

## Rochester, Jacqueline

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**From:** Kaelin, Michael  
**Sent:** Tuesday, May 9, 2023 3:58 PM  
**To:** Rochester, Jacqueline  
**Subject:** Fw: Comments re BOF Data and information used in GMW and Town Meeting discussion (and who has the right to engage publicly)

Here is Stewart's email from last night, which should be posted with the agenda.

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**From:** Koenigsberg, Stewart  
**Sent:** Monday, May 8, 2023 8:06 PM  
**To:** boardoffinance  
**Subject:** Comments re BOF Data and information used in GMW and Town Meeting discussion (and who has the right to engage publicly)

My apologies for the long email.

I believe that we do need to communicate more openly within our meetings and to the local press, and with all the greatest respect to those who feel otherwise, we did such a bad job in communicating data broadly, and others outside of the BOF who desperately attempted to support an unpopular addition to town costs and taxes, have promoted misinformation, some unintentionally, and others, completely intentionally, and some completely intentionally.

The best interests of the town we are elected to serve are poorly served when misstatements and bad data are quoted regarding budgets and budgeting matters in meetings and the local press, and we do not respond. I also believe that data free accusations and/or false statements should not be free from response in the local press, and at any town meeting or Board meeting.

Ira provided a personal opinion, not a legal one on engagement with the press (and social media), which if not followed by everyone on our Board, currently, and in the past, and in the future, and all town boards for that matter, would appear inconsistent at best to suggest that only one person follow it.

There is also the issue of applying that to everyone, which is not, was not, and will never be the case.

If anyone on this Board had a problem with another Board member engaging publicly, it was very surprising that no one sent a note out earlier to Chris Stroup suggesting that he discontinue his sponsorship of ads in GMW, which didn't even attempt to clarify data, as I did, but specifically encouraged people, not only to vote, but actually how to vote..."vote no". Personally, I highly support Chris' right to support whatever he wants to, so long as any data presented is accurate, and my deepest respect and thanks to Chris for supporting the schools and our town. I also highly support and am grateful for his efforts, and I wish more people would have followed his guidance so that we would have a more precise indication of the yes vs no votes. I don't know why Kevin Smith's publicly stated opinion opposed Chris', unless Kevin felt strongly that a clear vote would have made it even more obvious that the overwhelming majority of the town supported the budget at the level we set or lower, which it sure seems like was the outcome... or possibly Kevin understands that it is best to compromise. Unfortunately, I don't think it was helpful. I never understood the town charter precluding votes to increase the budget except to protect the bond rating or otherwise to avoid having to set other guardrails on number of voters and percentage of increase.

In my op Ed, one objective of mine was to suggest that we and others who have the wherewithal, send a check to the BOE, particularly those who insisted that they would be willing to pay more, yet seemingly never agree to follow through when it is voluntary (and was tax deductible in the past). Those people should be asked to follow through on their very vocal and repetitive comments. I suggest that we all publicly acknowledge our agreement that we will contribute to the BOE with at least our share of the BOE budget increase cut or 1%+ of our annual tax bill and encourage others to do the same publicly.

In the not too distant past, I have read OP Eds and even articles sponsored by only one political party in town specifically targeting members of the Board of Finance, which were laden with false statements. Those were done during election years. There was no respect nor dignity using Sandra's words, associated with those, they were petty lies, pure and simple, and in the end, they served no purpose, and worse, the same will be repeated again during every election cycle in Wilton, the result of extraordinary pettiness

and/or stupidity. By the way, I'd like to change the charter and state law so that we can get together and reason like intelligent public servants, with data, rather than emotions. Somehow, incredibly important decision making bodies like the Fed and others can do so but the BOF in the little town of Wilton can't, because of conspiracy theorists.

My purpose is to state facts, and possibly to explain things that we as a board should explain to constituents, as opposed to allowing disinformation regarding town expenses to be used to sway voters to support their way of thinking. The whole idea of these comments that inflation wasn't considered, and the statements that CPI must be used by the BOF, and the oft repeated criticism of the BOF for not discussing that measure, when the overwhelming majority of BOE expenses are intermediate term fixed by contract, which have never been linked nor correlated to CPI. For many years, the teachers' union contract was running at roughly 2x CPI, and only recently is CPI higher. We have a responsibility to respond to the lack of accurate data and provide accurate data, on both sides of the budget debate, and moreso, to evaluate and comment on the veracity of claims made by others, including the BOE.

