

TOWN COUNCIL MEETING – May 5, 2011
PUBLIC HEARING- SCHOOL BUDGET

Present: Vice-President Kerry McGee, Ted Jendzejec, Raymond Spear, Carl Mattson, Jr.

School Committee: Thomas Hetherman, Katherine Patenaude, Nancy Sprengelmeyer, Judith Liner

Town Manager Thomas Hoover

Town Solicitor Frederick Tobin

Absent: President Gary Cote, School Committeewoman Lianne Russell

PRESENTATION:

School Finance Director Robin Reasor discussed matter pertaining to a resolution in which the School Department would receive \$1.2-million in revenue, not to be included as part of maintenance of effort. A full handout is included in the Town council folder.

The budget presented indicates a 2% increase in salaries for certified staff by contract, projected at \$596,740; a step increase for certified staff projected at \$516,326 and a projected increase of \$44,534 for district staff health care and dental costs, based on new Federal Health Care Reform. The certified staff pension will increase from 11.25% in FY 2011 to 13.23% in FY 2012, projected at an \$827,351.

Cuts required to balance the budget include \$125,000 from Physical Plant supplies; decrease in health insurance premiums from 3% down to 1%, a \$120,000 savings; reduction in district transportation of \$80,000. One additional FTE clerical position at Coventry High School will be eliminated, saving \$65,926. Additional future cuts to FY 11-12 budget requests are possible, but we are awaiting final state aid amounts. Those cuts bring our expenditure request to \$63,571,189 as stated in a resolution passed by the School Department and the Town Council.

Michael Convery, Superintendent of Schools, indicated that projected enrollment is relatively stable.

Councilman Jendzejec questioned the number of FTE's that are non-certified and Ms. Reasor responded that between last fiscal year and this fiscal year there was a total of 10.5 non-certified staff.

Discussion ensued pertaining to a bond for capital improvements. Manager Hoover recommended the school consider a bond for the amount of capital that is needed for roof repair and fire systems.

Councilman Spear suggested that since a bond issue will impact taxes in the community, we need to be cautious and look for the lesser amount to borrow that gets the best job done so that we will be generating the lowest increase in taxes and people would be willing to support it.

Councilman Jendzejec questioned the percentage the state reimburses on a bond. Ms. Reasor responded that percentage is approximately 48% with 4% available through energy efficiency. You could get more than half the money back.

Ms. Reasor indicated that many classified staff are paid through grants outside of the operating budget. Of our 168.33 FTE classifieds, many are paid through federal grants. This year will be stabilization, the next year job funding. When they pay a certified staff out of federal funds, the percentage that we pay for the pensions jumped from 13.23% to 22% last year. So in order to have the most money available to the district, we try to pay for salaries that wouldn't fall within those areas.

School Committee member Judy Liner asked if there was another avenue other than a bond issue for capital improvements, for fear of losing accreditation. Manager Hoover replied that the only other way is to take it from the town side, as we really don't have any other mechanism to do it. Councilman Spear suggested looking for grants for capital projects.

Superintendent Convery replied that Coventry does not fit the credentials for most available grants as we have low poverty and do not fit ethnic qualifications. However, we still look.

PUBLIC COMMENT

When asked about the resolution proposing to fund the schools an additional \$1.2 million and not having that amount count as maintenance of effort, Superintendent Convery explained that the \$1.2 million would be a one-time gift, not a loan, to enable the school to get through the 2011-2012 school year. The commissioner's office previously noted that the resolution needs to be worded differently and he hopes to get a signature from the state allowing us to do this.

Kelly Erinakes, President, Coventry Teacher's Alliance, spoke regarding the resolution and whether the \$1.2 million should count toward maintenance of effort. She is concerned about a deficit for the 2012-2013 school year of possibly up to three million dollars. Changes would be detrimental, you would be closing the only middle school and adding double sessions at the high school, eliminating all non-regulatory teacher assistants, classrooms will be overcrowded, and custodians eliminated. Ask that you reconsider counting this money towards maintenance of effort.

Councilman Jendzejec asked if the School Committee has looked at the possibility of a \$3 million deficit next year. Superintendent Convery replied that has been considered and the School Committee has indicated that they would close the middle school and have double sessions, which still remains an absolute alternative for next year. There will be no after school activities or electives.

Councilman Spear asked if the kinds of wage increases that are part of our budget would continue on, because by increasing wages and benefits you are decreasing educational offerings to kids. In addition, we will not be able to afford it.

Superintendent Convery responded that in order to honor the contract, we would have to severely cut. The bulk of the increase is going to pensions and benefits. We do not control those.

Sandy Clunan, Enzo Drive, is a teacher and does not want to see the closing of the middle school and double sessions at the high school.

School Committeewoman Nancy Sprengelmeyer believes that we need a solution from

the legislators. The taxpayers have to say that they don't want this, they don't want the high school to lose accreditation and she urged citizens to contact their legislators.

Ron Gizzarelli, 50 Harrington Road, remarked that the teachers should be asked to take another hit, go into neutral and come back after the economy turns around.

Marie Duquette of Lowell Street said that year after year programs have taken hits, and it's not acceptable anymore. We could lose accreditation. Behavior specialists and teacher assistants do a good job with the children that have special needs and we can't keep cutting.

Bob Thibeault, Grant Drive, stated RI General Law allows for a municipality to reserve \$500,000 for capital improvements. He suggested fixing the roof in sections; sell a cell tower to fund it. He also recommended a bond issue for capital improvements.

Motion made by Councilman Jendzejec seconded by Ray Spear to adjourn meeting at 7:03 p.m. All voted aye.

Deputy Town Clerk