

# Town of Colchester, Connecticut

127 Norwich Avenue, Colchester, Connecticut 06415

Bernie Dennler, First Selectman

## Board of Finance

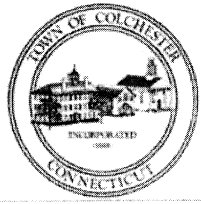
### Budget Forum Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, February 21, 2024 @ 7:00 PM

Hybrid: Town Hall – Meeting Room 1 & Via Zoom

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COLCHESTER, CT  
2024 FEB 27 AM 9:36  
GAYLE FURMAN  
TOWN CLERK

1. Call to order and Roll Call
  - a. Scott Chapman, Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:30 PM
  - b. BOF Members Present: John Thomas, Scott Chapman, Tim Vaillancourt, Mike Hayes, Mike Egan, Karen Belding
  - c. BOF Members absent: none
  - d. Others present: Bernie Dennler (First Selectman)
2. Pledge of Allegiance
3. Opening statement made by Chair.
  - a. Agenda and format reviewed, with citizen comment overview
4. Citizen Comments on Budget
  - a. Vince Rose: Is glad to hear a collaborative tone being set. Concerned with supposition from past years - that small increases in past several years don't seem adequate for either the town or school. On the school side, concerned with programs that have disappeared due to cuts required by minimal increases, talented and gifted program, double block of English that had to be removed, B/C level of a math class stopped being offered.
  - b. Jenny Sevigny: been involved with budgets as a teacher (in a different town) and as a parent/citizen and is concerned with what is going on in our town. Flat budgets are not how we solve the problem. We have to keep up with increasing costs and payments. If we do not fund appropriately each year, it ends up with something like a fiscal cliff situation. Agrees that no one wants to pay more taxes, but it is necessary to a certain extent to keep service levels and maintenance fully funded. Would like to see a reasonable Town and School budget.
  - c. Margo Gignac: speaking as citizen but highlighting a BOE meeting. Special meeting tomorrow night for BOE - 6 pm at William J Johnson to present a capital plan – the output of community committees and also the presentation from the group that put together a proposal for school fields. 2 BOE budget forum meetings will be at CES; supposed to be childcare available, Feb 27 and Mar 9. See board of ed webpage for details.
  - d. Jeremy McKenzie: states that citizens were loud and clear during the process last year. First need appropriate funding to provide services properly. Concerned about schools - wish list is long, wants to see gifted and talented back, pay to pay sports removed, increases in salaries to be competitive, afternoon buses for athletes, playing field upgrades, building maintenance funds and projects, more club funding for student exposure.
  - e. John Malsbenden: wanted to remind new members of the board that we should avoid a problem faced by many boards - using non-reoccurring income to pay for reoccurring expenses because it does not end well. Earmarking certain revenue lines to fund very specific things is a monster to keep track of and make sure it happens well - keep it more general, but under tight control.
  - f. Deanna Bouchard: stated believed that the First Selectman promised an update on fiscal health prior to enter budget deliberation. Stated that we need to go beyond 'wants' to 'needs'. Some decisions have been made in the past because of prioritizing 'needs' over 'wants'. School population has decreased



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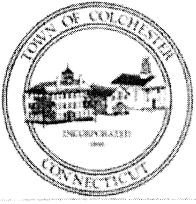
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significantly and some program cuts happened because of reduced population - programs like gifted and talented were chosen to be cut because of such reasons. Double block of English was a change in direction. Athletic fields are atrocious, but what's the impact of making improvements on all the members of town. Agrees we should not use non-re-occurring funds to pay for re-occurring costs. First Selectman came into this term and made mid-term increases in salaries. Need to see fiscal health and this board should demand it.

- g. S. Chapman stated that these forums are meant to be a device for collecting town perspective prior to finalized draft budgets and the revised financials available per timelines stated at prior meeting.
- h. Michael Dubreuil: comment is more about process – wants to see board of finance to state what format budgets are expected to be provided in. Concerned over the back and forth over proposed budget formats that happened last year. Agrees with the comments on source of revenue.
- i. Cliff O'Donnell: increased wages for employees – they deserve the rate increase and it is needed to try to slow turnover. Stated that re-allotment of funds needs to be discussed – not just an increase to pay for things to keep tax increases low. Hopefully school board will try to keep a reasonable budget. Sure everyone involved will work hard.

