

Subject to Approval

**Town of Simsbury Board of Finance
PUBLIC HEARING MINUTES
Tuesday, April 6, 2016 at 6:00PM
Simsbury High School – Amphitheatre
34 Farms Village Road, Simsbury, Connecticut**

PRESENT: Barbara Petitjean, Jeff Blumenthal, Robert Pomeroy, Jr., Kevin Prell, Moira Wertheimer and Linda Schofield (via phone).

ABSENT: None.

ALSO PRESENT: First Selectman Lisa Heavner, Selectmen Elaine Lange and Chris Kelly; Director of Administrative Service Tom Cooke and Interim Finance Director Sean Kimball; Board of Education Chairman Tara Willerup, Board of Education members Tom Doran, Tom Frank, Jeff Tindall, Lydia Tedone, and Todd Burrick; Superintendent of Schools Matt Curtis, Assistant Superintendents Erin Murray and Sue Homrok-Lemke, Business Manager Burke LaClair, and Director of Personnel Neil Sullivan; Town Engineer Jeff Shea, Public Works Director Tom Roy, Director of Planning and Community Development Jamie Rabbit, Police Chief Peter Ingvertsen, Recreation Director Gerry Toner, Simsbury Public Library Director Lisa Karim.

Chairman Barbara Petitjean called the public hearing to order at 6:00PM.

Everyone present stood for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Ms. Petitjean reviewed that the purpose of the Public Hearing was to allow the Board of Finance to share with the Town information regarding the upcoming budgets and to allow the Board to receive thoughts and opinions from the Town. She explained that the Board is comprised of six elected people functioning as an oversight board governed by state statute and the town charter. Ms. Petitjean further explained that the Board is charged with the responsibility of approving operating budgets of both the Board of Selectmen and the Board of Education as well as approving those two respective boards' capital budgets. Once the Board of Finance approves those budgets, they are then forwarded to the Town Clerk's office who in turn schedules a referendum allowing all Simsbury voters to vote on them, according to Ms. Petitjean. She noted that an additional responsibility of her board is supplemental and emergency appropriations, if necessary, and transfer of funds within various departments of the Town's Budget. She noted that her Board also has fiscal oversight of the Town Pension Trust and the OPEB Trust. Ms. Petitjean then reviewed the key criteria in establishing the budgets this year, including the long tradition of Simsbury being a vibrant and financially secure community. She noted that her Board has promoted increased collaboration between the boards and the continued focus of minimizing tax increases. Ms. Petitjean reported that as of last June, Moody's has rated Simsbury with their highest possible rating, a AAA rating, citing that the community has a historical fiscal stability, strong reserves, well-funded pension obligations, and very modest debt levels. She also noted that despite a very small finance department and many long hours, Simsbury has continued to receive the Government Officers Financial Association (GOFA) award for Excellence in Financial Reporting, the sixteenth year that the town has received this award.

Ms. Petitjean then reviewed a legislative change this year which will effect the budget process including the 32 mill rate cap placed on motor vehicles, explaining that this is an attempt by the state to reduce pressure on the fifty-one towns and cities with higher rates. She explained that there is a subsidy promised by the state to make up for the shortfall expected in this regard. Ms. Petitjean also noted that in the second year, the mill rate cap is further reduced to 29.36 as part of this legislation and noted that it is unclear whether the difference will be fully funded next year. She also then reviewed briefly the amount of increase of the two boards' budgets and capital budgets. Ms. Petitjean reported that the town bonds for the capital projects and explained that debt service and capital are calculated based on interest and principal payments which must be made to pay back the bonds. She noted that this year her Board and the Finance Department worked with the bond consultants to calculate the cash flows inherent with these investments in an effort to determine the affordability rate, noting that there is a lag and the money is not spent the year that it is approved. Ms. Petitjean reported that in order for the town to stay with the 7% debt ratio, the capital projects will have to get up to \$7M but noted that only the current year's appropriations are voted on in a given year.

