of this year's budget shows salary/benefits as the greatest portion. The school however, is the largest department in the town serving just under 5,000 students and approximately 3400 families. We employ 661 people and have approximately 175 subs and non-union personnel that are used throughout the year for short term projects and tasks. Per pupil spending is just under \$14,000, with 31 districts spending more than Coventry. In the past 16 years students living below the poverty level has nearly doubled in Coventry. In 2000 the poverty level was just under 6%, in 2013 it was 11.6%. Our total enrollment is expected to decrease and we expect by 2024 we will have 4% less than what we currently have. In addition, the student population qualifying for our reduced lunch program is increasing.

The FY 17 proposed budget shows a breakdown of the requested \$1.2 million as follows: The staff will double with 8.5 added teachers, 3.5 itinerant teachers, 7 new teacher assistants and 5 supervisory assistants. One staff person is included to continue our JRROTC program. We are still hoping for the Navy to pick us up but that is still to be determined.

As far as all day Kindergarten, we anticipate 340 students, with class sizes at capped at 23. Each elementary school will have full day kindergarten. There will be three in each building except Washington Oak will have four. Each room will have a teacher assistant and an additional supervisory assistant for recess and lunch.

James Lewis, 119 Columbia Avenue, has a child that will go to all day kindergarten this year. He commented that he does not think that the people of Coventry who do not have children, or the elderly, disabled, or those on fixed incomes should have to pay extra taxes to implement all day K in this school year. Manager Waters explained that there is a tax freeze for seniors. No matter whether a family has one child or eighteen children, they still pay the same in taxes.

Joe Fisher, 4 Ivy Drive, stated that his family moved here in August from Warwick specifically for the children to have a better education. Warwick had all day kindergarten and reading specialists and we still paid lower taxes. When we moved to Coventry our taxes doubled. However, I respectfully ask you to adopt this budget so that we can fund our schools and our children can benefit from the quality education that we expect as taxpayers.

Kelly Erinakes 9 Sugar Maple Drive, has been a teacher in Coventry as well as a resident. She doesn't think prior Councils have had the forethought to plan for the future and is thankful that tonight there is forethought and planning, although this doesn't bring anything back that has been lost. It troubles me when I see that we have a lower standing in many categories. We pay \$14,000 per student when the rest of the towns and cities are paying \$16,000 and more. The problem is that we have been level funded for 5-7 years. And now we are looking at all day K and there has been lack of planning for all day K. We closed the middle school, closed Oak Haven, our buildings are in disarray and overcrowded. People used to move into Coventry because it was a wonderful school system. I am asking that you make our schools great again.

Ken Jackson, 2799 Harkney Hill Road, asked Superintendent Convery about administration raises last year. Mr. Convery responded that the \$53,000 that was expended last year is what we expended. Mr. Jackson stated that the money to provide the raises was taken out of kids supplies; \$25,000 was cut from the science packages.

Mr. Jackson made several points:

- He feels that there should be a savings of approximately \$19,141.56 with the new school attorney
- There are too many assistant principals at the Middle School.
- He spoke about the \$104,000 spent on parts to fix chrome books, administration raises and suspects there is up to \$200,000 in padding of the school budget
- Problems in the school budget are due to administration costs, not teachers, especially when you have four or five assistant principals in the high school. He suggested that the school committee look at this budget again, cut down on administration.
- Lastly, Mr. Jackson asked if \$1200 travel money is still being given to administrators. Mr. Convery replied that is a contractual item, not a budget item, and it is only if they go on an approved conference. Not everyone goes every year.

Asst. Superintendent Levis offered to meet with Mr. Jackson to address his questions, as he feels that he has a lot of misinformation.

Judy Liner, 20 Lynn Drive, urges the Town Council to support the school budget. All day K is a necessity, the children deserve a strong foundation in order to be successful in future years.

Heather Tyler, 44 Woodland Ave., asked what happens if all day K is not funded. Mr. Convery replied that if we do not get the funding and do not have all day K, they would lose \$22.6 million aid from the state of RI, over 1/3 of the budget. The School Committee, early on, made the decision that we are going forward with all day K, whether or not we get the funding. If we do not get the funding, we will have to go to a list of cuts, but we will have all day K next school year.

