

TOWN of RIDGEFIELD – BOARD of SELECTMEN BUDGET MEETING
MARCH 7, 2016 – 7:00 P.M.

TOWN HALL/LARGE CONFERENCE ROOM

REVISED/APPROVED MINUTES

These minutes are a general summary of the meeting and are not intended to be a verbatim transcription.

In attendance: R. Marconi, R. Hebert, M. Kozlark, B. Manners, S. Zemo

Also present: K. Redmond, Director of Finance

Agenda

1. RVNA Budget
2. Board of Education Budget
3. General Budget Discussion
4. Possible Non-binding Recommendation on Board of Education Budget to Board of Finance

R. Marconi called the BOS Budget Meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

M. Kozlark moved and R. Hebert seconded a motion to add Library Budget to the evening's agenda after #2, Board of Education Budget. Motion passed 4-0. B. Manners was not yet present.

1. RVNA Budget

Theresa Santoro, President & CEO, Bill Dunlop, Vice President of Business Development, and MJ Heller, Director of Philanthropy, came forward to present the RVNA's request for a \$50,000 grant as they move to their new location at 30 Governor St., and the RVNA will no longer be a Venus Building tenant at 90 East Ridge. They had been receiving \$42,500 in rent abatement from the Town of Ridgefield.

Seniors are living longer and many of them continue to live in their homes. RVNA provides home health care when needed, health education and nutrition programs to the community to help Ridgefield's residents stay healthy, and the nursing arm that is ready to serve in case of an epidemic or health threat to the community. The RVNA is a founding member of Rides for Ridgefield, a volunteer driving labor pool of 300 volunteers. They work closely with Tony Phillips, who is responsible for the Town's ADA compliance programs. The average age of their patients is 77.

The RVNA is assuming some debt service with the upcoming move to the new facility, which will cost an additional \$60,000/year or \$5,000/month. They had been debt-free for many years. They are anticipating about \$75,000/year increase to their expenses. S. Zemo stated the RVNA will be able to increase their billing with added services at their new building. This shows good economic growth. 60 percent of their patients are Ridgefield residents. The additional 40% of their patients are spread around 29 neighboring towns. The RVNA is a vital resource for the Town of Ridgefield.

M. Kozlark commented on how the RVNA seems to be pretty much where they thought they would be. Where does their revenue come from? Their services are reimbursed through Medicare for those over 65. Medicaid is primarily needs-based. Home-care charges are billed to insurance. They haven't had a problem with their charges being non-reimbursable. W. Dunlop stated their money comes from the government through Medicare, and their revenue has gone up because they

are serving more people. M. Kozlark inquired about their staffing. In the last five years, they have doubled their staff. They employ many specialties.

B. Manners asked if they provide some services to other town. They do provide health and wellness programs to other towns but less than to Ridgefield residents. R. Marconi inquired about the treatment of opiates. This is a subject that people do not talk about, but is becoming more of a problem. The RVNA will no longer be receiving their annual rent abatement of \$42,500 and that is why they are requesting renewal of their former annual grant. They would like \$50,000/year to help with their increased expenses at their new location. R. Marconi thanked the RVNA for all they do for the Town of Ridgefield.

2. Board of Education Budget – Dr. Karen Baldwin, Ridgefield’s new Superintendent of Schools, and Paul Hendrickson, Business Manager for the BOE, came forward to present the BOE budget for Fiscal Year 2016-17. Also present was Michael Taylor, a member of the Board of Education and Chairman of the Budget Committee.

Dr. Baldwin stated this is a dynamic and complex time. This budget responds to the needs of all levels both nationally and locally. This year they started with a zero-based budget and built the budget from the bottom up. They also brought in two independent consultants which indicated a couple of gaps and one in particular with regard to the special needs students. This budget provides the infrastructure and builds the base.

The BOE is seeking a 5.72% increase. They have taken a close look at health insurance and are moving to a self-insured model for dental insurance. They just completed negotiations with the teacher’s bargaining group with a 9.75% increase over three years. These contract negotiations are a “driver” in this budget. The 2015/16 budget is off by \$284,000. We have only 7 teachers who can retire. Our class sizes vary according to the grade level. Class size for K-2 is 21 students and Grade 2 up is 24 students.

Dr. Baldwin reviewed staffing needs for Special Education, which includes the hiring of 1.7 additional speech pathologist and .5 occupational therapist. In order to expand the transition program, we will need a certified teacher for this position. She is suggesting reversing the mainstreaming model. With regard to our curriculum assessment, we need to right our science curriculum.

