

**LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL and BOARD OF FINANCE JOINT SPECIAL MEETING
COUNCIL CHAMBERS, 3 PRIMROSE STREET, NEWTOWN, CT
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29, 2024**

MINUTES

PRESENT: (LC) Jordana Bloom, Laura Miller, Keith Alexander, Tom Long, Ben Ruben, Derek Pisani, Jennifer Nicoletti, John Zachos, Chris Gardner, Heather Dean, Eric Paradis, Jill Soderholm (BOF) Jim Gaston, Steve Goodridge, Bryce Chinault, Barney Molloy, John Fletcher, Janette Lamoureaux
ALSO PRESENT: First Selectman Jeff Capeci, Finance Director Glenys Salas, Superintendent Chris Melillo, Assistant Superintendent Anne Uberti, BOE Chair Alison Plante, Director of Business and Finance Tanja Gouveia and 25 members of the public

CALL TO ORDER: K. Alexander called the meeting to order with the Pledge of Allegiance at 7:30pm.

VOTER COMMENT:

Aha Jerfy – He is a student at Newtown High School and in support of the BOE Budget. He understands that there is an increase in the overall budget and feels strongly that this is an investment into their future. He is young and motivated and plans to give back to our community.

Trent Harrison, 59 Platts Hill Road – He is a resident of town, product of Newtown schools and a Newtown teacher. He said that he felt the BOE put together a good budget. Newtown pays teachers less than surrounding towns.

Melissa Beylouni, 15 Equestrian Ridge Road – Speaking tonight as a co-president of Newtown High School PTSA and as a taxpayer for over 20 years. The High school will be receiving the largest special education group of students as 9th graders next year. This requires staffing and funding to accommodate those students. Over the years as a PTA president she has been tasked with funding items such as playground equipment, Chromebook, sound system in the auditorium at Head of Meadow and more. This is due to the fact that our schools simply do not have unlimited funding. The PTA's are tasked with rallying the parents to get out and vote. Having the vote the week after spring break made it difficult.

Rachel Mealy, 63 Castle Hill Road – She has 3 children in the school system and also a CEO of an Inc 5000 company. She is here today in support of the budget. Reducing the BOE budget budget will have a negative effect on our children.

Jeff Mealy, 63 Castle Hill Road – He has been in Newtown for 3 years. He believes that people are moving to town and thinks our school age population is going to be growing. You need to shore up the budget now or it will be more expensive later.

Madhuri Jerfy, 59 Castle Hill Road – The teachers don't just teach, they support even with career development like letters of recommendations and getting them ready tomorrow. We are taking away from our children, it is an investment of tomorrow. Before making cuts think about what we will be taking away from the youth of tomorrow.

NEW BUSINESS

2024-2025 BOE Budget – Superintendent Chris Melillo, Assistant Superintendent Anne Uberti, BOE Chair Alison Plante, and Director of Business and Finance Tanja Gouveia came to the table to answer questions.

The voters turned down the budget so they need to make an adjustment. Superintendent Melillo explained that they are trying to make decisions that will keep the impact from the classroom. They are looking to cut around the edges if possible and keep the instructional core as sound as they can. They purchased the K-5 reading program with a 5 year license that includes professional development last year. They have in this budget to purchase 6-8 this year for \$282,000. They are looking at leveraging the surplus from this year for the 6-8 reading program and for some of the textbooks in the budget. The BCBA that they were going to add next year to work on behaviors would be a cut because that would be a new position. There was an addition to summer school that they would cut. They are also looking at cutting a teacher from the high School. They were going to add an elementary teacher that they will be cutting back on. Elementary Spanish will be eliminated which will be 4 teachers. They would be reducing the increase in library paraprofessionals that they had proposed and look to consolidate some of the secretarial staff. Some of the platforms used to assess students would be cut back and the kindergarten readiness will be removed from the budget. It was their hope that they would be cost neutral but because of the hours that they have, they cannot slide a special ed teacher over to that kindergarten readiness program, they would need to hire, so they will no longer bring that position into the budget for next year.

The cost of the security at the schools was discussed. They were originally funded on the Town side and moved over 5 years ago to the BOE. The cost for that is \$850,000 for security including armed security.

LC Chair K. Alexander asked for the input from the Board of Finance (BOF).

J. Gaston (BOF) explained the BOF's role of being financial stewards. There were comments of a failing school system but J. Gaston explained that the system is doing fine. This year, US News and World reported rated Hawley School, not the BOE, 7.6% in the state of Connecticut. Niche, a private company that helps students with scholarships ranked the High School at 23 out of 162 in other words, they are at 14.1%. J. Gaston provided a summary of CT State Department of Education District profile and performance Report for Newtown School District from School year 2013-14 to 2022-203 spreadsheet of his conclusion (att.).

