

The Annual Budget Meeting of the Town of Fairfield was held on Monday, May 2, 2022 via Webex.

[RTM 5-2-2022 22-23 Budget Vote - YouTube](#)

The meeting was called to order at 10:10 PM by Moderator Mark McDermott.

PRESENT: 39 ABSENT: 0 VACANCY: 1

PRESENT: Bateson, Furey, Longo, Ruggiero, McCormack, Perham, Steele, Durrell, Galdenzi, Lambert, Pistilli, Karson, Kelly, Spolyar, Zezima, Diaz, Garskof, Siebert, Wolk, Berez, Gale, Graceffa, Havey, Kuhn, McDermott, Vergara, Wackerman, Ference, Iacono, Messina, P. Tallman, Brown, Georgiadis, Horton, Scinto, Astarita, Britton, Petise, S. Tallman

VACANCY for Schwartz

ITEM NO. 1 ON CALL: PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE & MOMENT OF SILENCE

Moderator McDermott led the Body in the Pledge of Allegiance.

ITEM NO. 2 ON CALL: TO CONSIDER AND ACT UPON SELF-SUPPORTING FUNDS IN THE AMOUNT OF \$6,884,937 FOR THE WATER POLLUTION CONTROL AUTHORITY FOR THE FISCAL YEAR OF JULY 1, 2022 THROUGH JUNE 30, 2023.

Alice Kelly, District 4 moved this item as distributed with the Call, duly seconded.

VOTE: This item was approved by unanimous voice vote.

ITEM NO. 3 ON CALL: TO CONSIDER AND ACT UPON SELF-SUPPORTING FUNDS IN THE AMOUNT OF \$3,111,143 FOR THE EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS CENTER FOR THE FISCAL YEAR OF JULY 1, 2022 THROUGH JUNE 30, 2023.

Karen Wackerman, District 7 moved this item as distributed with the Call, duly seconded.

VOTE: This item was approved by unanimous voice vote.

ITEM NO. 4 ON CALL: TO CONSIDER AND ACT UPON SELF-SUPPORTING FUNDS IN THE AMOUNT OF \$229,066 FOR THE REGIONAL FIRE TRAINING SCHOOL FOR THE FISCAL YEAR OF JULY 1, 2022 THROUGH JUNE 30, 2023.

Hank Ference, District 8 moved this item as distributed with the Call, duly seconded.

VOTE: This item was approved by unanimous voice vote.

ITEM NO. 5 ON CALL: TO CONSIDER AND ACT UPON PROPOSED APPROPRIATIONS IN THE AMOUNT OF \$345,100,092 FOR THE FISCAL YEAR OF JULY 1, 2022 THROUGH JUNE 30, 2023, AS RECOMMENDED BY THE BOARD OF FINANCE, FOR ANY LAWFUL PURPOSE. THE TOTAL PROPOSED BUDGET AS APPROVED BY THE BOARD OF FINANCE IS AS FOLLOWS:

Board of Finance Recommended Budget	<u>\$345,100,092</u>
Less: Non-Current Tax Year Revenue	<u>(28,934,215)</u>
Net Revenue to be raised by Current Year Taxation	316,165,877
Plus: Senior Tax Relief	4,444,886
Plus: Assessment Appeals (Open Court Log)	400,000
Plus: Reserve for Uncollected Taxes/Other Credits	<u>3,501,293</u>
Gross Amount to be Raised by Taxation	\$324,512,056

Alice Kelly, District 4 moved this item as distributed with the Call, duly seconded.

BOE Chair Christine Vitale asked that the RTM approve the budget as recommended by the BOF as it meets their contractual obligations, building upkeep and students' academic and socio-emotional wellbeing. There are some savings in retirement and pension lines, but there are some additional expenses for legal services and the superintendent search that will need to be found in the budget. Because of special education costs, contractual obligations and increased health insurance premiums there is no wiggle room.