We collectively did not do a good job of that, even though we spent a great deal of time collecting it. The state's cuts in covid funding to our BOE, and resultant impact on headcount that was added previously while student population was shrinking, was not even included in the BOE's Town meeting presentation which forced people to conclude that it must be this year's BOF "cuts" required by the BOF. The barrage of comments that the BOF doesn't have the expertise nor the data in Wilton to opine on budgets of the BOE while the same procedure is followed in the overwhelming majority of 167 towns in Connecticut, seems a lot more like empty complaints rather than a data driven exercise.

The statement that comparison to other towns, including Edsight and CT Dep't of Education data should be dismissed as irrelevant due to differences was misleading at best, especially because a few years ago Kevin Smith held up those comparisons as the centerpiece of those presentations when the data showed that we spend less than surrounding towns. Now that our per pupil spending is higher than the likes of New Canaan and Darien, have they now somehow become irrelevant? We, as the town's independent financial expert body should have an opinion. Mine is that it is highly relevant, and we need to keep up with the Jones's and never fall to the bottom of the DRG, even through our town is not as wealthy, and we should not try to be at the top either. We should also present the last twenty year of student population changes and forecasts.... And we should note and agree that gross dollars spent without considering student population size is completely irrelevant.

We should all state that the page in the BOE Town meeting deck, which showed that for nine years ( why nine years? Why not 1, 5,10, 15, 20 years... 9 seems a bit like a @search for supportive data points for an argument ), Ridgefield had the greatest increase in gross spending and Wilton had the lowest. Relevant? Absolutely not. Presented as highly relevant? Absolutely yes. More relevant than spending per pupil? Absolutely not... does Ridgefield spend more per student? No, but that presentation suggested it is irrelevant.

The driver of what Sandra referred to as virulent debates among town's people is mostly due to the "data free" nature of so many of those other discussions, driven at least partially by biased presentations, and GMW articles and op-Ed's, which was particularly true this year for the BOE. Personally I believe that the partisan nature of discussions in Wilton is ridiculous, but should be discussions of data. We should present data and not over reach on the dramatization on over or under spending because it is generally inaccurate to do so.

The overwhelming majority of the town wants very good schools but at a reasonable cost, as we see this over and over again in the surveys and votes. My role and I believe our role is to support what the majority of our constituency supports (not what any political party wants), and yet, even members of this Board have and will dispute the results of surveys and votes as inconclusive. Just as I will not vote for a lying bigot for President, who falsely claims that elections are rigged (notwithstanding current party affiliation), I won't support a policy to quell the facts, I won't be silent when I see information being misrepresented, and I will not vote on the Wilton Board of Finance to support anything that I understand is not supported by the town, and I have not and will not accept lies that the all the surveys and all the elections were misleading or fabrications, or poorly written to suggest that the majority of the town has not made it perfectly clear repeatedly as to their views, which we should have unanimously supported rather than a 4-2 vote. So who is representing the town's will and who is supporting their own or their party's "secret meeting" instructions, as I and other BOF members have been accused of? It should be clear.

I digress.

Our time is better spent designing and planning the next, more comprehensive survey, and informing our constituents about the following:

1. Next year's mill rate will likely be considerably higher because of several factors... higher borrowing costs, continued impact of union contracts, much lower valuations for Wilton office properties and automobiles which will shift property taxes to homeowners, and potential increases in town and school operating costs without corresponding increases to property tax revenues given under construction and planned multi family housing, as well as suggesting that if the State supported by our own elected officials pass pension or any other costs to our town, that will be potentially enormous....we would encourage Wilton people who care about our schools to ask their local elected officials to fight such efforts and demand reinstating the cuts for next year which they took away, not because Hartford doesn't have surpluses, but to take the money from non municipal towns in Fairfield county, and send it to elsewhere (municipalities, who do in fact need more help, and eastern CT). We should invite Ceci Mahr and Keith Denning to educate us as to the risk and ask what they are doing to stop it. We might even want to educate people in town on the teachers contract, our single largest town expense, and the potential impact of teacher pensions, Wilton teacher comp and benefits and

other expenses in the BOE budget and possibly how they compare to other towns. I would volunteer to get that data, if a Democrat could ask the elected Democrats to join us.