Before providing an overview of the Board of Education's 2016-2017 Budget, Chairman Tara Donohue Willerup thanked her Board and acknowledged fellow members Tom Doran, Tom Frank, Jeff Tindall, Lydia Tedone, and Todd Burrick as present as well as Central Office staff Superintendent of Schools Matt Curtis, Assistant Superintendents Erin Murray and Sue Homrok-Lemke, Business Manager Burke LaClair, and Director of Personnel Neil Sullivan.

Ms. Willerup reported that next year's budget includes an increase of \$1,290,564.00, a 1.94% increase. She then reviewed downward and upward pressures as they factor into preparing her Board's budget. She noted that declining enrollment and the Board of Finance's goal to attain a flat mill rate were considered coupled with contractual, insurance and pension obligations, as well as identified staff needs. Ms. Willerup presented a power point presentation providing additional details of the budget including all the factors that were part of the consideration. Among the slides shared and reviewed were: K-12 staffing and enrollment history, return on investment detailing the national recognition that Simsbury schools receive, major drivers, and operational efficiencies utilized in the proposed budget. Ms. Willerup noted that her Board's budget includes the addition of five new positions including a .7 FTE for Preschool Special Education teacher to meet increased enrollment demands, a 1.0 FTE Math Coach to provide professional development curriculum support, a 1.0 FTE Social Worker for the elementary schools, 2.0 FTE Special Education teachers at high school and 1.0 FTE Speech and Language Pathologist. She noted that the net result will be a slight reduction in staffing of .9 FTE. She noted that the total impact due to increases in contractual obligations is 1.77% of the overall 1.94% increase.

Before providing an overview of the Board of Selectman's 2016-2017 Budget, First Selectman Lisa Heavner thanked her Board and acknowledged fellow members Elaine Lang and Chris Kelly as present. Ms. Heavner also noted the tremendous amount of work put into preparing the budget, beginning their work in December by Interim Finance Director Sean Kimball and Director of Administrative Service Tom Cooke. Additionally, she acknowledged Tom Roy, Jamie Rabbit, Chief Ingvertsen, Jeff Shea, Jerry Toner, JoAnn Martin, and Lisa Karim. Ms. Heavner also acknowledged the Board of Education, noting that her board worked along with them in a very collaborative manner and extended her thanks and appreciation to both boards for that.

Ms. Heavner then presented the power point presentation created to explain in detail the Board of Selectman's budget. She reviewed the objectives of her board in creating this budget, noting

that they included a goal to maintain fiscal responsibility by delivering quality services in the most cost effective manner, responsible stewardship of the town's natural resources and assets, develop a plan for long term economic sustainability, and modernize technology to provide transparency, increase efficiencies in the current and future needs of the town's residents. This budget responsibly preserves Simsbury as the beautiful place to call home in the most cost efficient manner, according to her presentation. Ms. Heavner reported that her Board approved a budget of \$19,506,444, reflecting an increase of \$638,475 or 3.38%. She noted that it meets the Board of Finance's goal of a flat mill rate.

Ms. Heavner reviewed some of the legislation that have budget implications including the motor vehicle mill rate cap, the expected share of sales tax revenue, as well as a proposed property exemption to those businesses with assessed values of less than \$10K, a law which if imposed would result in a loss of revenue to Simsbury of \$74K as it would effect about 600 businesses in town. She then reviewed more than twenty-five examples of initiatives designed to produce cost savings.

Town Engineer Jeff Shea then reviewed the following town's 2016-2017 capital projects: Simsbury Farms Golf Course Improvements (\$125K), Park Improvements (\$30K), Athletic Field Improvements (\$30K), Greenway Improvements (\$240K), Open Space Planning and Improvements (\$400K), Street Lighting Purchase/Lighting Improvements (\$775K), Simsbury Veterans Memorial (\$100K), Plan of Conservation and Development (\$130K), Land Use Studies (\$92,500), Highway Pavement Management (\$2.5M), Window Replacement/Municipal Building Renovations (\$44K), Dam Evaluations & Repairs (\$145K), Town Facilities Master Plan (\$400K), Public Works Complex Infrastructure Improvements (\$450K), Town Hall Site and Safety Improvements (\$385K), Portable Generator Project/Generator Infrastructure (\$175K), Sewer Main Extensions – Massaco Street (\$104K), Hopmeadow/Center Area Sewer Repairs (\$100K), Skidsteer Track Loader with Brush (\$83,103), Oxidation Ditch Dissolved Oxygen Control (\$27K), and a Storage Building for WPCA (\$27K).