Pamela Iacono, District 8 had asked the superintendent to reconsider some things with the BOE. They did their due diligence and discovered additional expenses and thanked Ms. Leborious for her assistance. She said there should be a deeper look at central office as there are 76 employees including lots of administrative staff where there could be synergies. She quoted CGS 163 10-4 in part "...each school district shall finance at a reasonable level". She did not consider this a reasonable request.

Liz Zezima, District 4 felt there were disproportionate priorities in the budget as there are 76 employees in central office supporting 1,500 employees and \$500,000 in dept. head level staff in the first selectwoman's office.

Laura Karson, District 4 said we are coming from a place of support for the children

Jay Wolk, District 5 said 76 people supporting 17 schools is not a lot of people.

Amy Ruggiero, District 1 asked when the last audit took place. Ms. Vitale said there was an operational audit 12 years ago. \$4.2 million was reduced from the BOE budget in the first year of the pandemic. They can look at central office staffing as there has been a lot of turnover there.

Karen McCormack, District 2 said there should be an independent consultant to take a look at the BOE. It is Teacher Appreciation Week and we are quite aware of what they have gone through, but the minimum budget requirement and year over year spending is troublesome as we will be wedded to this level of spending for years to come.

At 10:58 PM Josh Garskof moved to suspend Rule 36, duly seconded and carried unanimously.

Steve Berez, District 6 said passing the school budget as approved by the BOF is the right thing to do.

Melissa Longo, District 1 said we are asking people for a huge sacrifice; we have a great school system and a great community and wants to continue that as it's our biggest draw.

Ken Astarita, District 10 said people are having a hard time with high inflation and high gas prices; not all the Covid relief money has been spent; he asked that the budget be kept reasonable. All districts are dealing with the same issues and enrollment continues to drop. Ms. Vitale said PPE and compare districts by looking at the base, spending over time and revenue that districts receive such as Title 1 and ECS.

Joe Seibert, District 5 said he respects the proposal for an audit of the BOE and related how his child thrived in FPS where he thought she was struggling; he will not sway on quality education.

John Kuhn, District 7 asked for confirmation that the BOE is subject to annual audit as part of the Town audit to which Mr. Schmitt said it is included in the annual financial audit; an operational audit had been suggested.

Liz Zezima said the budget baseline can be reduced. She questioned how we went from 22 to 80 in PPE spending. Schools need to be supported in the manner they need.

Tom Lambert, District 3 said strong public schools set us apart as someone that grew up here, understands the importance of strong schools and moved back because of the excellent school system.

Jill Vergara, District 7 said we all endured tremendous challenges over the past couple of years; the pandemic changed us and robbed us of health and resources. It robbed our children of precious time in school. Our kids and schools have shouldered an immeasurable burden and now is not the time to cut education. We have clear evidence of significant learning loss and increased needs. Special education costs are 41.7% or \$4.35 million of the requested increase. The BOE budget was approved in a unanimous vote, which reduced the Superintendent's original budget, reflects the district needs. We cannot face our children's unprecedented challenges and struggles and take resources away.

The 5.42% increase is not unprecedented. Contrarily, average increase in education budgets averaged 7% before the Great Recession and during the First Selectwoman's tenure on the BOE, the average increase was 6.7%. Fairfield overcorrected during the Great Recession and kept education increases artificially low that created holes. Our PPE ranking fell from 20 in the State to 89. Other towns, like Greenwich, Westport, West Hartford, and Milford did not cut educational spending so significantly and is reflected in their relatively static PPE rankings. Underfunding began in 2009 to 2017 compounded by underfunding of ECS caused Superintendent Jones to compare Fairfield's educational funding to a rubber band about to snap in 2018.

We can't ignore the historical context of educational spending or the differences between towns' federal stimulus funding. We cannot compare to towns like West Hartford and Greenwich that received 4 & 3 times the amount. West Hartford has a nonlapsing account like contingency, Fairfield does not; Greenwich allocated 57% or \$18 million in ARPA funds for schools. 4% of Fairfield's \$25 million in ARPA funds was allocated to schools.

