



Town of Ridgefield Board of Finance Public Hearing

Approved Meeting Minutes

Monday May 18, 2020

I. Call to order

D. Ulmer called to order the Board of Finance Public Hearing at 7:00 PM May 18, 2020 via Zoom due to recent Coronavirus. Board Members D. Ulmer, G. Kabasakalian, M. Rettger A. Freidenrich, K. Ogden present.

II. Board of Selectman-R. Marconi (the beginning of this was inaudible due to static). Several meetings have been held regarding the budget and changes due to COVID 19 regarding the town's economy. Many factors are involved and there is much concern over several variables. All are on the same page in regards to the mill rate with many different issues. There are different scenarios regarding the mill rate and budget. There is a possibility of personnel cuts. There is a vacant police position not being filled. Roads need to be repaired. In regards to the operating and capital of roads, we're trying to use town aid road money. Additional funds for salt and OT have been needed. Revenues have decreased about \$250,000 from Parks and Rec, \$200,000 in conveyance and we've seen a reduction in interest. We're comfortable in working with the revenue committee and tracking where we are. We're confident that a \$750,000 reduction due to COVID 19 needs to be planned for and comfortable with revenue that has been reduced; 2% increase on collectibles. BOS needs from the BOF \$3.37 million. The BOS proposal would require \$3.37 million from the town fund to reach a 0% tax increase." People are concerned for the schools. The BOS is not looking to dismantle schools but it's also critical to understand employment and the economy. Recommend from BOF 1.2% increase for the town. Capital-\$7.2 million put forward represents town use, BOE and roads. We're expecting a rebate from Eversource for \$30,000 due to school closure. Capital items are dump truck, guard rail replacement, and truck lift. Golf-\$110,00 for paving cart paths. Parks & Rec-the number of kids allowed to summer camp will be reduced. This will impact revenues. Upgrades needed for irrigation, Rec Center, Ballard Park and Barlow pool repairs. In regards to the town engineer, a storm drainage study is being done and beginning the assessment of what an upgrade would cost. If we have repairs, they're covered by FEMA if it's in our 5-year plan. Needs are also roofs, sidewalks, window replacements and entrance re-hab work at various locations in town. Tiger Hollow in need of track replacement; approximately \$550,000. Police need a record system replacement and to begin the study of renovations to police and fire departments. This is currently on hold. Do we renovate these two buildings or look for new

locations? The fire department needs two new boilers, approximately \$25,000 and fire gear needs to be repaired for public safety. The equipment is critical. An upgrade in library technology could be approximately \$45,000.00. Infrastructure improvements and renovations and updates to schools including windows, roofs, bathrooms, cafeterias, gyms, etc. and camera upgrades district wide are all in need. A non-binding recommendation of 1.5% increase to the BOE budget is what the board has voted on. Voted 4-1 for 1.5% increase to the BOE budget. The BOS is concerned with the total budget and impact on the town. Future uncertainties as debt service continues to go down, about \$700,000 next year and \$1.6 million the following. Boehringer Ingelheim has a building to add to our grand list. Health is the most important to our residents and future of the economy is uncertain.

III BOE-Dr. DaSilva thanks all boards for their collaboration 3.96% BOE approved budget. Main increase is for transportation, contracted services, supplies and equipment. She cautions comparisons as not all budgets are created equal. Things to be considered: How do districts design their budget? What revenue resources are available? How much carry over are districts using to support budgets? How is the impact measured against the districts per pupil expenditures? Excess costs? Ridgefield's per pupil expenditures 2018-2019 was \$19,408 and ranked 58. Context for RPS is budgeted turnover, lack of revenue, contingency planning, grant allocations and a surplus returned to the town. How will our collective decisions impact our ability to provide an attractable and sustainable education system that not only benefits the graduates but also the town as a whole? Being responsible means advocating for children and or school district now and for the future and ensuring that the Ridgefield public schools stand tall well beyond COVID 19. Reductions prohibit us from providing excellence in human capital, opportunities to support the whole child, programs, academic and emotional support, student health and safety and comprehensive high school offerings. The current FY 2020-21 BOE approved budget will help to mitigate risks and future compounding costs with known risks including additional referrals and interventions, compensatory/legal expenses, social distancing and virtual learning, additional staff needed for health and safety, transportation costs due to state mandated protocols, technology/professional learning needed by students and staff and project funding for maintenance and equipment for school buildings.

