

**CITY OF NORWALK
BOARD OF ESTIMATE AND TAXATION
PUBLIC HEARING
MARCH 28, 2018**

ATTENDANCE: Edwin Camacho, Chair; Harry Rilling, Mayor; James Feigenbaum, James Frey, Troy Jellerette, Artie Kassimis, James Page

OTHERS: Donna King, City Clerk

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Camacho called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m. A quorum was present.

PUBLIC HEARING

Ms. King announced that there were two sign up sheets one for the City Budget and the Board of Education.

Mayor Rilling said that he expected a health and robust discussion but requested that everyone keep this respectful and courteous. He added that the cap on the Operating Budget would not be set tonight.

Mr. Robert Ayala of Raymond Terrace came forward and said that he was the Dean of Students at Brien McMahon High School. He said that he deals with the most talented student who require extra care and attention. The budget cuts would harm the students. Mr. Ayala often deals with the students one on one before they need guidance counselors. Failing to fully fund the budget will put the school in a position to either fail to hire more teachers or guidance counselors. During the past two years, they have not been able to offer alternative pathways to students who need this, while the State of Connecticut has required more credits to graduate. Rather than cutting corners, the Board should fund the Board of Education and invest in the future.

Mr. Mike Barbis, the Board of Education Chairman, came forward and said that the Board of Education was the largest portion of the Budget. He said that the City was spending the least per pupil of all the City's neighbors. While Norwalk's schools are better than Stamford's, Norwalk is spending \$2,000 less per pupil. Norwalk is a growing city and is top of its peer group. The elementary schools are only delivering 900 hours of instructions while the State is requiring 1,000 hours. The board is asking for a small increase.

Ms. Mary Yorden of Mott Avenue came forward and said she was representing the Norwalk Federation of Norwalk Teachers came forward. She said that there had been decades of under funding and growing needs, the district is making strides. The Board

faces many challenges and the District is proud of the Norwalk students and their achievements. There are many week-ends when the teachers are participating in student events. All Norwalk teachers are investing their time and talent into their Norwalk Students.

Ms. Shelley Gillman of Crooked Trail came forward and said that she lives in Rowayton. She teachers in Norwalk and said that they are faced with more challenges every year. She said that there were two non-English speaking students in her class along with her other students and was requesting that the Board receive as much money as possible to get the students ready for first grade. She invited the Board of Estimate and Taxation members to come to her classroom to see what goes on there. She said that she was begging the Board of Estimate and Taxation to support the Schools' needs.

Ms. Jennifer Boswell came forward and said that she was a paraprofessional at Marvin School. They only work part time, don't get paid much and don't receive benefits. She said that taking away the kindergarten aides who are working to help get the students ready for first grade. She pointed out that their salaries are just above those who teach summer school.

Mr. Scott Hurwitz, the Brien McMahon High School principal, came forward to speak about the current status of students. Without adding more teachers, the students may not be able to earn enough credits to graduate.

He said that another challenge is the reduction of a counselor positions. When students have moments of crisis, they need counselors. Currently, the counselors serve about 190 students. He then listed the various ratios of the near by schools and said that losing one counselor would move the number of students per counselor to 218.

Mr. Tom Hamilton came forward and said he was the Chief Financial Officer for the Norwalk School district. He thanked the Board of Education, and those on the Board of Estimate and Taxation for their hard work. However, he said that Board of Estimate and Taxation has an opportunity to bridge some of the gap for the funding that the Board of Education is asking for. Previously, the City has budgeted very conservatively, and this is a good thing. He then listed some of the conservative budgetary practices that the City routinely. Most of the time, there has not been a fund balance draw down and the City has outperformed the budget. there is 51.7 million in the fund balance, which outperforms almost every town in the State. Based on this, he would encourage the Board of Estimate and Taxation to budget less conservatively.

Mr. Ed Abrams of Morgan Avenue came forward and said that he was the president of the Norwalk Band Parents. He listed several statistics about how the band students perform and asked why the City was cutting the funding. They have an opportunity to correct a situation that is wrong. There are solutions that will not present a risk to the City. He asked the City to ask the Governor to do what is right for the City of Norwalk

Ms. Rebecca Riddell of Greenfield Road came forward and said that she was a kindergarten paraprofessional at Brookside and her husband is a second grade teacher. The paraprofessionals provide comfort to the students and also can provide reading intervention to the students when needed. Paraprofessionals help with emotional and social support for their students. She asked that the Board of Estimate and Taxation help the Board of Education by fully funding the budget request.

Ms. Laura Lecky of Flax Hill Road came forward and requested that the Board of Estimate and Taxation should increase the funding for the Board of Education. Due to lack of funding, the District will be cutting positions such as the guidance secretaries. While there will be new technology, it cannot replace the secretaries in the middle schools. The students face challenges socially and emotionally. The guidance counselors help the students navigate their challenges, but when they are not available, the secretaries step in. The secretaries provide much needed services to the students and their family.