2. More data on the details behind our borrowing, with more borrowing to come, and interest rates in our borrowing up significantly. Show impact of each element to the town, with Dawn's help.

3. The BOE contract with teachers requires a 4.03% increase next year, and 3.77% the following year, no matter where CPI drops in response to hawkish Fed policies. Show sensitivities based on student population and tax revenues.

4. More data on percentage of office buildings in our tax base, and impact from falling auto prices on home taxes. Get data from Dawn.

5. Respond publicly and uniformly to the disturbing comment that the BOF would disregard the town votes if required to reconsider the budget.

The suggestion that we would not respond to follow town vote guidance in line with the town's wishes is a disingenuous and self serving comment in order to question the judgement and allegiances of the BOF, and further attempts to confuse people as to the truth as to where the town majority stands.

I found all such comments to be a pre-emptive attempt with the knowledge that the original BOE budget and tax rate did not have majority support.. and there was very little hope to get the votes necessary to reinstate the BOE budget. I liked Chris Stroup's approach much better, and I was looking forward to a vote on the subject with clear lines, so that we could get better guidance before this nonsense of "vote yes because the BOF is dishonest, because they lied about the surveys etc. ". Ridiculous and insulting and dishonest. It is the same conspiracy theory that there are secret meetings about budgets, another sad excuse for an alternative reality, and that the BOF does not serve the town.

I don't know about the rest of you, but my boss in the Kremlin has been too busy setting off fireworks above his building, while suggesting they were drones from one thousand miles away, to give me my orders this week as to how to vote on the Wilton budget when it is overturned by all those majority voters at the Town Meeting who were "disgusted" ( he used that exact same tone deaf line before at a town meeting before in 2009... and I believe that the town actually voted to decrease the budget that year because it was too high, after many people in town had financial difficulty that year).

As another aside, Sandra has suggested and I second the notion that we, and others should act with respect. I would like to propose that resident comments at our meetings be open to response by any BOF member, just as our meetings are, and when data free accusations or other such insults are hurled at town government volunteers, the speaker should be asked to be specific as to events or specific data they are referring to that supports their claim. I would also strongly recommend that we put in time limits to comments at our meetings.

This is especially true at town meetings.

Look at all the press time received by the data free insulters at the Town meeting, without apology, notwithstanding their vote lost by a 5:1 margin. They should have been asked to cite specific evidence to support their view, and we should be able to respond to all data. Lynne does that all the time, what can't the BOF?

We all should be perfectly ok stating very clearly at every meeting, and we should vote for and pass a resolution, even if symbolic, that if the majority of the town votes to increase the budget, we will support their will, and anyone who infers otherwise has no credibility.

My only caveats in the resolution would be that:

1) We need to achieve a majority 15%, not just the 35 speakers at our BOE budget meeting nor the 150 or less members of the public who attended the Town meeting (as some GMW op Ed's have suggested);

and,

2) The amount of the increase does not create the risk of a rating agency downgrade.

On the other disinformation floated, I believe that we need to, as a Board, have a discussion of what gets presented by the BOF at those meetings for example ( we failed to assist Mike in this and I at least felt blindsided by statements by the BOE this year). Do we support or deny the Edsight and CT Dept of Education data (sort of like asking whether the last presidential election was rigged, for those who deny either, I believe), and whether we should communicate with the BOE as to whether we believe that it is fair to use the BOF as a lightning rod by suggesting that the BOF caused a problem caused not by the BOF but mostly by hiring added personnel with state grants, while student population was shrinking (rightly so during covid), and then restructuring to meet the decreases driven by the State elimination of that funding ( not the BOF actions, and the BOE was warned by some BOF members at that time that these were temporary headcount unless the funding and the covid pandemic became permanent)... which wasn't even cited in the BOE presentation as the driver.

Those are some of the things I believe we should discuss, and we should consider sending slides to the press to educate them on

data in the future. I really believe that Ira was referring to social media more than the press, and stating opinions rather than facts. Our public BOF meetings attract almost no interest yet, at public budget time, there is an incredible desire by our critics to misrepresent our actions and our character without any fundamental data to support their comments. Sorry for the long email. Looking forward to our discussion tomorrow.

Stewart Koenigsberg