Mary Vandervelde, 7 White Oak Court, has two daughters who graduated from Coventry High School and they received a great education, partly because of the teachers they had. We need to continue to invest in our schools.

Paula Jefford, 175 MacArthur Blvd., moved to Coventry so that her son could get a good education, after having paid for a private school for her child. So far she has watched Coventry get level funded year after year. Test scores are low, but our kindergarteners are only getting a half day program. Our children have been going into first grade with half the education of their peers across the state. I ask that you fund the all day K program.

Gary Beaudoin, 45 Fairview Ave, commended the school committee on the good job they have done and is happy that there will not be level funding this year. He thanked the new town manager for supporting the school budget.

Councilman McGee has been on the Council for five years, and has seen the school hit hard due to pension issues, etc. I think we are on the right track now and he urged Council to support the school budget, as it is presented.

Diane Kowal, 85 East Shore Drive, a school nurse in Coventry, raised the subject of substance abuse and mental health issues in the community and state. We are working collaboratively to overcome some of the societal problems that we have and believes that education is the way that we can work together to solve some of these problems.

Michelle Kowal, 2 Driftwood Drive, had a child start kindergarten this year and was disappointed that he was in a half day program. She is concerned that all day K will not be funded by the taxpayers and is fearful of what the children will be losing out on if cuts have to be made.

Nick Zammarelli, 11 Wesleyan Avenue, credited Coventry High School for giving him his life, after beginning his childhood education as a blind child, eight years old, attending Perkins School for the Blind in Massachusetts. At that time Rhode Island could not provide education to blind and sight impaired children. Nine years later, my mother brought me back home to Coventry, to the Coventry School system. I was put into the mainstream and expected to deal with mainstream curriculum. I graduated in 1986 as a member of the RI and Nat'l honor societies, went to college, became a teacher and in 1998 after graduating, when no one would hire a blind teacher, Coventry gave me my shot. I get to be a part of educating our young people. I urge you to pass this budget.

Michael Bucacci, 146 Poor Farm Road, is a lifelong Coventry resident and has taught in the school system for 17 years. We have been crushed by level funding. I am hoping that with this budget passed that we have the foresight to start implementing some of the programs that were cut. We are still behind the eight ball after years of level funding, but are in a position to make a difference for those students who are coming up.

Councilwoman Duxbury commented on the statistically low percentage nationally of kids who are ready for college. We need to do something with our school systems. This year she sees a different tone in Coventry, a tone of cooperation, and she thanks Superintendent Convery for being key in that change along with our new Town Manager, Graham Waters. She thanked Finance Director Bob Thibeault and Deputy Treasurer Lori Robitaille, who have worked closely with the school department and have put a lot of work into this budget. Mrs. Duxbury supports the proposed school budget.

Councilman Laboissonniere doesn't believe there will be any opposition to moving this school budget to the FTM. Congratulations to Mr. Convery and the School Committee for the tremendous work they did on this budget. One thing that does disturb me is that we have doubled the number of kids that need school meals. It shows that people still suffer financially. Mr. Laboissonniere fully supports the school budget.

Ken Jackson, 2799 Harkney Hill Road, again stated that the \$1.2 million should be reduced. Remember that municipal or school employees who live outside the town don't care what the tax rate is. We are still dealing with the fire tax situation. I think the \$25,000 Parks and Recreation gate is a

nicety. I want all day Kindergarten to happen , it should have happened years ago. But I don't want to see \$1.2 million though. The school has sufficient funds. Administrators are the problem, not teachers. I don't want level funding either, but I think their number could be looked at. I think we are looking at about a 4% raise. People are moving out of town, can't afford it here and there are a lot of empty houses.

Mr. Thibeault said the proposed tax increase of 3.15% is subject to change, as we continue to look at the budget and continue to get updates from the tax assessor.

Vice-President Carlson was pleased with the public hearing this evening and wished to thank everyone for coming, including town staff and school staff.

School Committee Chairwoman Kathy Patenaude feels that the cooperation and collaboration between both sides was great this year. She is grateful that the budget is being put forward as requested and looks forward to the Financial Town Meeting, where she believes the people will accept this budget.

A motion was made by School Committee member Florio seconded by member Kalunian to adjourn school committee meeting. All voted aye.

A motion was made by Councilman Laboissonniere seconded by Councilwoman Duxbury to adjourn council meeting. All voted aye.

Town Clerk