Children have gone through enough. Now is the time to invest in our children and show teachers that we value them. We know the importance of kid's education to their wellbeing and prioritize it.

Jeff Steele, District 2 said he supports education wholeheartedly and it keeps our property values strong, prepares our children for college and beyond. We are scrutinizing the budget not attacking education. It's not a political issue we are trying to be fiscally sound. We all know what kids have been through and it's tough for adults and families to get out of the pandemic and facing inflation. The HR department was scrutinized and what they should live with and the dh is leaving HR and let the new one decide what he needs but the same can be said for the BOE with the superintendent leaving. There should have been more scrutiny of the BOE budget.

Dru Georgiadis said she supports the budget as presented. Percentages can be manipulated; during a revaluation year many towns had no increase while we had an increase. We all have the best interests of our town in mind. The value I've gotten from the FPS I'm still grateful for.

Public Comment:

Reini Knorr spoke in support of the BOE budget.

Melissa Longo moved to reduce the BOE budget by \$2.5 million, duly seconded.

VOTE: The motion to reduce the BOE budget by \$2.5 million failed with 17 in favor and 22 opposed.

IN FAVOR: Bateson, Furey, Longo, Ruggiero, McCormack, Steele, Durrell, Gale, Ference, Iacono, Messina, P. Tallman, Scinto, Astarita, Britton, Petise, S. Tallman

OPPOSED: Perham, Galdenzi, Lambert, Pistilli, Karson, Kelly, Spolyar, Zezima, Diaz, Garskof, Siebert, Wolk, Berecz, Graceffa, Havey, Kuhn, McDermott, Vergara, Wackerman, Brown, Georgiadis, Horton

Hannah Gale, District 6 moved to reduce the BOE budget by \$1.5 million, duly seconded.

VOTE: The motion to reduce the BOE budget by \$1.5 million failed with 17 in favor and 22 opposed.

IN FAVOR: Bateson, Furey, Longo, Ruggiero, McCormack, Steele, Durrell, Gale, Ference, Iacono, Messina, P. Tallman, Scinto, Astarita, Britton, Petise, S. Tallman

OPPOSED: Perham, Galdenzi, Lambert, Pistilli, Karson, Kelly, Spolyar, Zezima, Diaz, Garskof, Siebert, Wolk, Berecz, Graceffa, Havey, Kuhn, McDermott, Vergara, Wackerman, Brown, Georgiadis, Horton

Karen McCormack moved to reduce the BOE budget by \$1 million, duly seconded.

VOTE: The motion to reduce the BOE budget by \$1 million failed with 17 in favor and 22 opposed.

IN FAVOR: Bateson, Furey, Longo, Ruggiero, McCormack, Steele, Durrell, Gale, Ference, Iacono, Messina, P. Tallman, Scinto, Astarita, Britton, Petise, S. Tallman

OPPOSED: Perham, Galdenzi, Lambert, Pistilli, Karson, Kelly, Spolyar, Zezima, Diaz, Garskof, Siebert, Wolk, Berecz, Graceffa, Havey, Kuhn, McDermott, Vergara, Wackerman, Brown, Georgiadis, Horton

Ms. Iacono said although she was disappointed, she respects everyone's opinion and moved to closed debate and vote on the overall budget.

VOTE: The appropriations in the amount of \$345,100,092 for the Fiscal Year July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023 were approved with 22 in favor and 17 opposed.

IN FAVOR: Perham, Galdenzi, Lambert, Pistilli, Karson, Kelly, Spolyar, Zezima, Diaz, Garskof, Siebert, Wolk, Berez, Graceffa, Havey, Kuhn, McDermott, Vergara, Wackerman, Brown, Georgiadis, Horton

OPPOSED: Bateson, Furey, Longo, Ruggiero, McCormack, Steele, Durrell, Gale, Ference, Iacono, Messina, P. Tallman, Scinto, Astarita, Britton, Petise, S. Tallman

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 12:15 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Elizabeth P. Browne, MMC, MCTC
Town Clerk