IV BOF-D. Ulmer-unemployment is currently approximately double the past recession. We've seen 1400-1500 unemployment applications. This doesn't include cut incomes and self-employed individuals. There are many unknowns. The town response to the last recession in April 2008, the BOF & BOS approved a budget of 3+% tax increase. In May, 2008, voters rejected that mid-year increase. The BOS dropped and froze items. In 2009, the budget process for both BOS and BOE had 0% budgets. In regards to the fund balance, the BOF has a standing policy for 10 years for a fund balance equal to 8-9% and continues to manage it well. It's designed for unexpected declines in revenues. The biggest number in the revenue budget is taxes. Other revenues down in fiscal 20 are over \$1 million. Parks and Rec and golf are down a bit. We're hoping for a surplus this year of 10.4% in the fund balance. There are large back tax collections and better revenue than expected in the fund balance. Hoping to pay back tax payers from surplus being generated. The fund balance doesn't cover expenses. We use the fund balance to the extent that we can and can't cover extended revenue declines.

V. Public Comments-

Jason Rice-The discussion needs to be on the pressure that's being put on the town and schools. He asks for creativity for the school budget and to deal with the here and now. Don't invest in things that aren't necessary and don't compare this situation to the past recession.

Mary Ellen Foley, Barry Ave.- There's not a lot of low hanging fruit in the budget. Less money means less programs for the schools. Other schools have programs that Ridgefield doesn't have. 2.96% increase is needed.

Rayda Krell-petition with 947 for 2.96% increase with 952 current signatures. Urges to protect our schools.

Allison Archam-this is not the time to increase the budget. Schools need to step up. We can reassess after the Coronavirus, about 1 year from now. The kids will survive. This is the wrong time to be looking for an increase and possibly look for school closures.

Stephanie Anderson, 3 Barrack Hill-16year resident of Ridgefield. She supports the 2.96% increase. This is not the time to cut programs and/or teachers. Give the schools a fighting chance during this unprecedented time.

Catherine Moug-resident for 30 years. The schools attract new residents. She supports the BOE increase.

Sara Collins-Urges the board to listen to the town. Her college success is due to past Ridgefield teachers. Do what's best with the hand we're dealt during the Coronavirus. Teachers supply students with comfort and normalcy.

Paul Wronski, Wooster Heights-Consider a 2.96% increase. Schools are an investment not an expense. This is a highly rated school system. Cutting the school budget will never be a positive move.

Natalie Vecchio-Looking to the future, 89% of revenue is from tax. Not funding the schools is a dishonor to residents.

Malcolm Karlan, Mallory Hill-Chose Ridgefield for the schools. We spend less on students than other neighboring towns. There's no fat in the budget to cut. We must invest in schools and increase the budget.

Linda Haines, Langstroth Drive-Resident over 30 years and continues to support schools after her kids have graduated. Schools are drivers in the town. Property values will take a hit if school services diminish. Listen to those who attend the meetings and sign the petitions.

Frances Walton-thanks the BOE, BOS and BOF for all of their work. She moved to Ridgefield for the schools and community. Schools are a major employer and we have the taxes to support a fine education. She strongly supports the school's budget and requested increase.

Micah Collins-supports the BOE budget increase. We've never experienced anything like this before. We need to give future leaders of tomorrow all the advantages we have.

Ed Tyrrell, 17 Pond Road-We're in a national emergency. The BOF needs to do everything to remain taxes flat and need to use more of the fund balance than ever before. Schools have to get by with less.

Lori Christansen, Peaceable Hill-Resident over 30 years, 3 kids through the school system. She understands the value of schools and asks to consider all residents during this pandemic. 0 % tax increase.

Aryln Kilduff-a resident and teacher. Pleads with the board to support the BOE increase. Cuts will have long lasting impacts.