R. Marconi asked what changes can we expect to see within the next two to three years? Dr. Baldwin responded how when we develop the curriculum in one area and assessments are in place, we should see an increase in that area. B. Manners stated how we do get standardized test results. We can do an internal analysis from these test results.

Our SAT scores are down. Historically, Ridgefield has been a little stronger. This year the SAT’s have been revised and accountability measures have changed. Accountability goes back to the classroom. This budget addresses all these dynamic areas. Certain outcomes will come from strategic planning and development of our infrastructure.

M. Kozlark stated she was surprised at how large the dollar request was in this budget. Last year we added a psychologist and math teachers. There is no measure of the result of these additions this past year. She is hearing that we are not servicing all the children. Dr. Baldwin responded we are trying to provide relevant courses in the 6th through 8th grades, which will take these children into their high school years. Our priority is to build the base. Intervention has been strengthened and a few new courses added to the curriculum at the high school.

S. Zemo stated he did not know or understand why we are not fulfilling the needs of our Ridgefield students. We have a moral responsibility to provide for all our students. There is lots of data and it appears that we are the lowest in per-pupil spending and the lowest in SAT scores in our comparable group of CT towns.

R. Hebert stated we are talking about special needs children and that group of children seems to be really increasing. There appears to be a lack of trust in our community. We need to build a better system of data collection and assessment. Dr. Baldwin responded 26 of Ridgefield's children are participating in placement out of the district, which is consistent with other towns as well. She would like to build an internal program for pre-K through the age of 21 for these children. The behavioral and mental health needs for these children are being challenged. Why are we seeing an increase in these needs? We are seeing more problems at the secondary level. We have programs in place for younger children. We would be well-served to build our own program here.

The salary line is 50% of the budget, which is common throughout Connecticut. We are committed to salary and benefits costs for our certified and non-certified personnel. Our budget is "people-driven".

There is a significant increase in our athletic program. Trainers are working with senior athletes. This service is contracted outside. The service cannot guarantee that it will always be the same individual working with the Ridgefield athletes. The trainer cost has been moved to the Personnel account as we want to hire our own people for this. P. Henderson stated we upgraded one secretarial position in the Athletic Department. The coaching salary is part of collective bargaining. There are no other initiatives.

Our settlement line is \$925,000 which is high compared to other towns. This cost is the result of 22 mediations. We need to show we are providing quality programs for these special education students. We need to build positive relationships with the families.

M. Kozlark inquired about the possibility of closing a school which had been discussed previously, which would save about \$1 million/year. The response was that we have been reviewing our most recent demographer's report and looking at the trends for K-5 which show a dip of about 14% but then the enrollment numbers go back up. How fast is our enrollment number going up to 2,000? A very severe dip in enrollment had been forecast, but that has flattened out and is less severe. This is why closing a school at this time is not being considered.

What about the decline in numbers in the middle school? The ten-year decline show 24% and then a 16% decline. We need to see if this holds true. We need to continue to monitor the numbers and reduce accordingly the cost of what we are delivering to the community.

R. Hebert asked if we look into this current year and look into next year, and if we do not make any changes, our budget will have to increase to what level? 4.2% is just for contractual obligations. 4.45% includes the budget increase of \$90 million. We have reviewed the settlement and feel that it came out OK. It addresses some of the inequities and smooths out the bubbles. R. Marconi asked if we got more back than what we had to give out on the benefit side? The answer is yes. What about outside consultants for this year? Yes, the consultants remain in place and are in the budget – for professional learning. We need outside help to support this. We moved and consolidated this item in the budget – no longer in the individual building budgets. This makes it difficult to compare. Overall, this is a stable budget.

R. Hebert expressed appreciation to the Board of Education for their hard work. What is the next step? Dr. Baldwin responded, “This is the foundation. The big driver is the teacher contracts. Then comes on-going curriculum development, intervention with digital skills, more work with the finances, and improve programs internally for mental health needs.

M. Kozlark stated Ridgefield is very responsive and spends their dollars wisely. We are responding to requests and should be responsive to declining enrollment numbers. We need to continue to look at every detail and where changes can be made.

Joe Moritz, Facilities Manager, talked about Capital Improvements for the Board of Education. There will be a continuation of our energy conservation program. We have dollars in our lighting budget. We are seeing a reduction in kilowatts at the High School. The contract has been awarded for the solar program. The Board of Education is part of the community district radio program. It was deferred from last year into this year. R. Marconi asked about the timeline of the project of connecting the sewer to the main line. J. Moritz stated that we are taking care of it.