Mr. Shea also reviewed the CNR (Capital Non-recurring) list which included the following: purchase of three patrol vehicles for the Police Department (\$87K), body cameras for the Police Department (\$59750), uninterruptible power supply for communications division for the Police Department (\$20K), purchase of used support vehicles for the Engineering Department (\$15K), Highway Plow Truck for the Public Works Department (\$155K), Program Room Technology Upgrade for Library (\$8K), a used small pickup truck for building and grounds for Public Works (\$11,500), a small mower with bagger for Culture, Parks, and Recreation Department (\$13K), and a ¾ ton pickup truck for Culture, Parks and Recreation Department (\$32K).

Simsbury Public Schools Business Manager Burke LaClair reviewed the four Board of Education projects as part of the Town's Capital Improvement Plan: District Network Infrastructure (\$450K), Henry James Middle School Phase II (\$1.95M), Simsbury High School Turf Field Replacement (\$675K), and the Climate Control Phase II (\$950K).

Ms. Petitjean then welcomed the public to share their concerns and comments.

Ms. Joan Coe of 26 Whitcomb Drive initially addressing the Board of Selectman's budget, opined that many of the capital expenses are instead maintenance expenses that ought to be included in the operating budget. She spoke in opposition to the following items being included in the capital budget: a golf cart recently purchased by the Simsbury Performing Arts Center and the Veterans Memorial.

Mr. Bill Donahue of 36 Hildurcrest Drive shared his concerns with the condition of the tennis courts at both Henry James Middle School and Simsbury High School. He opined that they are very unsafe and advised that going forward, the Board of Education ought to review its commitment to physical education of students in town. Mr. Donahue requested that the superintendent of schools, the superintendent of recreation, and the risk manager walk the facility and assess the risk involved, noting that he is extremely uncomfortable putting the kids that he works with out there at this point.

Ms. Kimberly Sudnick of 12 Pilfershire Lane praised the Board of Education and the results they are achieving. She shared three questions: With regards to a Tootin Hills Elementary third grade class going from fourteen students this year to a class size of possibly twenty to twenty-four students next year, how does the Board value consistency? With regards to the possibility of increasing class size at the high school level with the intent of better preparing them for very large introductory level courses in college, does the Board value smaller class sizes in the younger years because the impact of socio, emotional, and intellectual are greater at that level? What is the impact of Open Choice students coming into the Simsbury school system, in terms of the impact to the classroom grades and rankings as they go up through?

Mr. Mike Rinaldi of 32 Pinnacle Mountain Road congratulated the Boards, characterizing their presentations as excellent. He noted that a problem he would identify is that over the last ten (10) years, more could have been done to decrease the town's mill rate.

Mr. Steve Mitchell of 165 Old Farms Road thanked the Boards that presented budgets this evening. As a business owner in town, Mr. Mitchell opined that mobility is very important. He concurred with concerns as expressed by Mr. Donohue, noting that children are not exercising enough and spoke in favor of the funds being put forth to expand the Greenway. Mr. Mitchell also expressed support for the Weatogue Plans being included in the budget.

Ms. Coe returned to express her concern that the Board of Education capital projects actually represent maintenance costs that should be included in their operating budget. Ms. Coe also relayed her concern regarding the safety of the tennis courts at both the middle and high schools.

Ms. Debbie Thibodeau of 5 Woodcliff Drive communicated her support for the Capital projects, particularly the Greenway improvements and the Bike Master Plan, noting that these projects are all important for maintaining and improving a modern transportation network.

Mr. Rinaldi returned to address his concerns with the budget of the Board of Education, opining that the town should be seeing a decrease in their budget annually as a result of the decrease in enrollment.