Stephen Jamison-people and businesses are hurting. Property taxes are too high and they continue to increase annually. Home values are down and people are moving out of town and the state. Supports cuts to school and town budget.

Sandra Mahoney-Supports the BOE budget and recommended increase. Close to 1000 have signed petition for BOE budget. Education is an investment not an expense. Economic driver of town is schools and they need normalcy. Please invest in them.

Douglas Collins, Lakeside Drive-supports the school budget. Use savings for a buffer, use funds for the schools. We may need more than less teachers. Please support the BOE budget.

Michael McNamara-supports school budget. Kids don't need stress due to lack of services. Suggest a 1% increase in property tax, will allow to save fund balance.

Angela Rice-PTA's don't speak out. We have a no frills BOE budget. Teachers can't be successful with reductions.

Cheryl Oscher-a 1.5% increase will cause scrambling, kids will take a hit and will feel the impact. We need to prepare for the future. K-12 students will need Chrome Books IT support. Cleaning supplies and nurses will need to added to the budget. This is not the time to cut the BOE budge. We need at least 2.76% increase.

Melissa Ettere-supports the increase to the BOE budget. This is the time to invest in schools and attract new residents. Don't let the kids down.

Mira Jensen-Schools won't be fine with less. Supports the BOE increase. Invest in schools and future.

Lin Jamison-3 kids in schools. The best way to attract residents to be financially responsible. Encourages to not take away from schools.

Coleen McGuirk, Scodon Drive-Supports the increase to school budget. Reduction will hurt the programs.

Robin Collins-listen carefully to all voices and support the BOE budget.

Laurie Bellagamba-We can't ignore the impact the Coronavirus is having on our children. Meeting students' needs must be a priority. The BOE budget should be the top consideration.

Michelle and Greg DiMiceli, Old Branchville Road- on Zoom meeting but unable to speak due to technological issues. Emailed comments in support of 2.9% increase.

John Early, Fieldcrest Drive. On Zoom meeting but unable to speak due to technological issues. Emailed comments detailing his reasons for opposing proposed BOE increase. I am disappointed I could not comment at the meeting. I use my computer regularly for business calls, although with more robust software. Next time see if we can't make comments by phone. Please share my comments on the school budget with the Board of Finance as follows:

- * The real (inflation adjusted) school budget at 1.5% for next year gives a rise of 25.4% over the last 15 years.
- * Enrollment has declined 17%
- * Thus spending per student has risen 51.2%
- * Test scores and other objective measures have not improved. (Highest SAT scores were 12 years ago)
- * Lower output at higher cost without quality improvement is pure waste.
- * I am a mathematical economist, have lived here 30+ years sending three children through the schools -- the last, just a year ago, so I know this as a professional and on the ground as a parent.
- * The waste is everywhere -- assistant principals at elementary schools, multiple assistants at middle and high schools, supervisors supervising supervisors supervising supervisors, teacher coaches, curriculum coordinators, clerks, administrators, etc., none of which teach anybody or improve the educational process.
- * The one speaker was wrong. The independent academic research shows that spending within the ranges spent within the USA has absolutely no impact on objective measures of educational outcomes. Some of the best districts spend well below average and the worst district in the USA spends more than almost any other. It's how you spend the money, not how much.
- * It's time to hold the budget constant, not add to the waste.
- * The objection are merely emotional hysteria. No way will a constant budget be devastating or decimating. The decline in enrollment offsets any possible inflation, so there is no reduction of anything, except the administrative dreams of expanded empires.
- * I've spent a career helping companies and not-for-profits improve both

their financial and quality. The attitudes expressed by school management are exactly the same as those who have driven others into financial ruin. The taxpayers should not continue to enable them.

* The whining about class size is plain wrong. If the current leadership can't hold the spending constant and keep the class sizes the same with declining enrollment, they should be replaced.

* Educational quality is not threatened, but our financial strength is. If a 51% in real spending made no improvements, a freeze can't possibly hurt it.

*Thank you to Andrew Neblett for facilitating public comments.

IV. Adjournment-motion to adjourn at 9:00 pm by G. Kabasakalian, seconded by K. Ogden. All in favor.

Respectfully Submitted by,

Mia Belanger