



TOWN COUNCIL
HYBRID MEETING – VIRTUAL AND IN-PERSON
April 28, 2025
Special Town Council Meeting
Council Chambers

APPROVED MINUTES

1) CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Black-Burke called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

Present: Mayor Nuchette Black-Burke, Deputy Mayor Darleen Klase, Councilor Mary Armstrong, Councilor Ronald Eleveld, Councilor Kristin Gluck Hoffman, Councilor Anthony King (virtual), Councilor Ojala Naeem, Councilor William Pelkey and Councilor Walker

2) PUBLIC COMMENT

Dr. Linda Alexander of 155 Fieldstone Drive shared concerns of increased taxes in town making it unsustainable and unaffordable for many.

John Cassarino of 48 Arrowbrook Road stated he opposed the current budget proposal and wanted to see the Town of Windsor and the Board of Education's budget broken down to the lowest level and shared with all Windsor taxpayers before the referendum.

Sally Grossman of 106 Niles Road urged the Town Council to keep the education budget that was passed by the Board of Education, and stated that their budget maintains the level of services already in place without any additions.

Leonard Lockhart of 57 Columbia Road spoke about the Town Council's request of the Board of Education to address the achievement gap and one of the things they did was to use ESSER funds for additional positions to ensure students are getting the help they need. He said the schools need those positions. He also stated as a firefighter he was disturbed by the public requesting that their stipend be taken away. He said the volunteer firefighters provide a huge tax benefit to the town and provide excellent service.

Dennis Palmer of 123 Eastview Drive stated that he was in favor of the Board of Education budget as was passed and believed that we have to invest in our children as they are the future leaders. He believed that we should tap into our rainy day fund to meet the current needs of the community.

John Willin of 433 Lantern Way stated that he opposed the proposed budget and the significant property tax increase. He shared ways that he has had to restrict his spending.

He also urged the Town Council to consider reforming the senior tax relief schedule and proposed three options – to index senior property tax increases in line with the social security COLA increased percentage, to freeze property taxes for seniors at the level they were at when a senior attained age 65 or 70, or to increase the income level to qualify for the current town's senior tax relief program up to a level of roughly \$75,000. He commented that while the tax increases of the past two years have placed a burden on seniors, that it is not a senior citizen issue.

Coralee Jones of 1171 Matianuck Avenue stated that she was opposed to the current budget proposal and shared that owning her home is becoming unaffordable and her budget is unsustainable. She also shared concerns of the Board of Education budget increase. She stated that the town generated extra revenues from the first half of the revaluation last year and she wanted an explanation as to what happened to that additional money that the town received last year and is receiving this year.

Becky Jacobson of 50 Lighthouse Hill Road shared that she has five children in Windsor Schools and supported the Board of Education's budget. She cautioned the Town to continually decrease funding and take away programs like other towns. She stated that her family is restricting their spending too but would pay higher taxes for a good education for their children.

Tim Keating of 131 Tobey Avenue shared that he moved here five years ago to retire and now he will likely sell his home and move out of town due to tax increases, which have gone from \$3,600 to \$5,200. He stated that he did not understand how this happened and for the Council to fix it back to the way it was.

Tracey Zotter of 28 Spring Street commended the Town Council for lowering the mill rate to help compensate for the increased budget and stated that there are a lot of increases that are outside of the town's control. She stated that cutting the Board of Education's budget is not going to make test scores higher or make our economy stronger and that it would do the opposite. She encouraged people to understand, read the fine print in the budget and ask questions as there are valid answers out there.

Jeremy Halek of 1890 Poquonock Avenue stated that the budget is way too high and he hoped the Town Council would listen to everyone tonight and make a good decision.

Ayana Taylor of 88 Farmstead Lane shared that she is a parent of Windsor school children and the Vice President of the Board of Education. She implored the Town Council to be intentional and to help educate the public on what is in the school budget. She supported the Board of Education's budget and stated that there is no fluff in it. She said we should have quality education, not just the bare minimum, and that they have been working with the bare minimum for a long time. She hoped the Town Council would support the Board of Education's budget.

3) PRELIMINARY DELIBERATIONS

Mayor Black-Burke clarified that those serving on Town Council or any board or commission in the town are volunteers and do not get paid. She asked that anyone listening or watching spread that information as there seemed to be misinformation in the community.

Mayor Black-Burke stated that a revaluation is mandated by the State every five years and that it is for every town. She asked Town Manager Souza to talk more about the revaluation before moving to other budget deliberations.

