

**BOARD of FINANCE BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING – MARCH 29, 2010**

EAST RIDGE MIDDLE SCHOOL AUDITORIUM – 7:30 P.M.

APPROVED MINUTES

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

Board of Finance Members in Attendance:

Peter Gomez, Chairman, Jill Bornstein, Vice Chairman, Marty Heiser, Margaret Price Sims, and David Ulmer

Peter Gomez called the Public Hearing to order at 7:30 p.m. He announced that the March 29 meeting is the first of two Budget Public Hearings. The second Public Hearing will be held on April 5, 7:30 p.m., Veteran's Park Elementary School Auditorium. The current Town Charter sets the BOF Budget Public Hearing to be held the last Monday of March, which this year is Passover – thus the scheduled second meeting on April 5<sup>th</sup>. A request has been made to the Charter Revision Committee that this be changed to require the BOF Budget Public Hearing to be held no later than the end of March.

P. Gomez announced the schedule for the evening will be a presentation by Rudy Marconi, First Selectman, on the proposed Board of Selectmen 2011 Budget, a presentation by the Board of Education on their 2010-2011 Budget Submission, and then time for comments from the public.

Board of Selectmen 2011 Budget – Presented by R. Marconi, 1<sup>st</sup> Selectman

R. Marconi commented on the General Town Budget Overview and wanted note made of how the current year increase is impacted by one time prior year savings, such as Furloughs and Uniform Allowance Concessions. Town Operations increase would be 2.25% without these. Town Operations is at \$21,297,782 (increase of 2.99%); School Building & Grounds \$476,535 (a decrease of -6.79% because Parks & Rec has turned some of the maintenance of the School Grounds back to the BOE); and Utilities/Heat/Fuel \$2,169,010 (increase of 4.02% because unable to secure as favorable a pre-buy as in the previous year); and Employee Benefits \$6,998,100 (+3.47%).

A pie chart detailing Town Operations, Percentage of Town Budget (\$30,941,427) is as follows: General Government – 13%; Public Recreation – 16%; Public Safety Police – 15%, Public Safety Fire – 12%, Public Works – 14%, Employee Benefits – 22%, and All Others – 8%. Public Debt for 2011 will show a decrease of 0.49%. Mr. Marconi stated that a fairly good decrease in the public debt is expected in the future, although the Library is currently involved in a Task Force Study, and both the Fire Department and Police Department are anxious for new buildings.

Public Capital Improvements are detailed as follows: Town Vehicles & Equip - \$1,176,710; Town Buildings & Equipment - \$402,100; Town Roads & Infrastructure - \$1,515,000 for a Total

of Town Projects - \$3,093,810. School Buildings & Equip - \$604,800 for a total of Public Capital Improvements at \$3,698,610. R. Marconi pointed out that the dollars from the Federal government Stimulus Package of \$700,000 are not included in these numbers. – This money will be used for the redo of Farmingville Road.

The pie chart detailing Capital Improvements (Percentage of Capital Projects - \$3,698,610) is as follows: General Government – 3%; Recreation – 8%; Public Works – 36%; Public Education – 16%; Public Safety – 19%; and Engineering – 18%.

R. Marconi reviewed the requests for Vehicles & Equipment totaling \$1,176,710 from the following departments: Public Woks (Excavator, Dump Truck, and Truck with Plow); Recreation (Truck with Plow, Truck with Plow, Golf Maintenance Equipment Replacement, and Park Safety Improvements); Police (Police Cruisers/Unmarked, and Radios/Light Bars/Other; and Fire (Car 2, Tanker 10 Replacement, and Air Packs (SCBA).

Town Building & Equipment requests totaling \$402,100 include the following: General Government (IT Equipment Replacement); Recreation (Outdoor Fitness Course – less matching funds of \$10,000; Recreation Center – various; Barlow Pool Resurfacing – less matching funds of \$81,500; and Park Safety Improvements); and Engineering (Building Repairs, Dual Fuel Furnace and various Engineering Projects).

