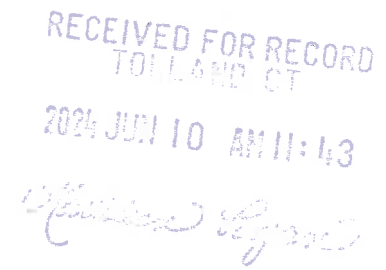


MINUTES

TOLLAND TOWN COUNCIL
SPECIAL MEETING
HYBRID MEETING
June 6, 2024 – 7:00 P.M.



Members Present: Katherine Stargardter, Chair; Jacob Marie, Vice Chair; Jennifer Buckler, Chris Moran, Alexander Noonan, Joseph Sce, Colleen Yudichak

Members Absent: none

Also Present: Brian Foley, Town Manager; Lisa Hancock, Director, Finance & Records; Mike Wilkinson, Director, Administrative Services (Zoom); Erin Bartlett, Tax Collector

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** The Chair called the meeting to order at 7:00PM.
2. **PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:** Recited
3. **MOMENT OF SILENCE:** Observed
4. **EXPLANATION FROM TAX COLLECTOR REGARDING JULY 1, 2024 PROPERTY TAX BILLS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A SUPPLEMENTAL MAILING IN JANUARY 2025.**

Ms. Bartlett provided background information on this item.

She explained that if the June 18th referendum passes and is approved, the Tax Office will make every effort to send bills out with the new mill rate. If the June 18th referendum does not pass, tax bills will need to be issued pursuant to the Town Charter Section C9-10.

If a new mill rate has not been approved by July 1st, the July tax bills will be sent out based on the previous year's mill rate of 37.33 for both Personal Property and Real Estate and there will be a second billing for January 2025. It will be retroactive to July 1, 2024, for the difference between the old and new mill rates and include the second installment calculated at the new mill rate.

Ms. Bartlett noted that she contacted QDS, the tax software company, to inquire about the cost of a second billing. The quote was \$3,913.83. They negotiated and QDS agreed to waive a significant fee for programming to adjust the bills with the new mill rate. An estimated \$825.30 of payroll would also be needed for staff to address the second billing (estimated as 15 additional hours each).

The total extra cost to the town for a second billing would be approximately \$4,739.13.

5. **CONSIDERATION OF THE TOWN COUNCIL'S PROPOSED FY 2024-2025 BUDGET**

Mr. Foley explained that with the defeat of the budget at the June 4th referendum and after a review of previous referendums over the last decade, he recommended the following revised budget: 38.28 mill rate which is a 2.54% increase. This is down from 3.32% and 2.65% from the previous referendum. This is a reduction of the budget by another \$50,000. Mr. Foley recommended that the \$50,000 reduction comes from the Board of Education.

Ms. Stargardter noted that Mr. Moran and Mr. Sce met earlier this evening.

Mr. Moran noted that he and Mr. Sce want what is in the best interest of the town yet did not agree on a final number and how to reach it.

Mr. Moran explained that this is not ideal, and he has reservations about cutting the town and BOE's budgets due to concern that they will lose staff positions and services. That said, he suggested a budget with a spending increase no lower than 4% which would be an overall spending decrease of approximately \$300K. He would prefer to split this in some way between the town and the BOE in the interest of reaching a compromise and doing what is best for the town. The reductions were \$563K (BOE) and \$115K (town) to date. Mr. Moran explained that his proposal is in recognition of where they are and is an effort to work together to get the budget to pass so the town does not incur additional costs.

Mr. Sce explained that he and Mr. Moran have differing viewpoints on how to reach the same goal of doing what is best for the town. He added that Mr. Moran did not believe that the Council would be willing to go below 4%. Mr. Moran commented that Mr. Sce indicated that he would not go above 3.4%. Mr. Sce explained that they reviewed the numbers and input from the voters over the past three referendums and he feels they cannot go over 3.44%.

Ms. Stargardter clarified that the percentages are in regard to a spending increase. She summarized that the Town Manager's proposal is approximately a 4.40% spending increase, (2.54% tax increase).

Ms. Yudichak asked Mr. Sce what a 3.44% would be in terms of dollars. Mr. Sce responded that it would be an additional reduction of \$645K overall.

Mr. Moran noted that his proposal would be a reduction of \$305K overall and under the Town Manager's proposal it would be a reduction of \$50K.

Ms. Yudichak commented that \$645K would be a large amount on top of the \$600K.

Mr. Sce noted that this would result in a \$2M spending increase (3.44%).

Ms. Yudichak asked Ms. Hancock for the average annual spending increase. Ms. Hancock did not have the number available but explained that it generally fluctuates between 0% and 3%. She noted that historical data is available in the budget book.

Mr. Marie commented that he is concerned about having the referendum fail again. He noted that it does not look good for the town especially in a year when the credit rating is being reevaluated and as they approach summer, families will be vacationing. It is a large reduction, but they need to get the referendum to pass. A budget that gets to a 1.18% tax increase has a decent chance of passing. He added that after three referendums, based on e-mails residents are tired, and the Council needs to put something out that is competitive. A 3.44% spending increase has a good chance of passing based on historical data.

Ms. Buckler noted that she too would like to see the budget pass at the next referendum. Her concern is that people will start to vote in the opposite direction for a different reason. The last referendum failed by twenty-six votes. More people voted and the "yes" votes increased by over two hundred as opposed to "no" votes that increased by over fifty. This indicates that the last referendum is close to being palatable to the town. It is reckless to say that if a huge leap is taken the budget will pass. They are trying to find a compromise. Many e-mails asked that no additional cuts be made to the BOE while others asked for a lower spending increase. Ms. Buckler's concern is that if they reduce the spending by so much, there will be more "no" votes from those who do not want a reduced spending increase for the BOE. What Mr. Sce is proposing would result in over \$1M in cuts to the BOE and she finds it difficult to believe this would not have a significant impact. They need to come to an agreement that results in the referendum passing.