Town Manager Souza recapped the overall process and stated that the State requires a revaluation at least once every five years. He said it could be done multiple times during a five year period. He also said that each municipality is required to do a full revaluation and compare those fair market values at that particular time with the previous time a revaluation was done. He said that was done with the October 23rd Grand List and then by state law municipalities have the option of either implementing the new values in the following fiscal year or up to a five year “phased-in” approach. He stated that the Town Council last year decided to phase it in over two years.

Town Manager Souza responded to the question where did my money go. He said that the money went into Board of Education and town services. He gave an example of a commercial property that experienced value changes to their property. He said in Fiscal Year 2024, Voya paid \$1.8 million in personal and real estate taxes and in Fiscal Year 2026 they are projected to pay approximately \$720,000. So it is a \$1.1 million loss in revenue from that particular commercial business. He said that those funds are still needed to provide services and it has shifted over to the residential properties, which saw a greater increase. He gave another example, Hartford Life is projected to pay \$800,000 less than they did in fiscal year 2024. He reported that Walgreens on International Drive did not see as big of a decrease in their commercial valuation and will be paying approximately \$300,000-\$400,000 less largely due to their depreciation and personal property. He said these are three examples totaling over two million dollars that got shifted due to the residential component of the Grand List.

Town Manager Souza stated that the town did not collect more funds and that the Town Council actually used \$3 million of the General Fund cash reserves to mitigate the tax rate and impact both residential and commercial folks for Fiscal Year 2025 that we are currently in. He reported that the Town Council has also the General Fund reserves for purchasing capital projects so we do not incur as much long-term debt. He stated that in Fiscal Year 2024, the Town Council used approximately \$4 million in reserve funds for pay as you go capital, and therefore, the town is not paying principal and interest on those funds over the course of the next 15 years.

Councilor King reiterated that the Town Council members are not paid and that many, like him, also have full-time jobs. He expanded on the Town Manager’s comments and said

that we have the same pie and it is just that the residential properties value increased while the commercial properties decreased. He said legally by the State the town is only allowed to have the same mill rate across all those things, with the exception of motor vehicles, so the Town cannot change it to go back the way it was. He said that the budget is a maintenance budget and does not include any big improvements. He said they are pretty bare bones with all of these budgets, including the Board of Education, where they have already taken significant cuts. He also commented that the Board of Education budget was a bipartisan budget and has been supported by the Republican minority leader. He hoped everyone could understand that every town is going through this right now, and that we do not want to be in a position where we are laying off teachers, police officers, and cutting other services.

Councilor Naeem spoke about a couple of things that the Town Council did going into this budget cycle recognizing the impacts of the revaluation, along with the impacts that are causing our budgets to increase and that it does carry a heavy burden for all of us as taxpayers. She said starting last December the Town Council increased the senior tax credit income levels to \$62,000, which was a significant bump up from what they were previously to qualify for that credit. She noted that the town has maxed out our Veterans tax abatement of \$20,000 and also increased the income limits for that one to \$62,000 as well to match what we did with the senior tax credit. She added that they also established a line of duty death tax exemption, which she hoped we do not have to tap into.

Councilor Naeem continued that she wanted to address a couple of the comments that were made and to put things into perspective. She stated that the challenges we are facing is not only a Windsor problem and that it is happening in every single town across this state. She said West Hartford just passed their budget about three weeks ago and have a mill rate of 44.78 compared to Windsor's rate which is below 30 mills. She said this information means that their houses, which are significantly higher in price, are paying almost four and a half percent in taxes versus ours, which is below 3%. West Hartford passed a budget with a 5.7% increase after making some cuts on their end as well and their population is about twice the size of Windsor. She said they have a population of about 60,000 people but their Board of Education, which is \$214 million, is almost two and half times our proposed Board of Education budget. She said to keep that in mind when thinking about the investment being made, and what you hear about students graduating from West Hartford Schools, and what quality education is there.

Councilor Naeem also looked to the Town of Avon with a population of about 20,000 and they have a Board of Education budget of \$118 million. She said taking all this into context and looking at what is happening around us, we see that this is not a problem that we are choosing to create as a Town Council. She stated that the property revaluation is something that is State mandated. We are trying our best to figure out how to mitigate the impact. She said the Town Council had discussions on how they can most strategically use opening cash/rainy day fund. She hoped the Council would all be in agreement to that again this year along with looking at other areas where they may be able to provide some relief. She said for every \$4.5 million cut, it is one mill rate, so that is less than 1% of the

impact on your tax bill. She said she would like to hear from the Town Manager what it would look like if we were to cut the budget down to a zero percent increase and what we would be losing in terms of services.