## 5. BOF discussion:

- a. T. Vaillancourt asking about status on Finance reports.
- b. B. Dennler said the updated finance reports will be brought to next week's BOF meeting and they will be much more representative of where we are at this time fiscally.
- c. M. Egan stated that it is normal part of the budget process to do budget forums to collect citizen feedback ahead of draft presentations, etc. The number of citizen comments tonight was actually a higher than normal turnout for the first budget forum and thanked the attendees. Reiterated importance of citizens speaking up about their priorities.
- d. J. Thomas stated that this is a similar story to prior years – some people wants things to increase, some to decrease and some to stay the same. A little disappointed there is not unity. Stated we have a great town. Stated that we haven't seen any of the cleaned up financial numbers yet. Only way to make this work is to come together.
- e. S. Chapman stated that he is new to the board and as chair, but acknowledged that there will always be disagreement over what exactly they want, but it was clear everyone wants to be heard. Our primary focus needs to be hearing everyone with an open mind and then doing what's right for the town as a whole.
- f. K. Belding stated some actions based on citizen comments: 1) deeper discussion on revenue lines and where we stand on those numbers for next budget year – asked that we address that at an upcoming meeting 2) proposed that at next BOF meeting, members of the board need to dialogue on the type of information or data that is needed in the budget presentations and budget books from both the town and BOE. Goal of expressing request list prior to budgets being presented. 3) Requested that both town and school budgets outline where there re-occurring expenses that are funded out of non-re-occurring funding sources. B. Dennler agreed town would include that information, but said that his understanding so far is there are not a lot of those, but budget presentation will explicitly flag each. 4) Articulated the theme heard that not all service or program decisions are solely made based on financial situations, so



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any shifts in services or programs in the upcoming budget proposals need to include the drivers for the change so this can be clearly understood in this round of budget discussions/decisions.

- g. S. Chapman summarized where we are at in the budget process, articulating next steps and how this is the beginning of the process and where it goes from here.
- h. T. Vaillancourt – asked for an update on the finance department and the report updates and timing. B. Dennler confirmed that the board would hear from the finance director in the 2/28 finance meeting on the findings in the finance reports and any steps taken for remediation/updates.
- i. J. Thomas – questioned what the format is going to be for the town budget. B. Dennler stated that the town will create a budget book similar to years prior to last year, standard budget book including current and past expenses and narrative of each department. J. Thomas followed up asking about the school budget format – wanted to know why the school budget was presented in a different format last year? M. Egan said that the BOE determines their own draft budget and the format it is presented in. We have department level control, but the BOE makes that determination, but can and will adjust per feedback. Acknowledged having been on the BOE when programs and services in the past had to be cut and emphasized the clarity of public opinion is imperative to the process.
- j. K. Belding – asked if we can articulate what we really need in the school board budget book in the next meeting so it can be clear to BOE what we need in their materials to avoid the concerns that happened last year.
- k. T. Vaillancourt – said he wants a budget book from the school like town is doing. Wants a budget book like we had two years ago. K. Belding asked what is in that budget book. T. Vaillancourt said a breakdown from each department. Committed to bring a sample of the school budget book from several years ago that can be reviewed at next meeting.
- l. M. Egan – noted that different towns and different school districts all present budgets and present draft budgets in many different formats. Different administrations have historically done it different year over year here, too. Recommended that we need to request it.
- m. J. Thomas – noted a concern that the transparency software would be one piece of solving some of this, but not sure how that's progressed. S. Chapman noted transparency software is only as good as the data being fed into it. B. Dennler noted that the BOS just signed a contract and set a tentative summer go-live target for that software to be live.
- n. Group discussion on historic information provided in different years by BOE and how and where it was available.
- o. S. Chapman closed with statement that this was a positive start and conversation. Urged citizens to attend Board Of Ed forums coming up. Also noted that the joint workshops are a chance to work with and ask questions of both budgets with the experts in the room to answer.

## 6. Adjournment

- a. J. Thomas motion to adjourn, M. Hayes seconds; roll call vote passed unanimously. Adjourned at 7:38 PM.

Respectfully Submitted By:  
Karen Belding  
Member, Board of Finance