Roads & Infrastructure requests totaling \$1,515,000 include the following: Public Works (Drainage/Waterway Work; Roads/Class Two Overlay; Mamasco Lake; Guardrail Replacements); Town Engineer (Gas Main Extension; Sidewalk Improvement (less State Grant LOCIP of \$150,000); and Tree Warden (Tree Replacement).

School Buildings & Equipment requests totaling \$604,800 include the following: Branchville Elementary School (Heat Plant), Farmingville Elementary School (Asbestos Abatement), School Buildings & Grounds (Door Replacement & Fencing) and Vehicles & Equipment (Truck with Plow, Tractor, and Ground Maintenance Equipment).

Totals include:

Town Operations (\$3,941,427 - +3.00%); School Operations (\$77,822,680 - +1.37%); Capital Projects (\$100,000 – 0% increase); Public Debt \$13,811,296 – less 0.49%), for a Total of \$122,675,403 - +1.56%.

The annual Town Meeting is scheduled for May 3<sup>rd</sup> at the Ridgefield Playhouse.

Board of Education Proposed 2011 Budget – Presented by John Palermo, BOE, Superintendent Deborah Low, and Amy Shinohara, BOE

John Palermo began the BOE’s presentation with an overview of the BOE’s proposed budget for 2010-2011. The salary line is up 2.9%, health benefits is -1.7% with the new contract and the hope for 50% participation in HSA, transportation is at +4.3% with the change from the 3 to 4 tier bus system, special ed tuition and transportation is up 15.2% because of the Federal and State mandates, utilities and energy services is -5.5% , with a decrease in electrical usage and locked-

in energy purchases, OPEB & pension costs are up 21.5%, and “everything else” category is-4.0%, for a total of 1.67% increase.

Superintendent Deborah Low, reviewed the full-day kindergarten proposal. She stated that this is a “significant initiative whose time has come”. She stressed the importance of early childhood education providing the foundation for reading and math and a focus on language development. The earlier the better to identify challenges and remediate before gaps arise. A full-day kindergarten schedule doubles the instruction time and will help in raising the standards from the first grade on up. She expressed hope for the support from the BOF and the community.

Four full-time educators will be required at an initial cost of \$360,000 (including benefits). Also will be the costs of \$90,000 for furniture, professional development and curriculum development. The current kindergarten day is too limited in time – only 2 hours, 46 minutes. This initiative addresses the State emphasis and research on early childhood education and matches best practices in comparable districts. Declining enrollment projections will help to contain cost increases in following years with the potential for future reduction in special education costs.

John Palermo, BOE, commented on the BOE’s new contractual agreements and what has transpired over the last 18 months with regard to agreements with administrators, teachers, custodians, secretaries, and paraprofessionals.

Amy Shinohara, BOE, commented on the current HSA transition. The targeted participation is 50% with 30% budgeted. May is scheduled for open enrollment month because better rates are available by making May the enrollment time. The HSA transition has been successful in other districts. Each employee was provided with an individual analysis of the cost of the new plan as compared to the old plan. Available also to each participant was a detailed summary of their out-of-pocket costs last year. The feedback from this has been most favorable. It has been determined that only five employees do not benefit from moving to the HSA plan. As employees are educated in how to look at their medical expenses, the resultant costs can only go down. With benefits costs estimated at \$11.3 million, this shows a decline of \$0.2 million or -1.7%. Administrators have already migrated to the HSA-only plan.

John Palermo, BOE, reviewed the budget projections for the upcoming three-year period (2010 to 2013). In looking at what is going on in New York and New Jersey, we see big deficits building up. These budget projection numbers show what the BOE is doing to keep costs down and reasonable. They have reviewed salaries, benefit costs, Special Education costs, and “all else”. They presented two alternatives – Alternate Case 1 with the reclaiming of Children’s Corner space in 2011, and Alternate Case 2 with the reclaiming of Children’s Corner space in 2012. Reclaiming this space will result in the loss of \$175,000/year rental income and capital expenses to convert the space back to elementary school usage.