R. Marconi expressed a thank you to Dr. Baldwin and the BOE and appreciation for the detail of her report.

3. Library Budget – Chris Nolan, Director, Marc Colamaria, Library Board Chairman, Dean Miller, Library Board Vice-Chairman, and Gary Rapp, Library Board Treasurer, came forward to discuss the Library’s proposed 2016-17 Budget.

The Library Board has two requests –

- Relocation fees - \$40,000

The Library is first interviewing local people. They have interviewed three search firms if decide to use such a firm. Statistics show that there is often more of a turnover when a search firm is not used.

- Website design – One firm’s estimate was \$100,000 – another one for \$45,000; this is a firm that knows Ridgefield and specializes in libraries. M. Kozlark asked if a new website design isn’t something a new Director will want to be involved in. C. Nolan responded that the Library will commence their new website design project once the new Director is on board. This is a great project for one to gather data about the community and will help the new Director become all the more acquainted with Ridgefield. R. Marconi suggested that this project be put off for another year. The new director may want involvement with the RFP.

4. General Budget Discussion

R. Marconi inquired if the BOS wanted to vote this evening on the possible non-binding recommendation to the BOF regarding the BOE Budget. There are still questions to be answered with regard to the terms of the overall budget. R. Hebert responded that he did not think he has a fair opinion on this issue right now. S. Zemo indicated that the BOE’s budget is fresh in our mind which is always helpful. B. Manners stated that we need to make our recommendation to the BOF in the context of the whole budget. We need to look at the mill rate at a proposed 2.2%. Could this send the mill rate up considerably? We do not know what the BOF will do. R. Marconi asked when does the BOS want to vote on this recommendation? R. Hebert indicated that he will take the time to be ready at the next evening’s meeting.

K. Redmond stated that the BOS needs to look at where we are right now without using fund balance. The numbers for the BOE’s medical insurance are not yet firmed up. R. Marconi stated that with no fund balance and including the BOE’s budget numbers, we are now at 4.97. 1.27% is arbitrary. With fund balance, the number is probably about 4.5. S. Zemo stated the voters have

the right to decide. If the referendum is voted down, it then goes to the BOF. B. Manners stated how there are legitimate needs in many departments. It is upsetting to learn that we spend the lowest amount per pupil on education and have the lowest SAT scores of surrounding towns.

We need a report from Peter Hill regarding the roads. They did rate a lot of the roads in the fall, but have more to do in the spring. The road program is a computer program that is not being fully utilized. We need to have a constant assessment of all our roads. Drainage is now a good number as well. Patching is at \$13,300. Our rust-colored guard rails look awful. We can no longer use the post guardrails with wire attached. All the dollars each year (\$40,000) put aside for this project have not been used. We have funds to cover the installation of higher quality guard rails. E. Tyrrell suggested the wooden guard rails like those currently being installed on the Merritt Parkway.

R. Hebert stated the BOS needs to look at trends. He feels at this point that he can only ask questions. Do we really need an additional secretary for the Athletic Department? What would be the effect of putting off this expenditure?

R. Marconi stated we did not realize that we are that low in Special Education. The consultants have come in and we need to listen to what they had to say. We can take the referendum to the public and see if they vote it down or accept our budget numbers.

B. Manners stated how we cut the budget down to the bone every year. We need to talk about Community Grants. There is a lack of communication with these various non-profits.

M. Kozlark stated how our residents are shocked! She feels they do not have robust earnings; their buying power is reduced. She does not think this is the kind of increase we need to propose. She does not believe our education system is failing. Yes, there are areas that may well need to be "tweaked", but she is not sure that we need to spend \$5 million to do this. She does not want to propose a budget doomed to fail. She does not yet know what she wants to recommend. She does not want the numbers to be too high for a successful vote. We need a reasonable mill rate increase.

R. Hebert stated we added about 65 in staff over a period of time and enrollment went down by 550 students. He understands that there are certain mandates that have to be met. What number is the number that the voters will accept? What number is the right number for us to propose (the percent of increase)?

R. Marconi stated if the BOF cuts the BOE budget, they may well cut the BOS budget as well. That has happened in the past.

S. Zemo moved and R. Hebert seconded a motion to adjourn the Board of Selectmen Budget Meeting at 10:05 p.m. Motion passed 5-0.

Respectfully submitted,
Janet L. Johnson