

**BOARD of EDUCATION, FINANCE, SELECTMEN SPECIAL MEETING**  
**NOVEMBER 16, 2009**

TOWN HALL ANNEX BOE CONFERENCE ROOM– 7:30 P.M.  
66 Prospect Street, Ridgefield, CT

REVISED/APPROVED MINUTES

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

In Attendance:

Board of Education: Deborah Low, Superintendent; Austin Drukker, Chairman; Joseph Burzek; Paul Hendrickson, Business Manager; Russell Katz; Katherine McGerald; Adeline Merrill; John Palermo; Sandi Rose; Richard Steinhart; Paul Sutherland

Board of Finance: Jill Bornstein, Bob Cascella, Peter Gomez, David Ulmer, Kevin Walsh

Board of Selectmen: R. Marconi, A. Bodner, D. Masters, J. Plock

Kevin Redmond, Director of Finance

**Agenda**

1. Overview of Current Budget: Kevin Redmond, Controller, Town of Ridgefield, and Paul Hendrickson, Business Manager, BOE
2. Comments from Board of Education, Board of Selectmen, and Board of Finance:  
Deborah Low, Superintendent; Rudy Marconi, First Selectman; Mary Heiser, Board of Finance Chairman
3. General Comments from all Three Boards
4. Public Comment
5. Adjournment

R. Marconi called the Special Budget Meeting to order at 7:30 p.m. Mr. Marconi stated that this November special joint meeting of the three boards was initiated several years ago as a start-up to the budget process for the next fiscal year. It is not a Public Hearing, although the public is welcome to attend. The meeting provides an opportunity for the BOS, BOE and BOF to receive an update on the current budget situation from the Town of Ridgefield's Director of Finance, and comments from the three Boards as to their view of the budget situation for the current fiscal year and a brief general overview of the next fiscal year's possible budget needs both operating and capital. Austin Drukker, BOE Chairman, commented that this is a working session to generate ideas and to outline some of the parameters for the next year's budget. It is not to deal with specifics, nor a percent of increase, nor any decision relative to a possible reconfiguration of the schools.

R. Marconi stated that Marty Heiser, BOF Chairman, is unable to attend because of a death in the family.

Overview of Current Budget – Kevin Redmond, Director of Finance and Paul Hendrickson Business Manager, BOE

Kevin Redmond stated that we are four months into the current fiscal year and current property tax revenues are coming in fine. The tax line is in good shape. The weakness is in conveyance and building fees. Income from recording fees is above budget due to refinancing. Parks & Recreation's swimming fees are way down. Parks & Rec may be down about \$100,000 in revenue. Paul Roche is working to reduce costs. On the expenses side, there are no red flags that Mr. Redmond can see at this time, other than possible snow removal costs.

Paul Hendrickson stated that we are only two months into the 2009-2010 school year. Staffing needs and turnover costs are to the good; each special education student in and out makes a large difference in budget numbers, and the ESC estimated return from the State of Connecticut this year is 70% on the dollar as compared to 100% on the dollar for last year's budget. It is still early in the school year cycle, but so far the BOE is still on target.

J. Plock inquired as to any forecasts about revenues for next year? Kevin Redmond responded that we can look at our three-year plan, but nothing more concrete than that. We need to be another three months into the 2009-2010 budget year to see what is really happening. The question is what will December and January costs look like?

#### Comments from Board of Education – Deborah Low, Superintendent

Debbie Low stated how the Board of Education has operated on a very lean budget the last two years. She provided a list of the BOE's many programs and accomplishments. Standing still is not enough. If the schools do not keep up and move ahead, they will fall behind. The Town of Ridgefield has to continue to invest in our schools and make improvements every year. The BOE has been doing its share to use funds prudently, including savings in both energy and bus transportation. Salary increases for the next budget year will be very modest, and insurance increases will be minimum. They hope to do an energy study with the Town. Projected enrollment decline will be the biggest change and challenge. The BOE is looking at how to react to this. She stated that Ridgefield is getting "a big bang for our buck!" In the November issue of *Connecticut Magazine*, Ridgefield was selected as #1 town for our size.

What are the needs for next year? Ridgefield needs to institute a full-day kindergarten program, work on curriculum development, and examine class size. We need to continue to move forward in technology teaching 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, continue improve our math and science program, and continue to provide a safe nurturing climate in our schools supporting educational and behavioral needs. There needs to be support for a meaningful degree of improvement in our schools every year.