Deputy Mayor Klase asked the Town Manager what it might look like with a zero percent increase or a 1% increase in the budget.

Town Manager Souza clarified if she was asking for just the town portion of the budget not including the Board of Education budget. Deputy Mayor Klase replied that is what she was looking for.

Town Manager Souza stated that the overall town budget is proposed to increase \$8.9 million and approximately \$4.9 million is the Board of Education. He said they could also subtract the two factors, which the town does not control – Great Pond Improvement District and Metropolitan District Commission – which leaves the town operating budget just under \$2.9 million. He said to get a town operating budget down to a zero percent increase, it would mean a reduction of \$2.9 million from the proposed budget that was presented to you the first week of April.

Councilor Naeem stated that \$4.5 million is approximately one mill rate and Town Manager Souza replied that was correct.

Councilor Eleveld also reiterated that the Town Council, the Board of Education and anyone serving on a board or commission does not receive any compensation or a tax cut. He said that the volunteer firefighters do receive a small financial benefit and that they save the town \$5-\$10 million per year for what we could be paying for a paid fire department. He said if they come in and ask for \$25,000 - \$100,000 for something that is needed that he would not vote against it. He said the volunteer firefighters deserve our thanks for the services they perform for us.

Councilor Eleveld continued explaining how the town calculates taxes. He said any resident can pick up a budget book and see where our revenues come from. He stated that the biggest chunk of money is in the State of Connecticut property taxes. He said they have to have a balanced budget by State law. He explained that they take the amount of money that is needed to run the town, subtract all the revenue sources and then they are left with an amount of money that needs to be raised to cover the cost of operating the town. He said they typically collect 98.75% of taxes and they take that number and compare it to the value of the property and that creates the mill rate. He said they do not collect extra money on the mill rate and that it's calculated based upon the amount of money that we are going to spend for the year. He explained that the Board of Education operates with about \$90 million dollars and the town with about \$44 million. He said there are certain expenditures that we have contractual obligations for that cannot be changed like MDC costs up about \$5 million for sewer services. He also provided the example of the Great Pond Improvement District has a \$1 million increase to \$2 million that we have

to pay them as we are contractually obligated from an agreement that we made almost a decade and a half ago. He concluded by discussing capital projects, and stated these are the projects that pay for road repair. He said that we can cut that but that means we will have potholes in the street and we will have to live with them for two to three years when we have the money to fix it. He hoped he helped illustrate some of the running problems. He explained that if the Town Council cuts \$4 million from the town side of the budget then that could mean eliminating an entire department or two, or getting rid of a handful of police officers or a handful of public works employees. He stated that he thought the budget should be lower and that is an issue that the Council would deal with over the next few days but it will not be a zero percent budget increase because of the second part of the two year phasing. He said they could use more from the opening cash/rainy day fund but cautioned about using too much and discussed how it could create problems for the town in the future.

Councilor Walker shared that he believed that the Town Council should listen to the taxpayers and that he has heard their overriding message of affordability.

Deputy Mayor Klase stated that the proposed budget is available in detail on the town's website and in fact Windsor has won the distinguished budget presentation award last year for its layout.

Mayor Black-Burke mentioned an email they received and shared in regards to mental health services but that the Council would not discuss that tonight but a little bit later. She stated that she knows that there are collaborations and line item pieces attributed to mental health services, and that we have supports at our Police Department. She hoped to discuss later what mental health services are tied into this budget and what that looks like.

Councilor Pelkey shared that it was news to him about people saying things about our firefighters not having stipends or any of the things that they very much deserve. He stated that if we had 100 volunteer firefighters that we would be looking at roughly a \$2,000 max stipend. He believed it was the very least we can do for all that they do for us. He believed affordability should be the focus as they discuss the budget. He relayed an encounter with a new resident of Windsor who has experienced a 30% tax increase over the last two years. He said it is the percent change that has really hit people and reviewed different tax percentage increases of properties across Windsor. He stated that our budgetary increases, whether it is on the town-side or with the Board of Education, are ahead of some of these other indicators of inflation. He said when he starts to look to the future, in terms of the Grand List, we have had a lot of investment in the town, and we have seen the Amazons go up and we are benefiting from those as they pay millions in property tax and personal property tax. He said unfortunately, when we look to the next two or three years, we do not have any more large property tax abatements that are going to add \$40 million to the pot. He said if we have this arc of spending going up that he thought to keep an eye on the future and bend that spending curve down and find a new way to address

the issue. He thought that the Town Council very much owed it to our neighbors in town to try to lessen any tax increase to the best extent possible.

