Town of Waterford

FIFTEEN ROPE FERRY ROAD
WATERFORD, CT 06385-2886

PHONE: 860-442-[illegible]
www.waterfordct.org

Board of Finance
*REVISED*Budget Hearing Minutes

Monday, March 24, 2025
Town Hall Auditorium 7:00 pm

Present: Chairman Glenn Patterson, Bill Sheehan, Michael Rocchetti, Ronald Fedor, Joe Filippetti, Robert Tuneski, Josh Kelly

Elected: First Selectman Robert Brule; Patricia Fedor, Chair Board of Education;

Staff: Thomas Giard, Superintendent of Schools; Joseph Mancini, Director of Finance/Operations Board of Education; Mark Geer, IT Board of Education; Gina Wygonik, Director of Special Services; Rebecca Hall, Admin Assistant Finance Office/BOF Recording Secretary

1. Establishment of a quorum and call to order:

A quorum was established and the Budget Meeting of the Board of Finance was called to order at 6:59pm on March 24, 2025.

2. Public Comment:

Helen Kwasniewski, Quaker Hill resident spoke to the Board of Finance (BOF) regarding the Board of Education's proposed budget for FY25/26. She began by saying residents are tired of paying high taxes in Waterford and does not feel that she gets what she pays for. She stated that she never had children, therefore, people with no kids should receive a tax refund. Ms. Kwasniewski said the Town should fire the Waterford Public Schools Building and Grounds Director for not taking care of the tennis and basketball courts. Salaries [for non-resident Town employees] should be reduced if you don't live in Waterford. She reminded the BOF members that they are spending residents' money. A reevaluation is coming next year and she is not happy about it. She told the BOF to "stop voting yes to every budget request". Ms. Kwasniewski said "Please be a hero and DO NOT vote yes to the Board of Education Budget."

3. Board of Education Budget:

Board of Education (BOE) Chair, Pat Fedor, began opening remarks about the BOE budget by informing the BOF that the BOE Finance Committee met three (3) times before presenting this budget. Two (2) BOE workshops were held to discuss the budget with the public. Tom Giard, Superintendent of Waterford Public Schools (WPS), acknowledged the BOE for their development of this year's budget as well as Joseph Mancini, Finance/Operations Director, WPS. Mr. Giard read through the slideshow presentation and highlighted the categories of the FY25-26 Budget request. 99% of the budget increase is for salary increases, health insurance, and Chromebook replacements. Due to a new health care carrier proposal, the BOE presented a reduction of $997,000 reducing their overall budget increase for FY25/26 to 4.78% as opposed to the original 6.51%.

Bill Sheehan asked how the teachers handle the non-English speaking students in the classroom. The Superintendent advised that the teachers utilize English immersion as well as visual aids in the classroom. There is multilingual support staff who push in to classes as well as pull students out of class to reinforce language learning. The support staff assist the teachers with providing ways to teach their English Language Learners (ELL). Mr. Sheehan asked if the assumptions on p. 4 are still valid or have they changed now? Mr. Giard said they are still valid but with some uncertainty. Mr. Sheehan pointed out that there is a decrease in ECS funding – does the BOE budget reflect that? Mr. Giard said two (2) grants make up the ECS funding – one grant goes directly to the General Fund in the Town and the other goes directly to BOE for Special Education. Mr. Sheehan advised the BOE to present their two (2) upcoming Capital Projects to the BOF in the April meeting to be sure they are funded and projects start as soon as possible.

Robert Tuneski commented that he would like to see more qualitative/quantitative data presented by the BOE in their budget request to the Town. He is interested in seeing the link of the goals set by the BOE and how they are – or if they are – achieving their goals each year. Mr. Tuneski pointed out that the Short Story data provided in the slideshow is nice but does not use comparisons to the district, state, or national data so it is hard to gauge as an on-looker how successful our education system in Waterford actually is. Mr. Tuneski would like to see a clearer ROI (return on investment) for tax payers. The Superintendent advised that the BOF could find more information on the WPS website as some of this data was presented at a BOE meeting in November.

Michael Rocchetti followed up on the ELL programs in the elementary schools with questioning how the teachers are coping with multiple languages in the classroom and wondered if this is creating stressful classroom settings. Mr. Giard said it is challenging for the classroom teachers but much support is given to the teachers to assist with instruction.

Mr. Rocchetti asked if Mr. Giard believed that the rate of budget increase every year is sustainable for the Town. Mr. Rocchetti added that taking a different approach to spending may be an option. Is it possible that some duties held by BOE should become Town duties potentially reducing costs? Mr. Giard said the BOE has reduced many lines to assist in controlling spending.

Josh Kelly noted that he feels that the increase asked by the BOE is within the lines of inflation and that the BOE has been below the inflation rate with their budget increase for the past several years. He questioned the BOE about the unfunded mandates and he would like further explanation of what the State requires of BOE. Robert Tuneski asked what the consequences are if the BOE didn't follow the unfunded mandates set by the State. Is there another pathway? Mr. Giard said he was not sure of the consequences and most districts use a form of "poetic license" in implementing these mandates.

Instructional Salaries: Bill Sheehan began discussion stating that there is an overall 4.93% increase but decrease of English teacher at the High School. Mr. Sheehan pointed out the reduction in the Special Education (SPED) Teacher Resource line of $78,000. Also a 0.5 decrease of an Information/Communication staff at the middle school and high school. Finally, Mr. Sheehan asked what replaced the TAG (Talented and Gifted program) in the elementary schools. Mr. Giard said that enrollment is down and a resignation in the English Department is coming up. Due to both factors, the BOE opted to cut that position. The SPED line reduction is due to the expiration of IDEA funding. Mr. Giard said in FY22/23 BOE added a computer teacher so the 0.5 staffing was no longer necessary. As for the TAG program, money has been allotted to the enrichment of after school programs and TAG has been eliminated.