Public Comments – Chaired by Peter Gomez, Board of Finance

Mr. Gomez stated how he wanted to “applaud both groups”, the Board of Selectmen and the Board of Education in their presentation of a “comprehensive and transparent” budget proposal. They both presented to the BOF reasonable requests.

Amelia Fox, Acorn Place, also expressed a thank you to the BOS and the BOE. People move to Ridgefield because of the good school system. Good schools are the Town’s most valuable asset. The BOE and the BOS should not be in competition. Please send the BOE budget to referendum as it stands.

Michele Tivey, Danbury Rd., commented on her experience as an attorney and suggested that there needs to be a “little spin” on what is going on in this budget process. This is the “second lowest increase in thirty years”; health benefits are not just “moving to an HSA, but this is a “health savings account”; not just an all-day kindergarten program, but “catch kids before they fall and give them wings to soar”; this proposed increase of 2.06% “on a tax bill of \$10,000 is only an additional \$2.67/month per household”. It is all how we look at it. In *Connecticut Magazine*, Ridgefield was #1 because it is “off the beaten track”, and a “low crime rate”. Nothing was said about education. With regard to other #1 rated towns, the first thing mentioned is their education system. We need to show our commitment to education. Our #1 ranking is very important.

Laurie Knachel, Barry Ave., commented on how she has three boys and paid for all of them to attend a full-day kindergarten program. This is how important it is for Ridgefield to have an all-day program. This will result in more challenges for the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades.

Page Bowler, High Ridge Ave., stated how she supports the BOE budget as presented. People move to Ridgefield because of the education available for their children. Regardless of the economy, we need to continue our focus on education. Let the residents vote!

Jay D’Orso, Sycamore Lane, suggested that we need to stop living in fear. Our town has to be appropriately funded. Lower enrollment is not the issue. The proposed budgets should go to referendum.

Bethany Agliardo, Holmes Rd., stated that she supports the proposed BOE budget. This is a very slim budget. The BOE has worked very hard to save dollars. We need to advocate for education. This small proposed increase in the education budget is important to support. Any further cuts would be too much. She does not like the late bus when the children do not arrive home until 4:30.

Stephanie Anderson, Barrack Hill, indicated that she is in support of the BOE budget. Ms. Anderson commented on the rhetoric in the press regarding the budget process, which she finds “disheartening”. We are all neighbors, we are all volunteers, we shop locally, we donate to local charities, we are young and old, Democrats and Republicans, have children in the schools and our children are grown – we’re all in this together. Let’s let the voters vote!

Lisa Schoenherr, Florida Hill Rd., requests that the BOE budget be kept as it is being presented.

Gian-Carlo Peressutti, Farm Hill Rd., indicated that he manages a budget at work and at home. Sometimes there is a cost incurred when “not” doing something. Our world is increasingly competitive. We are the only town in our peer group that does not have a full-day kindergarten program. Mr. Peressutti urges support for the BOE proposed budget.

Gene Waradzin, Marcadon Ave., a resident of Ridgefield for 43 years, cautioned approval of the proposed budget. There are Ridgefield residents out of work. The national forecast for employment is not good. We need to be cautious. If our school enrollment is declining, then the school costs should not be going up. Why isn't this budget decreasing? Why do we need a full-day kindergarten “right now”? He feels the BOE could not pick a worse time to make this request. We should try to live “within our means”. We will vote no on the proposed referendum.

Joe Buczek, Seth Low Mountain Rd., feels that the BOE has broken new ground. He is in agreement with Peter Gomez. Mr. Buczek supports the BOE budget as presented and hopes the BOF will do the same. Let the residents vote for the budget as presented.

