

Town of Willington

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BOARD OF FINANCE

**Budget Meeting Minutes
Via Public Online Video Conference**

**March 11, 2021
7:00 PM**

**Minutes are not official until approved at the next regular meeting*

Members Present (a quorum of 4 members is required to conduct business):

Mike Makuch – Chairman
Pete Tanaka – Secretary
Stephanie Summers
Matt Clark
Christina Mailhos
Brenda Abrams – Alternate
Lisa Woolf – Alternate

Members Absent:

Geoff Prusak – Vice Chairman

Also Present:

First Selectwoman Erika Wiececki
Donna Latinsics – Business Manager
Phil Stevens – Superintendent of Schools
Herb Arico – Board of Education Chair
Troy Sposato – Director of Public Works
Alex Moore – Chief, Willington Fire Department #1
Members of the Public

Chairman Mike Makuch called the meeting to order at 7:05pm.

SEATING OF ALTERNATES

Pete Tanaka made a motion to seat Brenda Abrams for Geoff Prusak.

Christina Mailhos seconded the motion.

Vote: 5 Yes (C. Mailhos, M. Clark, P. Tanaka, M. Makuch, S. Summers), 0 No

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Pete Tanaka made a motion to approve the budget meeting minutes of March 4, 2021.

Stef Summers seconded the motion.

Vote: 4 Yes (S. Summers, B. Abrams, P. Tanaka, M. Makuch), 0 No, 2 Abstain (M. Clark, C. Mailhos)

PRESENT TO SPEAK

Selectwoman Wiecenski shared what she knows so far about the American Rescue Plan, signed today. It includes money for towns and cities. It also includes funding for schools, but that will be coming directly to schools. It looks like funds will come in two installments – one in 90 days and the other 1 year from now. Treasury will have 60 days to turn the money over to the state, who then has 30 days to forward it to towns. There are no known numbers or clearly defined acceptable uses yet; that information will come from Treasury. We do know that lost revenue can be included in this particular rescue funding. It cannot be deposited into pension accounts or used to directly or indirectly provide tax cuts. As of right now, the funds can be used through calendar year 2024. She will keep the board updated as they learn more. There is one budget item that could be paid for out of this money specifically, but without clear direction, she is hesitant to take anything out of the budget currently.

NEW BUSINESS

1. Budget Discussions

Attachment #1

Chairman Makuch asked Selectwoman Wiecenski to speak on a question he sent her regarding the audio/visual equipment in the CIP plan. Selectwoman Wiecenski elaborated that \$15,614.12 from the Coronavirus Relief Fund has been spent to-date on audio/visual equipment, which includes a portable 65” interactive flat panel (smartboard), a computer, a video conference rack, a pan & zoom camera on top, and microphone. The microphone is a placeholder until we get the remainder of the equipment, which is estimated at \$33,000. That will include 10 individual goose-neck microphones, one public microphone on a stand, four ceiling-mounted speakers, two surface-mounted speakers, an amplifier, and four sets of ADA-compliant assisted listening systems, all to be installed in the upstairs meeting room to allow for the most space. As with many industries, this equipment is experiencing price hikes, so it is possible the price will go up. As these items were derived out a necessity to provide access to meetings during COVID, it seems right for using the rescue funds. The second phase of the project is currently in the CIP plan funded by off-budget Local Capital Improvement Program (LoCIP) grant funds, so it has no effect on taxation.

Chairman Makuch recalled that our Building Official is contracted from the town of Bolton. He asked about how many hours the Building Official works in one year and what the hourly rate works out to. Selectwoman Wiecenski replied that in a typical year, Mr. Rupert is in the Town Office Building on Wednesdays from 9a-2p and Mondays 3p-7:30p; approximately 9.5 hours of office time per week plus time spent on inspections or when he is called in after-hours. The contract is for 13 in-person hours per week from either the Building Official or his assistant, so we are never without coverage. It includes 24-hour per day on-call in the duty of emergency services. If we did strict math by the amount we’re paying and 13 hours per week per year, it works out to approximately \$51 per hour.