Austin Drukker, BOE Chairman, inquired about the need for an all-day kindergarten program. What is the kindergarten program offered in surrounding towns? Some towns have had a full-day program for many years; others have had an extended day program. New Canaan and Darien changed to a full-day program a couple of years ago. Is there any relationship between declining enrollment and our shorter kindergarten day? Ms. Low responded that she would have to get back to the BOF with the answer to that question, but she believes that all the neighboring towns are forecasting declining enrollment. What are the dollars relative to a full-day program? Ms. Low responded that they have not figured out precisely the dollar numbers, but it would double the staff cost. This request has been studied several times in the past. We need to do this! Bob Cascella, BOF, asked for an estimated number of the increase in staff necessary for a full-day program. Ms. Low responded that probably 7 to 8 would be the estimate. R. Marconi asked if a full-day kindergarten program is the BOE's #1 priority? Ms. Low responded that it is one of the top items to be discussed along with salaries, benefits and insurance.

#### Comments from the Board of Selectmen – Rudy Marconi, First Selectman

R. Marconi stated that “schools are critical”. Their demands are what drive our local economy. Our schools keep the prices of our real estate up, and bring in building fees and conveyance taxes. The revenue we are counting on is tax dollars. Last year there were 0 spec houses built in Ridgefield. This year there are 5. The Parks & Rec budget is off, but we are closely monitoring that. It appears that we are “right with the budget”. Al Garzi had forecast the Grand List growth of .5%. He is standing firm with that number, but no more than that. R. Marconi is requesting that capital budgets be lean, but we must not be behind in maintenance of our infrastructure. Ridgefield has received \$700,000 in stimulus dollars for road repair and \$800,000 (out of a total cost of \$1.5 million) to extend the water main for the Barlow/Scotland site. The plans for the water main extension were finalized with the DPH last week. If the project is not started this fall, it will be done first thing in the spring. Nine full and part-time positions were eliminated and there are no plans to rehire. The BOS is very pleased to be selected as #1 town for our size by *Connecticut Magazine*. Our crime rate is the lowest even with the Police Department being down three in staffing. We need to look at the shortfall in the pension fund, but the numbers have improved from their previous low.

Richard Steinhart, BOE, commented on the value of running a gas line up to the High School. R. Marconi stated that this had been previously researched and because of the cost, it was not done. There is also the possibility of bringing a gas line down to the High School from the Ridgebury area. We have asked the gas company to look at this option – the volume of gas available from this source. A gas line is currently being installed to connect Town Hall, Veteran’s Park and East Ridge. The real cost is putting in the gas line.

Austin Drukker, BOE Chairman, inquired about the Town’s capital needs. Does the BOS have a reliable inventory of the Town’s infrastructure, all the properties the Town owns and leases out – an engineering study of the capital needs for these buildings? R. Marconi responded that the Town is comfortable with what they think they will need in capital for the next 2-3 years. Charlie Fisher, Town Engineer, submits each year a report of the upcoming capital needs. Do we have a study of the entire town? – No. For example, there is a study of drainage issues. There is no point in paving if the drainage issues are not addressed first. Sewer issues are part of the NPCA, which has about \$2 million in retained earnings. Building roofs are an upcoming issue and they are part of the Town’s five-year plan. One-half of the old High School roof has been redone, but the remainder is in need of repair soon. East Ridge’s roof also needs to be redone. The schools are in pretty good shape. It has become apparent that there is no insulation in the roof of the Town Hall nor the old high school. Installation of insulation could result in a 10-15% savings in energy costs for these buildings. The oil burners for the Venus Building are so very old – converted coal burners.

Andy Bodner stated that if the Town continues to defer and defer capital expenditures, we will eventually hit a wall. The Fire Department has deferred their tanker purchase and other apparatus. We are paving few roads each year. The Public Works Department continues to request equipment replacement and there is the continued issue of Police vehicles. The Police Station is 100+ years old, the Fire Station needs work and there is the Library renovation issue as well. The Town manages to scrape by, but we cannot delay these major projects forever.

BOE Chairman Austin Drukker stated that he feels the BOS has been doing a good job requesting capital items such as trucks, etc., but the school buildings need to be maintained. R. Marconi stated a comprehensive list of upcoming capital requests with a ranking is needed. Having all needs listed is important.

Paul Sutherland, BOE, stated that the stock market has improved from the previous low. How has this improvement affected the Pension Plan? Last year's numbers indicated that the pension fund was down about \$450,000 with the need for an increased contribution of approximately \$150,000. Because of the gains in the stock market, it now appears that the Town needs to contribute an additional \$100,000 and the Board of Education approximately \$40,000 to the pension fund. There is a Pension Commission meeting next week and this is open to the public.

BOE Chairman Drukker commented on the Grand List. We have been growing at about 1% each year. It is important to note that this year's growth is estimated at ½ of 1%. We may be doing better than some of the neighboring towns, but this is still a breach from the growth in past years. Housing valuations are down about 25%.