Trieste Pierandri Matte, Revere Dr., stated that she is a third generation Ridgefield resident. She “loves this town”. She almost stayed living in Wilton because of the quality of their school system. Education determines the property value of our town. The BOF should not change the budget before the residents have the opportunity to vote. Please leave the budget as it is!

Peter Furfaro, West Lane, indicated that if he had known that there was not a full-day kindergarten program in Ridgefield, he would not have moved here. Our neighborhood school may well close. He has attended the BOE meetings and has seen the BOE's extreme process to keep the budget as low as possible. Yes, the BOF can make changes, but Mr. Furfaro indicated that he wants to vote for the BOE budget as presented. We're “better than this”. A lot of hard working people can make things happen here in Ridgefield. We as taxpayers want to vote.

Don Romoser, Wilton Rd., W., expressed a thank you to all the BOS members and department heads for their extreme diligence. The BOE has done the same. They are all financially responsible. He supports the capital budget for both the Town and the BOE. Why is the education budget going up when enrollment is going down? Across the nation, the cost per student is going up. Educational services are mandated in this global economy. He understands the caution. He has attended legislative sessions in Hartford and in Washington. The overriding principles regarding education are going to be changed. The ESA (Education Secondary Act) will be looking at early childhood education and competitive grants. The State education department is looking at full-day kindergarten as a “win”. 60-70% of the towns in Connecticut have full-day kindergarten programs. All our neighbor towns have full-day kindergarten. We need to look at this program with a long-range view. This is the lowest budget presented to the BOF in thirty years. Yes, last year's budget was even lower after it was reduced.

Kathie McGerald, Ramapoo Rd., expressed support for the 2.06% budget. This budget is more than just a full-day kindergarten program. It also relieves overcrowding in the middle schools and provides for a K-5 Literary Chair. Lot of houses in Ridgefield are up for sale now. We have seen a reduction in our high school test scores. Let's leave the budget as proposed.

Ed Tyrrell, Pond Rd., stated how last year's budget cut services and laid off personnel. A BOE School Configuration Committee was set up, which resulted in a minority report to close a school this upcoming year. Nobody wants to close something down. Instead, the request is to start a new program. We are in the middle of the worse recession in many, many years. The forecast is for 1500 students less than the bundle's proposed capacity. If this is the year to start a full-day kindergarten program, what about the funding for this program in the years to come? State aid is not going to increase. The Federal stimulus plan is going to end. We need to make repairs to our infrastructure. Roads benefit all the residents. Is a full-day kindergarten program more important than AP high school classes or smaller class sizes? We need to look carefully at closing a school sooner rather than later.

Alisa Hoover, Tanton Hill Rd., expressed support for a full-day kindergarten program. This is not an option, it is being done everywhere. It is a necessity and will provide for advancement in the other grades as well.

Andy Anderson, Barrack Hill Rd., stated that he is "cheap". He does not like spending dollars, but a failure to invest is sometimes worse than overspending. Our world is a competitive place. If we do not invest, we lose.

John Palermo, Board of Education, expressed a thank you for the many people who worked on the proposed budget. Thank you to Debby Low; we are lucky to have her leadership.

Peter Gomez closed the meeting time for comments from the public.

Children's Corner Lease – Rudy Marconi stated that the BOS is in negotiation with the Director of Children's Corner and their legal counsel and looking at a ten-year option for their lease. A lot of Ridgefield residents use Children's Corner for their child care and would like this space to remain available to them. There needs to be continued communication from the BOE regarding use of this facility.

Peter Gomez asked that the slide be returned to the screen regarding the grants received from the State of CT. These grants are going to be cut back and we have become used to receiving these dollars from the State. We need to channel our energy into what can we do at the State level. The BOF will be reviewing the budget requests with the individual Town departments as well as with the BOE in the days to come.

Peter Gomez closed the BOF Public Hearing at 9:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Janet L. Johnson