Mr. Joe Giandurco of Mott Avenue came forward to request that the Board of Estimate and Taxation not cut the funding because it will impact the students. He mentioned the guidance counselors who work with the students to help them emotionally. He encouraged them to work with the Board of Education to provide the funding for the schools.

Mr. Eric Nieder of Pettom Road then came forward and said that he was a tax payer and representing the Fox Run School. He said that there was a financial need because the Board of Education has been under funded for years. The City's priorities should include the public education. There are children in Norwalk who need care and this is unique time in history. There is a strategic plan and other plans that allowed the District to soar. Now these programs need to be developed. He spoke about some of the anticipated cuts in the schools and said that it would impact the students.

Mr. Camacho then said that if there was no one present who wished to address the City budget, he would like to dismiss the City department heads. No one came forward.

Mr. Ben Soreff of Fairview Avenue came forward and said that the USA sends money as foreign aid, but they don't support their own students. He said that when students fall through the cracks, the country will experience what happens with failed education.

Mr. Doug Peoples of Pogany Street came forward and said that he has been in Norwalk since Day One. He said that he did not think that the Board of Estimate and Taxation would know the names of the counselors who were present. He said that he knows the needs of the students. While the Board of Estimate and Taxation members will come and go, and the superintendent will go on to get a better job, the counselors will remain. Without funding, things will change.

Mr. David Heuvelman of Buckingham Place came forward and said that it was time to stop playing politics with Norwalk's children. He said that the gains that the schools have made are in danger despite the fact that Norwalk is the top urban school district in the State. The District is closing the achievement. When he hears that the contingency fund is being held back against something that might happen, but the Strategic Operating Plan is stalled.

Mr. Bruce Kimmel of Toilsome Avenue came forward and said that he was a member of Board of Education. He said that everyone understands the need for contingency funds, but felt that the Board of Estimate and Taxation was being irresponsible because they were not supporting the Board of Education. He said that he appreciated the fact that public education has become more expensive and it was important to realize that the money will be spent one way or another. Since 2008, the City has been working on building the fund balance and working on the budget. He congratulated the Mayor about the Plan of Conservation and Development. There is more on bike lanes and traffic than there is on education.

Ms. Lemieux came forward and said that she teaches children in Norwalk, Weston, New Canaan and Wilton. She said that focus is always on how to make the world a better place. She said that she felt that Norwalk has become a better place. There have been great teachers, great administrators and great plans, but now the City needs to fund the District at an appropriate level. Now is the time for the Board of Estimate and Taxation to make the world a better place by funding the District appropriately.

Ms. Barbara Meyer-Mitchell came forward to speak about the Board of Education budget. She asked the Board of Estimate and Taxation a way to fund the Board of Education and said that she felt that it could be found in the contingency fund. She then listed a number of different programs that would require more funding, such as the increase in the number of credits for graduation, the school counselors, and various other programs. Norwalk must have a vision to get away from the status quo.

Ms. Meghan Hopkins came forward and said that she was president of the PTA at Roton Middle School. She said that she felt that she was doing this too often and was tired. Every year, she has this opportunity to address the Board of Estimate and Taxation and the Council. In 2005, they found out they could not sell their house for what they paid for it. So, they started their children in Columbus Magnet and loved it. The improvement of the Norwalk Public Schools will pay off in the long run. She then read a number of statistics about real estate values. She said that just 4 miles away is a community that doesn't have a beach, or Stew Leonard's but does have a School District is not under funded every single year.

Ms. Beverly Dixon of Cedar Street, said that she went to McGrath Elementary, Ponus Middle and Brien McMahon High School. Her son has attended Norwalk schools, also

and is the president of the Norwalk Federation of Educational Personnel. She said that she was here to support the students and want to teach the students properly. She said that they work well with the teachers. If the positions are cut, it puts a strain on the teachers. The para educators work with the teachers and want the best for the students. Instead of trying to cut the funds, it is important to take a step forward rather than one back.

Ms. Joanna Cooper came forward and said that she could not be proud and more decisive. Norwalk actually seemed to be moving forward and had a Board of Education that was working together without drama. The Operating Plan seems to focus on moving the schools to a higher level and Special Education has made major strides forward over generations. Before the audience were 11 officials that had made a promise that they would support the schools. She then asked everyone how they could not be outraged. This is an insult to all taxpayers rather than just those who have children in the District. This is wrong and the sweetheart deals that the Mayor has with developers who contributed to his campaign.

Ms. Rachel Bratton came forward and said that she and her husband had moved to Norwalk 3 years ago. She said that they had lived in three different other communities and had never attended a meeting like this. She and her husband suddenly ended up with custody of his 16 year old son and her family has received incredible support from the guidance counselors at Norwalk High School. This is important and she wanted to let them know that the challenge is not just getting into college. Now the children are exposed to random sexuality and many other things, without guidance counselors at the schools, it is almost impossible to reinforce the values from home.