Selectwoman Wiecenski continued that with the Viewpoint software, we now have access to the Building Official on a broader scale, because he can work on paperwork for Willington remotely. She commented that Willington benefits greatly from his expertise.

Pete Tanaka clarified that the Minimum Budget Requirement (MBR) calculation is at least two years behind the coming budget year. Superintendent Stevens confirmed. Further discussion was held on reading the output of the MBR calculation.

Stef asked if there are projections available for the number of students at E.O. Smith in future years so the BOF can be aware when the Region 19 cost may increase and decrease. Superintendent Stevens replied that he's been discussing that with the Region 19 superintendent, but the projection is never perfect because people with high-school-age kids may move to town. Next year's 8th grade class is larger and the following year is 19 fewer, but it could change.

Christina commented that the board would also need to understand what the other towns' populations are doing to understand what our share of the Region 19 cost is going to be, since it's a proportional cost. The board discussed specific scenarios. Herb Arico, who also sits on the Region 19 Board of Education, shared some enrollment specifics and commented that the percentage is based on the number of students that each town is contributing to E.O. Smith. Willington is paying a higher increase because its increase in students is a higher percentage of the total number of students it sends.

Pete asked where in the budget does the cost for high-school special education students appear. Superintendent Stevens replied that Region 19 doesn't view special education separately from the general budget, they just take the total cost of their budget and divide by the number of students to get each town's share. He doesn't believe they attribute special education costs specifically to the sending town.

Pete asked where in the budget does the cost for students attending Windham Tech or other alternative high schools appear. Superintendent Stevens replied that when a student goes to a magnet or technical school, the money goes to Region 19 and they're budgeting to pay the other school to cover the cost of those students. All high-school age students are in the Region 19 budget regardless of whether they attend Region 19.

Stef commented that it may be worthwhile to have a Region 19 budget official talk to the BOF about trends, for planning purposes. Chairman Makuch agreed to pursue that topic for the future.

Chairman Makuch clarified the number of school administrators. Superintendent Stevens replied that the Director of Special Education is equivalent to school principals, so there are three senior administrators and himself.

Chairman Makuch brought up the previously stated fact that Willington has had a hard time finding snow contractors because we can't afford to pay them as much they would get elsewhere. He suggested Willington put out a Request for Proposal (RFP) to see what amount people would do the work for, instead of releasing a dollar per hour rate. Director of Public Works Troy Sposato replied that that's how it was done before. Larry, the current contractor, set the price to what it was. There just weren't a lot of people who bid on the contract.

Selectwoman Wiczenski elaborated that the needs are sent out and the contractors come back with what they can do that particular job for. For many years, they had similar vendors bidding

in the same range. Contractors know about how much the contract went for in previous years and don't want to bid on smaller jobs, thinking we're going to choose the lowest bid.

Selectwoman Wiecenski shared for comparison: Ashford has 68 miles of road, uses no snow contractors, has five full-time Public Works employees, one of whom is a mechanic, plus their Director, and their transfer station employees are separate; Columbia has 40 miles of road, uses no snow contractors, has five full-time Public Works employees plus their Director, and has a separate Facilities department; Brooklyn and Canterbury are the same. We're seeing towns our size have larger crews and are not using snow contractors. We believe we have the same kind of work and needs.

Chairman Makuch mentioned the significant increase of 48.2% or \$91,800 in the library budget request. Pete commented that he thinks it is a rather substantial rise in the request and the BOF should be looking at it carefully. Matt and Brenda agreed.

Pete proposed board members come to next week's appropriations meeting with specific amounts in mind for line items if they'd like to see a different number than what's been proposed. Chairman Makuch stressed the importance of that as well.