Ron Fedor inquired about the change in the math teacher at Great Neck Elementary as to which the Superintendent said it was merely a realignment of the category for math intervention. Mr. Fedor asked about the increase in the Social Worker line and Mr. Giard responded saying IDEA funding ran out so there is an increase in that line but no additional staff added.

Robert Tuneski asked about pages 15-17 in the BOE Budget. He questioned why Unified Arts, Career/Technical, and Special Education have additional staffing budgeted while core classes like math have reduced staffing. If the reduction is staffing is due to reduced enrollment as Mr. Giard responded, then why wouldn't all classes have a reduction in staff? Mr. Giard added that the non-core subjects are added to create time for contract-based prep time for teachers as well as adding a well-rounded curriculum for students.

Ron Fedor pointed out that the SPED staff members have increased from 47.45 to 57 in a 13-year span. Is cost of support greater? The Superintendent replied that it's not necessarily the number of students that dictate the number of staff, it is what the student require for assistance. In addition, the BOE has built in-district support to educate in our own schools. Out placement for SPED students could cost around $150,000/student. Also, Pre-K schooling has been added to our elementary schools.

Support Services: Bill Sheehan noted he was happy to see the increase of paraprofessionals. Mr. Sheehan asked what the monitors do at the schools, why a computer tech was dropped, and who is in charge of the auditorium. The Superintendent stated the monitors offer an additional level of security in the cafeterias and hallways, Mrs. Fedor added that more information was needed before properly moving forward to replace the computer tech, and finally, the IT department manages the auditorium.

Contracted Services: Josh Kelly asked about the decrease in Health Service – Nursing line to which the Superintendent stated the number of students requiring a one-to-one/nurses aid decreased. Bill Sheehan asked what contracts are coming up next fiscal year. The answer was Custodial Services, Food Services and Nursing.

Transportation: Ron Fedor inquired about options for running buses/routes based on the number of student actually using buses for transportation. Mr. Giard responded that minimizing the number of buses would be mean longer bus routes and possible changes in school start times. The BOE pays the new bus company per day rather than per hour as in the past which is a cost savings.

Insurance: Michael Rocchetti opened discussion regarding the health insurance reduction of $997,000 put forth by the BOE in their presentation. Mr. Mancini indicated there is a total possible savings of $1.3 million should the BOE be accepted in the State's health care program. While the BOF would like to see all of the savings applied to the BOE budget, the BOE will be submitting a reduction of $997,000 due to climbing costs of Stop Loss Insurance and the possibility of other unforeseen circumstances arising. Mr. Rocchetti pointed out that should the BOE "keep" the remaining savings, the Town cannot have access to it per State laws restricting municipalities from cutting Education budgets once approved year to year. Josh Kelly asked why Fire/Property Insurance shows an increase of $50,000. Mr. Mancini stated the renewal came with an increase. Mr. Kelly hopes for a rebid in the future.

Tuition: Bill Sheehan pointed out that the headings were improperly labeled in the Tuition spreadsheet of budget. The year in the Proposed budget column should read 2025-26. Then Mr. Sheehan asked why there was an increase in SPED – Public by $77,000. The Superintendent said it was rate driven – the cost is for students who have been out-placed in highly specialize SPED programs.

Other Purchased Services: Bill Sheehan advised the BOE that the Town Finance Director, Kimberly Allen, shows the line Service Contr-Custodial at $78,000 while the BOE shows $77,759 requested. This needs to be rectified.

Instructional Supplies: Bill Sheehan asked why the rental cost for SPED and maintenance equipment decreased by $2,500. Mr. Giard and Mr. Mancini were unsure. Mr. Sheehan asked about the $4,000 increase in testing supplies to which the Superintendent responded that there is required multi-year testing for TAG.

Operation & Maintenance of Buildings: Mr. Sheehan asked if there are plans to install a generator at Clark Lane Middle School as it is the only school in town without one. Joseph Mancini answered no. Mr. Giard added that there is a battery backup system to lighting only. It was pointed out by the BOF that there is a large increase in water usage at the high and the BOE representatives had no feedback. Robert Tuneski asked about the cost of outside engineers for projects. He also asked if there is a preventative plan in place for maintenance of buildings and grounds. Mr. Giard stated there is a very tight schedule for maintenance and the BOE has a very robust preventative plan in place. Ron Fedor asked if all of the generators at other schools work. The Superintendent answered "most of the time" and Mr. Mancini added that there are constant problems with the generators.

Equipment: Josh Kelly inquired about the Technology Plan noting the budget for this line used to be about $74,000 and this budget is showing ~$300,000. He asked if the BOE could explain the plan to the BOF. Mark Geer, IT Director BOE, explained that the $300,000, for the most part, is for the upkeep and replacement of Chromebooks for every student in town. The life expectancy of each Chromebook is about four (4) years. Some of the cost for these computers was in the Capital line but has been moved to a different line due to the annual cost plan. Bill Sheehan questioned why the funding for Pre K was cut to zero. The Superintendent said the BOE received grant funding.

Motion by Josh Kelly and **seconded** by Joseph Filippetti to move forward the FY25/26 Board of Education budget request in the amount of **$61,363,308 - $997,000 = $60,366,308,** designated by the Series Subtotals above.

Vote: 6-0-1 **Abstained: Ron Fedor** **Motion: Passed**

4. Adjournment:

Motion by Bill Sheehan and **seconded** by Joseph Filippetti to adjourn the Budget Meeting of the Board of Finance at 9:23pm.

Vote: 7-0-0 **Motion: Passed**

Respectively Submitted,

Bill Sheehan, Clerk

Rebecca L. Hall, Secretary