Ms. Michelle Suda came forward to speak about guidance. Her daughter suffered a major concussion that caused her to lose significant time during her junior year. Her guidance counselor made sure she got her work and a home tutor. When it was time for her to come back to school, her guidance counselor made sure that the teachers knew she couldn't come back full time. Ms. Suda said that she did not think her daughter could have done it without the Norwalk High School guidance counselors. The Paraprofessionals are treated as equals and work as a team. It is important for the Board of Estimate and Taxation members to visit the schools and s

Mr. Dan Sullivan came forward and said that he was privileged to serve the students for the last 20 years. People pay a premium to live in Norwalk and expect success. There are times of anxiety, and mental health issues and the need for school guidance counselors is critical.

Ms. Jenifer Jefferies of Rascal Street came forward and said this is the third time she has come to speak about the school budget. She said that the budget cuts would reduce programs and Impact the mental health of the children, particularly the 4, 5 and 6 year olds. Norwalk's budget is less than its neighbors. There are many children who enter

kindergarten without speaking English. On any given day, a Paraprofessionals provides help with small groups and individualized instruction. They provide care that the parents often take for granted. This makes the children safe, happy and able to learn.

Mr. Nate Shelton came forward and said that he had been a Norwalk taxpayer for the past 7 years. He spoke about the increase of students recently while other communities have had decreases. The Math and English scores were in the lower half. the staff is not able to keep up with the increases. The Strategic Plan is good, but the programs need funding. Norwalk wants to attract families rather than just as a temporary landing pad. Let's not put the children at a disadvantage and keep the strategic plan on track

Ms. Angela Blu, a Board of Education employee with a child at Brien McMahon High School , came forward and said that former President Barak Obama had said that the country had an obligation towards the students. She said that she performs many roles at her school, as a nurse, a secretary and a guidance counselor. She said that when someone calls the school to pick up a student early, there may not be someone there to answer the phone. She said that secretaries and guidance counselors work with students who are anxious, the ones that may be considering suicide or have other problems. When you take away the little pieces, it takes away from the students. We need to provide the best education.

Ms. Emma Apointe came forward and said that she was a sixth grade student and said that the budget should not cut. She said that they need their aides an the security system needs to be working. The guidance counselors are needed. Cutting the budget will impact my life as a student.

Ms. Jill Aruanitis came forward of Esquire Road came forward to speak. She said that was speaking as a parent. She wanted to know what it would do to the home values if there was a headline that Norwalk fully funds the schools. She said that they are closing the achievement gap.

Mr. Chad Southerland came forward and said that he wanted to speak as a counselor. He said that he was in a unique position to see the impact on students' lives. They handle things like suicidal ideation, Snapchat and helping parents find resources. In the school system, you play multiple roles. There are students who are going through increasingly difficult times in their lines. He said that he HOPED that they would be able to fund the budget. There is major momentum right now in the District and this is important.

Ms. Olivia Togridis came forward and said that she had not planned to speak. She had two children that need Special Education and the teachers and paraprofessionals help her children. Every year she has to fight for her children's rights. Her daughter is at Tracey School and the building looks very poor. The staff tries so hard to reach all the students. It's not fair to have the parents have to come to the Board of Estimate and Taxation to beg

for funding. Many of the residents love Norwalk and there are many poor people, who we all love. Please don't make the residents beg every year.

Mr. Alan Joseph came forward and said he was a Brien McMahon guidance counselor and a football coach. He said that he had been a counselor for about 8 years. Everyone asks about the daily schedule and he pointed out that it is confidential. He spent time with parents in the morning and he has about 54 students in his caseload. He is one of 2 Creole speaking staff at the school. He spoke about the meetings that he had to attend and while he was there, a student at home had a loaded firearm and texted another student. Since he was in a meeting, the secretary for the guidance department was able to get help for that student.

Ms. Cheryl McGuire came forward and said that she had brought her six year old child to a meeting. Her daughter attends Brookside and she has a good friend in the school staff. Ms. McGuire said that her significant other is currently in Texas with his sixteen year old son because they don't want to pull him out of his school. she said that she is a British citizen and can not vote. Her partner has a four bedroom house in Texas and pays no State income tax. She said that she was wondering why she should stay in Norwalk.

Mr. Anthony Allison, the Norwalk ACTS Director came forward and said that he was listening to the discussion. He said that it takes great passion and understanding to speak about the issues. He said his job is support the members and the children. When decision making is done, the impact on children is major. Even with the best data and best decisions, people still make mistakes. He said that the constant that people deal with is that people make decisions that are just wrong. There is leadership at the District that the District never had before. He knows the dedication that the staff has to support children today. The Board of Estimate and Taxation has an opportunity to make a good decision. He asked how many of the Board of Estimate and Taxation members had children in the NPS. Mayor Rilling and Chairman Camacho raised their hands.

Mr. Camacho then asked if there was anyone else present who wished to address the Board. No one came forward. He then thanked everyone for coming.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Camacho adjourned the meeting at 8:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted

S. L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services

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