Chairman Makuch summarized that based on the information provided by the Treasurer, if all budgets are approved as they were submitted, and using assumptions such as applying \$400,000 from the general fund, it would put taxes at a 1.9 mill increase. He reminded the board that there are options to adjust those numbers, such as adjusting the applied fund balance, adjusting appropriations to each department, or adjusting revenue assumptions such as tax collection rate.

Pete asked if any of the federal relief funds can be used toward air handling units that are in "out" years of CIP. Superintendent Stevens replied that, similarly to municipal funds, they don't have specific details of what the funds can be used toward yet, other than they have to be used toward COVID-related items with priority around health and safety. The school district did offset their budget by over \$100,000 from Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER II) funds. A priority for ESSER II funds is items connected to learning loss as well.

Stef shared a 10-year comparison of mill rates for Willington and surrounding towns that she compiled. She pointed out that Union decreased their mill rate by almost 2 points in 2020-21 and wondered if it was related to the fact that they benefit from our ambulance services. She highlighted that Willington typically has the lowest mill rate in the region.

Superintendent Stevens shared that the decrease was due to the fact that Union schools had a part-time superintendent and a principal, but now has one person who acts as both.

Chief Moore further elaborated that Union has never had an ambulance, so there would have been no change in the cost for them. Chairman Makuch replied that if they're not paying for it and we end up coming up with some sort of agreement where they share the cost that Willington taxpayers are bearing, it might affect their costs in the future.

CORRESPONDENCE

Chairman Makuch will make sure all board members have the mill rate comparison.

PRESENT TO SPEAK

Peter Latincsics of 97 Trask Rd. stated: I was curious to see how the conversation would go tonight because this was your discussion evening, and it seemed relatively quiet. As a member of the public that was somewhat surprising to me. Last meeting was a difficult evening with the Treasurer's report indicating that our grand list is flat and revenues have decreased. It confirms to me the original assessment that was made by your board in the first meeting of the budget process when you looked at the UConn report from Professor Carstensen, showing that we're in a deep economic recession.

Peter continued: I would ask the board prior to the next meeting, to reflect, given those circumstances, on presenting the town with a mill increase. That would be a sizeable increase for our town in normal or good economic years. This is certainly not that. I would ask that you particularly look at the expense side of the budget and not be distracted by revenues or mill rate calculations which is tempting to do. I think you have to consider that increasing spending at a time when so many people have lost their jobs or their businesses or both, or are suffering severe economic distress, makes any kind of increase wrong. I do believe you have to consider that very carefully at this time.

GOOD & WELFARE

Chairman Makuch commented that good is coming, chances to get outside are improving, and vaccinations are improving the public health situation. He encouraged everyone to be healthy and safe.

Pete Tanaka made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:00pm.

Stef Summers seconded the motion.

Vote: 6 Yes (M. Clark, C. Mailhos, P. Tanaka, B. Abrams, S. Summers, M. Makuch), 0 No

Respectfully submitted,
Marysa Semprebon
Recording Secretary

Ten Year Mill Rate History For Willington & Surrounding Towns											
TOWN	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	△ 10 Years
Ashford	25.6	31.05	31.65	32.16	33.96	34.77	34.77	34.77	35.46	36.84	11.24
Coventry	26.58	27.27	27.97	28.47	31.20	31.20	32.00	32.20	32.20	31.17	4.59
Ellington	27.50	27.90	28.40	28.70	30.50	30.50	31.70	31.70	32.60	32.60	5.10
Mansfield	26.68	27.16	27.95	27.95	29.87	29.87	30.63	30.88	31.38	31.38	4.70
Stafford	28.96	32.29	33.06	33.03	33.37	33.51	33.93	34.26	34.93	34.93	5.97
Tolland	29.99	29.99	30.19	31.05	33.36	34.19	34.48	35.00	36.05	36.05	6.06
Union	23.05	23.59	24.37	29.00	29.60	30.27	30.84	31.1	30.93	28.99	5.94
Willington	23.58	23.96	24.38	27.34	27.73	30.09	30.09	30.09	30.09	29.99	6.41

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