

Board of Finance / Board of Education
Budget Work Session
2/8/11

Attending :

BoF Members: Gail Lavielle, Al Alper, Jim Meinhold, Lynne Vanderslice, Warren Serenbetz and Andy Pforzheimer.

BoE Members: Bruce Likly, Barbara Myers, Gil Bray, Richard Dubow, Karen Birck and Jim Saxe.

Wilton Public School Reps: Gary Richards, Ken Post, Arlene Gottsman, Ann Paul, Ellen Andrews and Matthew Hepfer

School Administrators: Julia Harris, Virginia Rico, Tom Ford, Cheryl Jensen-Gerner, and Tim Canty

Wilton Citizens/ Members of the Public: Anthony Buzzeo, Ed Papp, Maria Haljun, Maria Wilcox, Stacey Crameri, Jim Lucas, Tiffany Tecce, Chrisitan Camerota, John Kalamarides, Sibylle Kinley, Amy Donohue, Sandra Dennies and Joy Ruterman

Call to Order:

BoF Chairman Warren Serenbetz called the meeting to order at 7:30pm.

Mr. Serenbetz stated the agenda of the meeting was to communicate questions from the BoF to the BoE with the understanding additional time may be needed to answer some of the questions, which could be done within the next week. He also stated there would be time for public participation at the end of the business meeting.

Mr. Serenbetz thanked the BoE for their work on the budget and for their time in attending tonight's meeting. He stated new this year was the BoF's desire for a 3- year budget outlook to give proper perspective on this year's numbers. He acknowledged it's difficult to execute especially with salaries and the pending contract negotiations. As a result he suggested the BoE assume no changes in any contracts for 2013 and 2014 projected numbers.

The BoF is interested especially in the items being deferred. The BoF is hopeful these additional numbers can be produced by mid-March.

In response to a question by Mr. Post, Mr. Serenbetz said the starting point should be the BoE's currently proposed budget.

An opening statement was read by Mr. Bray, Chairman of the BoE, appreciating the opportunity to discuss the 2011-12 budget, which was approved by the BoE on 2/3/11 with a 5.32% increase to \$70.3 million. There are 4,210 students currently enrolled in the Wilton Public Schools, which is 55 students lower than last year.

BoF Comments / Opening Remarks:

Ms. Vanderslice began by responding to requests by taxpayers and BOE Chair, Gil Bray that the BOF just pass along the BOE budget to the voters. She pointed to the Town's Charter and the stated BoF responsibilities. The BoF is required to listen to and consider what is said at the public hearings, read and evaluate the letters received by the public and determine if there is savings left on the table by the BoE and / or the BoS before determining an appropriate budget.

Ms. Vanderslice also indicated she had met with several BoE reps to discuss average teacher salaries and their high ranking compared to DRG schools. Although the numbers are what they are, during the meeting several factors were discussed to account for the results, such as the fact that Wilton teachers work a longer day and a longer year. Although they were as close to apples to apples as possible there still are differences. Context is critical when using the State DOE numbers.

Mr. Pforzheimer stated there is a larger divergence with what's been proposed vs. previous years regarding the cost curve of the schools versus what the town can afford to pay. He is disappointed in the cost cutting, which is affecting the core education and he's concerned the thought process is no different for the upcoming years. This is another reason why the BoF is requesting a 3- year plan to be certain this trend doesn't continue. He's hopeful the teachers' contractual negotiations will prove favorable. He's hoping by bringing in teachers on a collaborative basis the cost to the schools and the required pay in salaries will be more in line over the next 10 years.

Superintendent's Statement:

Dr. Richards stated 80% of the budget is in salaries and there is a proposed meeting with the BoE counsel for the next steps regarding the teachers' contract negotiations. He indicated the challenge faced is the schools are a caregiving organization and resolving each issue doesn't mean handling it the cheapest way possible. He stated it's a balance of cost savings vs. the mission and values of the organization, requirements of the law, best practices available and expectations of the community. Furthermore the many mandates often force restructuring.

Dr. Richards commented there are 128 different mandates, of which 121 are either unfunded or underfunded. The schools continue trying to find savings in instructional practices, teacher training, long-term planning, equipment replacement, and health benefits. He stated one new area of savings is the consolidated health benefits program of the town and school employees. This larger pool of people will lead to increased savings.

Mr. Meinhold questioned what would the potential savings be if all the unfunded mandates "just went away", asking for the top 3-5 areas and put a number on it. Dr. Richards responded the reporting and various requirements associated with Special Ed and the Burden of Proof are the two largest areas of unfunded mandates.

Mr. Alper commented he couldn't find any fat in the budget and also believes the current cuts are too deep and hitting the education of the children.

There was then discussion about the freshman mentoring program and whether or not it was possible for outside volunteers to continue this program (the answer was no due to labor laws and liability issues). Along the same lines Ms. Vanderslice asked if it was possible to have extra-curricular activities run by the same teachers on school property, but instead of the schools paying the teachers a stipend, could the students pay a fee directly to the teachers?

Discussion ensued regarding class sizes. Mr. Canty commented WHS is now at a 15.6 students / teacher ratio compared to 15.1 over the last 10-15 years due to the recent budget cuts. He believes it's important to keep the

K-8 class sizes in check as the benefits of smaller class sizes are definitely seen when the children get to the high school.

Both Mr. Pforzheimer and Ms. Lavielle questioned if there is a metric for measuring over time the impact of the class size and a measure for learning outcomes. Mr. Dubow responded the measure is difficult and often seen in retrospect based on an individual student's experience.

Mr. Serenbetz asked where you draw the line on creating an individualized experience for each student as it's just no longer possible.

Comments on the importance of keeping class size small ranged from the concern of fewer writing assignments due to the grading work load on teachers to children becoming disengaged in larger classes.

Regarding course offerings at WHS, Dr. Richards stated beginning in 2014 the State is mandating increased requirements for graduation, which will result in the need for more courses required and possibly course offerings.

Ms. Vanderslice inquired how WHS compares to other area high schools regarding course offerings. Mr. Canty responded world language seems to be the biggest area of concern and discussion, but everything else seems to balance out.

When questioned the BoE said it was considering moving forward on some capital projects due to the current low interest rate. The Middlebrook and WHS bathrooms were to be renovated over the next 5 years but it's now being proposed to bond them as one combined project.

Regarding discussion on what should / should not be bonded, Ms. Vanderslice said most suggested items would outlive an 18-20 year bond but paving won't last more than 10-15 years so shouldn't be bonded. There was then discussion on who should pay for the paving, the town or the schools.

Ms. Lavielle requested to see the Benefits and Salary match-up to compare categories and if there are increases or decreases in teacher positions what that would mean. She also stressed the importance of reviewing all vendor contracts on a regular basis to find possible savings. She commented no one wants to see teaching, courses or class sizes impacted so she suggested the

BoE approach the teachers regarding contract negotiations in an effort to allow all of them to stay with the Wilton Schools.

Mr. Alper asked to see what the potential revenue might be if participation fees were put into place. He's interested in the breakdown of sports, extra-curricular activities, etc. Along the same line Ms. Vanderslice inquired about the AP exams and if they are required by the school to be taken as parents pay the high fee for those tests. Mr. Canty responded while it was the expectation the AP students take the test this is not a revenue generator, rather a service is received for the fee.

There was no participation or comments from the public.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 9:30pm