S. Goodridge (BOF) articulated that they were comparing the test scores and per pupil spending with other schools in our DRG. We are paying \$2,000 to \$3,000 more per student and they are getting better scores and doing it with less staff. The town has spoken that the budget is too high. We have to listen to what the voters said.

B. Molloy (BOF) agreed with S. Goodridge regarding the DRG. We are seventh in per pupil spending and third in terms of staff to student ratios meaning there are only two districts of the 21 in the DRG that have more employees per student that we presently do.

B. Chinault (BOF) There are a number of different studies out there and certainly we have to spend money. We educated 1700 more kids back in 2006 and spent \$30 million less over that time period. He also focused on Cheshire, Farmington and Salisbury within our DRG. They spend \$1500 less per pupil and higher outcomes according to the district reference group report. Investing in the schools is important and it is very clear from the voters their sentiment as well.

J. Fletcher (BOF) said that if you look at the growth rate of the BOE budget this year compared to the town, it's a smaller gap than it was last year. We are seeing pressure and we are going to have to make some tuff decisions.

J. Lamoureux (BOF) talked about the discussion about DRG and test scores. If we were going to do an analysis we need to do a deep dive. She thinks they are an indicator but not a one size fits all. We need to support the students and their needs. She stands by what the BOF proposed originally. She urged the LC to be cautious when making reductions.

C. Gardner (LC) move to set the BOE 2024-2025 Budget at \$87,409,066 representing a 2.75% increase over the current budget. D. Pisani seconded. C. Gardner explained it would be consistent with the voter approved Town budget which was a 2.78% increase. They have identified \$500,000 in cuts and approximately \$500,000 in surplus.

D. Pisani (LC) explained that the results of the referendum provided them with direct feedback from the taxpayers as to the affordability of the BOE budget. He pointed out that there are about 400 families that are delinquent in their taxes and over a hundred families that are relying upon the food pantry to put food on their table. It is not political, it is a complicated balance.

H. Dean (LC) articulated that this is an extraordinarily difficult decision to support a cut of this size. She believes in education and a strong school system. She expressed concern regarding low voter turnout but can't ignore those that voted and it is for that reason she will be in support of this motion.

J. Bloom (LC) agreed with H. Dean. She is here at this table because education is everything. Also very disappointed in voter turnout and encouraged everyone to get the word out and vote.

K. Alexander (LC) said he has zero interest in cutting the BOE Budget. However if a budget isn't approved by the end of the fiscal year, the BOE budget will default to the 2023-2024 budget.
Motion passes unanimously by roll call vote of the LC.

Voter Comment –

Avia Mara, 53 Mt. Pleasant Road – She has 2 kids in school system. She questioned the Superintendent when the PTA will get a chance to vote on the budget and when they can see a one pager of the cuts.

Deb Zukowski, 4 Cornfield Ridge Road – She was stunned by the large cut to the BOE Budget. She also understands that each and every one of the LC and BOF support our schools. She can see the reasoning behind vote and supports them and their cut.

Phil Carrol, Field Stone Drive – Thanked everyone for listening to the constituents.

Chris Gilson, 38 Osborne Hill Road – He is speaking on his own behalf and not as a BOE board member. There was talk about poverty. He was on food stamps when he was young and he struggled when his kids were born as well. When you talk about the struggling families in Newtown, they are poor, but they disproportionately benefit from all the wealthy folks paying their taxes in terms of social services and the public schools. He also asked the council that when you talk about statistics that you try to be clear, truthful and transparent with those comments. He understands the board's decision.

Announcements – K. Alexander (LC) Thanked the BOE. Everyone needs to get out and vote on May 14th. The more that vote the more accurate it will be.

Having no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:04pm.

*Respectfully submitted,
Arlene Miles, Clerk*

Attachment: summary of CT State Department of Education District profile and performance Report for Newtown School District from School year 201314 to 2022-203

[illegible]

Your Name: Heather Symes

Your e-mail address: hsymes82@gmail.com

Subject: Support the BOE Budget

Message:

I am writing to you in support of the BOE budget. With the budget failing at referendum, I know that there will have to be cuts made to the budget. I am asking for the reductions to be minimal. I believe that most expected the budget to pass and have gotten complacent.

While I know you do not have line item authority, giving guidance to the BOE would be helpful. It will show the community that there was a lot of thought and homework done instead of just throwing out numbers and percentages.

I still support the BOE budget as presented by Mr. Melillo and do not wish to see any cuts.

Thank you,

Heather Symes
6 Lake Rd, Newtown