Lynn Merrill, BOE, stated that the Board of Education has been meeting with the public quite regularly. The question has arisen as to the "process"? Is the Board of Education an independent entity? If we have savings, do the dollars saved belong to the BOE? To have this process in writing would be helpful. R. Marconi responded that we are all on the same team, but just on a different page. If a school were to be closed, that would be the BOE's decision.

D. Masters commented about the "process". She applauded many of the Board of Education's priorities and suggests that they prioritize the list. The municipal budget has been squeezed so tightly, there is almost no other place to make cuts. If savings are realized, they have to be shared with the whole town. We are a team. Main Street is not recovering even if Wall Street is recovering somewhat. Many Ridgefield families do not have jobs. We have to pave roads, plow the snow and mow the grass. Any savings realized should be savings to the taxpayer.

BOE Chairman Drukker indicated that there is no magic answer. The Town is just like a family – do we pay back debt, purchase something else, make repairs, save for the future? Any saving realized should be savings for us all.

J. Plock stated how if a town budget is too high and is defeated by the voters, this affects us all. Where can savings be realized? – a school closure, reduction in programs offered, reduction in class size? Many residents in this town are hurting. The school that was ultimately closed in the '70s was not the original school chosen to be closed. The situation is confusing because the original school could not be closed due to a class action suit.

Paul Hendrickson, Business Manager, BOE, reported on the close-out process for the school building projects. We were audited in late July and we did receive \$240,000 in May. We are expecting between \$800,000 to \$1 million to be returned to Ridgefield. Regarding East Ridge projects, there are 24 change orders which need to be approved by the State before we can file. Once these change orders are completed, we can then request the audit. BOE Chairman Drukker stated that if we receive more in bonding or additional funds from the State, then these monies can be used to reduce debts or increase our capital reserve fund. About \$700,000 in school funding remains open. A. Bodner stated how dollars received back from the State of CT are "one-shot deals", and should be used to build up the capital reserve fund.

BOE Chairman Drukker inquired about the contingency funds relative to Bennett's Pond? R. Marconi responded that negotiations continue regarding Affordable Housing. Regarding the South side litigation, we are waiting on the judge's summary decision. Regarding legal expenses, we are down to about \$300-400,000 of what has been approved.

Bob Cascella, BOF, asked Paul Hendrickson when did he think the funds from the High School building project are likely to be in our bank? P. Hendrickson responded that probably in about two months if we are in agreement with the audit report. If we are not willing to accept the report, then the process will take longer. East Ridge is more problematic. The change orders have to be approved by the State, then the audit process, etc. – more arduous.

David Ulmer, BOF, stated that the revenue picture from last year to this year is all even. Any increase in the budget for 2010-2011 will go directly to the taxpayer. Any increase in expenditures will go to referendum in May. A. Bodner indicated that it is going to be a challenge to keep the numbers down. We cannot cut more positions. A. Drukker stated how the budget process has to be equitable. We have to keep the dialogue open. We need to know where the problems are going to be with everything on the table so that there are no surprises. R. Marconi indicated that budget meetings are on the calendar for the first and second weeks in February.

### Comments from the Public

Bethany Agliardo, Holmes Rd. – stated how she has been attending Board of Education meetings this past year, and is concerned about a possible school closing. Families choose neighborhoods because of the schools. The residents want a budget presented and the opportunity to vote. She is also concerned about class size. If we are facing a decrease in enrollment, doesn't that open up space for a full-day kindergarten program? The parents realize that we are all in tough economic times, but we want a full-day kindergarten program. We do not need involved computer programs for little ones. The parents who want such programs can sign their children up for after-school programs. Many parents volunteer in the schools. We need to focus on how we can generate the dollars needed for the schools. What about a tax credit for residents with no school-age children and those with children pay more?

Eileen Burgess stated that last week the Board of Education took the possible school closing off the table for the 2010-2011 school year.

John Katz, Ridgebury Rd. – said the one word that will save money is “Off” – Turn off lights at Tiger Hollow, the High School and other locations around town.

### E-mails Received:

Anne Colucci, Cedar Lane  
Avery Costigan, E. Farm Lane  
Jessica Carter  
Page Bowler, High Ridge Ave.  
The D'Orsos  
Christopher Carter  
Jennifer Carter  
Michael Raymond, Mead Ridge Rd.

**J. Plock moved and D. Masters seconded a motion to adjourn the Special Budget Meeting at 8:50 p.m. There was unanimous approval to adjourn.**

Respectfully submitted,

Janet L. Johnson