Councilor Naeem commented on something Councilor Pelkey said about our budgets outpacing inflation. She said if you look to the last five to 10 years, our budgets have been below inflation, and she thought we have not done a good job of spending and keeping up with the demands and then they catch up to us both when it comes to competitive salaries for all the folks that work between our education and town departments, as well as the cost of services that we require like on software and technology side or the cost of construction and such. She stated that budgets in the past had very minimal increase or zero increase and that has led us into a place where we are needing to catch up significantly.

Councilor Naeem asked the Town Manager to share with the public how we could potentially come up with \$3 million if there was a zero percent increase. Town Manager Souza explained that within the operating budget there is a variety of capital projects, and said he would refer to them as CIP (Capital Improvement Program) cash or pay as you go. He said there is approximately \$2.8 million within that and that the Town Council has the opportunity to reduce any of those categories within there and stated that they had last year. He noted that close to \$2 million is related to replacement of larger fleet primarily in the Department of Public Works (DPW), approximately \$900,000. He said they have elected not to borrow money for those large replacements. He stated that there is also about \$800,000 for street repaving and that is from the General Fund and is coupled with some state aid that we receive each year. He said those are two large categories. He reported that the Town Council established a Public Safety equipment replacement fund, and that is funded at approximately \$500,000 as pay as you go. With those items there is about \$2 million. He said those are choices the Town Council would need to make. He commented as a refresher to Council that to mill and overlay a typical 30 foot wide street is estimated at \$280,000 a mile for the summer of 2025. He said we have over 160 miles of roadway in town, and we are fortunate to receive several competitive grants thanks to our wonderful engineering staff. He said we are doing about six miles, maybe eight miles of roadway each year of those 160 miles, so the Town Council will need to be cognizant of any reductions in that area. He stated there is one opportunity to reduce pay as you go, but again, it is a choice just like if you went to move towards services. He reported the average cost of salary, benefits, pension, retirement, and fringe is about \$90,000 to \$100,000 per person. He said we would be looking at eliminating 30 or so full-time equivalent slots or choosing to reduce staffing all the way up to that amount. He said a combination could be done by reducing capital or reducing the amount to open space account, which the Town Council chose to do last year.

Mayor Black-Burke thanked the Town Manager and said that is the hard conversation that they are going to have to get to. She said the conversation in regards to affordability is real and asked what affordability looked like. She thought it was important for the public to hear that it could mean cutting jobs. She said we are all feeling this burden that we are now carrying, and that it is happening everywhere.

Councilor Naeem wanted to bring everyone's attention to the Town Manager's budget presentation to the public about a month ago. She said he chose a random single-family house and its market value was \$213,000 in 2022 and then the value increased in 2023 to \$267,000 and in 2024 it increased to roughly \$312,000. She discussed that to cut the budget to a zero percent increase could mean a mix of possibly cutting 45 to 50 positions, adjustments to a library branch, street repaving, public safety equipment and public works impacts, which would save the homeowner \$374 a year. She shared this example to show the annual dollar impact to the individual and what we lose in terms of services, personnel and staffing.

Mayor Black-Burke stated that the Town Council will meet again on Wednesday, April 30th to deliberate the budget and receive public comment.

Town Manager Souza stated that he and the Superintendent will be conducting a budget forum at the invitation of the League of Women Voters on Wednesday, May 7th at Poquonock Elementary School at 6:30 p.m. He said they would also be at 330 Windsor Avenue Community Center on May 6th at 6:30 p.m. and at the Senior Center/L.P. Wilson Community Center on May 8th at 10:00 a.m.

Mayor Black-Burke said these are great opportunities to learn about the budget and have conversations with the Town Manager, as well as the Superintendent.

8) ADJOURNMENT

MOVED by Councilor Pelkey seconded by Councilor Naeem to adjourn the meeting at 8:00 p.m.

Motion Passed 8-0-0 (Councilor King virtually unavailable)

Respectfully Submitted,

Andrea Marcavitch
Recording Secretary