Ms. Diana Moody of 7 Elcy Way reported that Simsbury continues to remain a premier bicycle friendly community and that bike friendly communities have become a national movement. She noted that she would like to see Simsbury continue to lead the pack in Connecticut and that the Tarrifville connector is important in this initiative.

The questions and concerns put forth were then addressed by those positioned to do so.

Mr. Curtis then responded to Mr. Rinaldi's comments regarding decreased enrollment, noting that since 2008-2009, the district has seen a loss of 700 students, or 15%. He noted that staffing has not gone down by that same percent but the district does have 48 fewer FTE. Mr.

Curtis noted that during this time, the Board of Education has supported reallocation of resources that they had deemed important, including expanding kindergarten and increased elective opportunities at the high school. Finally, Mr. Curtis noted that during this same time, they have closed the gap of the per pupil expenditures between Simsbury and the surrounding towns such as Farmington, Avon, Glastonbury and West Hartford.

In response to comments made by Ms. Coe, Mr. Curtis explained that the non-lapsing account was established last year in collaboration with the Board of Finance and that capital is not purchased from this account and it is instead for unexpected expenditures related to special education.

In response to comments regarding class size, Mr. Curtis noted that it is often an item for discussion among parents and teachers and is differentiated across grade level. He noted that they are held to eighteen to twenty-two students in Kindergarten through second grade but are twenty-two to twenty-five at third grade. Mr. Curtis noted that the third grade cohort specifically mentioned tonight that will be going from three sections to two sections will have twenty-three students but there are eight other sections with a range of twenty to twenty-three so they are not an outlier. He noted that he is always willing to meet with parents and/or administrators to talk about needs of students. With regards to Open Choice, Mr. Curtis noted that Simsbury has been a partner for 50 years and that support systems are in place to help kids be successful.

In response to comments regarding the district's tennis courts, Mr. LaClair reported that the cracks are repaired on an annual basis and that these tennis courts are part of the six year CIP for replacement, with the courts at Simsbury High School planned for replacement in Year 2 at a cost of \$545K. Mr. LaClair noted that there is also a review to be scheduled with the athletic director to go over the possible relocation of these courts. He explained that the courts at Henry James are planned for replacement in Year 4 of the CIP but noted that this could certainly be discussed next year. Mr. LaClair indicated that he also functions as the Risk Manager and has met with both the boys and girls coaches as well as the athletic director in recent weeks and that all of these parties will continue to pay close attention to this issue. Once the weather warms up, the annual repair process can be undertaken, according to Mr. LaClair.

In response to the bike trails, for economic development and wellness reasons the Town pursued these as a priority, according to Ms. Heavner. Regarding a question raised as to why master plans were included as part of the Capital Plan, she explained that G.F.O.A. issued a "Best Practices" paper talking about the role of master planning in Capital Improvements, noting that this is an essential part. Ms. Heavner noted that without these master plans, the Town ends up taking a reactive approach rather than a proactive one. With regards to the comments shared regarding the Veterans Memorial, Ms. Heavner praised and congratulated the fundraising efforts of the group of veterans in town noting that they raised \$236K. Ms. Heavner reported that the Veterans Memorial is being supported through a \$150K STEAP grant. She explained that when the project went out to bid, the bids for the cost of materials came in higher than expected. Therefore, the Board of Selectmen voted unanimously to provide the gap funding for this project, according to Ms. Heavner.

In response to the comments made regarding the golf cart purchase, Ms. Heavner explained that it is not part of the 2016-2017 budget. She noted that the Performing Arts Center deemed this cart as an essential piece of equipment and that the PAC cannot function without it.

Ms. Petitjean thanked all that came out to this public hearing and all who will watch through the recording on Simsbury Community Television (SCTV). She noted that a second hearing will

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be held on April 19, 2016 at 5:45PM, in advance of their regularly scheduled meeting that same evening.

Ms. Petitjean reported that the referendum date is May 10, 2016.

The public hearing was adjourned at 7:54PM.

Respectfully submitted,

**Pamela A. Colombie
Commission Clerk**