Mr. Moran explained that Mr. Sce's proposal would approximately double the reduction to the BOE that it has thus far received. He too is concerned that the referendum will fail due to so much being cut from the BOE. People have said that they will vote "no" if additional cuts are made while others have said that they will vote "no" if the spending increase is too high. A more moderate approach is the right way forward.

Ms. Yudichak asked Mr. Foley where the \$68K would come from. Mr. Foley believed the Council had received this information. The list was distributed.

Mr. Marie commented that while he does not deny that some people voted "no" because they feel the budget is too low, the initial referendum failed by over two hundred, the seconded by about one hundred, and the last twenty-six. They need to reduce the budget for the referendum to pass. He believes that if people were voting "no" because it was too low, the most recent referendum would have passed.

Ms. Yudichak commented that budgets do not increase due to "no" votes. Twenty-six votes could have been the difference.

Mr. Moran explained that the Council needs to stand behind the budget and explain that it is what is needed to effectively run the town. His concern is if they reduce too much, a consensus will not be reached, and it will be difficult to pass the budget. It would be in the best interest of the town for them to reach consensus. When the entire Council supports the budget, it will have a better chance of passing.

Ms. Yudichak asked Mr. Sce if he would consider reducing his proposal. Mr. Sce responded that at this point, he does not believe so given the history of the town. He does not believe 4% will pass. They need to start listening to the majority of voters. He noted that his proposal is a \$2M increase with \$1.6M of that going to the BOE. There will still be an increase, just one that is more palatable.

Ms. Buckler explained that voters say "no," but the Council does not know what people want. Saying that people want a 3.4% spending increase does not come from the majority. While the majority voted "no," by twenty-six votes, could one say that they wanted 0%? 1%? It is speculative. They were close to passing the referendum and gained "yes" votes. She does not know that such a massive jump is necessary. She is concerned about what it will do to the town. There is a point that it becomes damaging. While, as the Town Manager says, they can get any budget to pass, the biggest problem is that the budget does not have the Council's full support. If there was a little more support from the Council, she believes the last referendum would have passed. She does not believe the town, as a majority, has said it only wants a 3.44% spending increase.

Mr. Noonan commented that the budget was almost passed. The data from 2007 shows they are right there. If they do not listen to the town and put forth an almost identical budget, it will explode. If he had said two weeks ago, "see you in two weeks," that would be bombing the budget. He does not believe people have the money this year, in this economy. He has children in the school system and believes in supporting education. As a blue-collar worker who works hard to live in Tolland, he will work anything in front of him in terms of monetary value so he can afford to live in town and do what is best for it; however, he is one person on the Council elected to do what is best for the totality of the town in its majority. He would like to pass a budget tonight that will not repeat history, tank the bond rating, and result in another failed referendum. He wants a budget that reflects what is being asked by the townspeople.

Mr. Marie commented that when looking back at 2007, a 2.32% tax increase failed to pass. They had to go to 0%. After a certain number of referendums, people tire and just want the number to be low. They are close to this point, and something needs to be put forward that will pass. He supports Mr. Sce's plan.

Mr. Moran commented that he agrees that they need to make spending cuts. He is not taking this lightly, but a 3.99% spending increase is a reduction in spending of \$305K which is the largest decrease put forward this year. While he respects what has been said, the 3.99% proposal is a significant spending decrease without going in the opposite direction and causing a failed referendum.

Ms. Stargardter clarified that they have been discussing spending percentages. Mr. Marie noted changes in mill rates. The mill rate change that was on the June 4th referendum was an increase of 2.64%. The Town Manager is recommending a 2.53% increase. Mr. Moran's proposal of a 3.99% spending increase equates to a 1.95% mill rate increase. Mr. Sce's proposal of a 3.44% spending increase equates to a 1.17%/1.18% mill rate increase.

6. APPROVAL OF BUDGET RESOLUTION

*Mr. Moran motioned to pass the 3.99% proposal.
Ms. Buckler seconded the motion.*

Ms. Stargardter clarified the motion:

Town Government: \$13,937,908

Board of Education: \$44,294,148

Debt Service: no change

Capital Improvements Fund: no change

Total: \$64,005,940

This equates to a mill rate of 38.06 which is a 1.96% increase (.73 mill).

Mr. Moran confirmed that this is his motion.

Ms. Buckler confirmed that this is her second.

Discussion:

Mr. Sce called a point of clarification and asked about the division between the Council and the BOE.

Ms. Hancock confirmed that the proposal is a 70/30 split with \$213,500 applied to the BOE and \$91.500 applied to the town.

A roll call vote was taken.

In favor: Moran, Buckler, Stargardter

Opposed: Noonan, Sce, Yudichak, Marie

Abstentions: none

Motion failed (3-4).

Mr. Sce motioned to pass a budget with a 3.44% spending increase with a change in the allocation, due to concerns of the safety of the town, with 100% going to the Board of Education. This would be a reduction of \$645K to the previous budget, leaving a budget increase of \$2.114M.

Ms. Stargardter clarified the motion:

Town Government: \$14,029,408

Board of Education: \$43,862,648

Debt Service: no change

Capital Improvements Fund: no change

Total: \$63,665,940

This reflects a spending increase of \$2,114,583 (3.44%).

This equates to an estimate tax rate of 37.77 mills which is a 1.18% increase (.44 mill)

Mr. Sce confirmed that this is his motion.

Mr. Noonan seconded the motion.

Discussion:

Mr. Moran commented that this is a shocking amount of money to be cut from the BOE. It would be more than has been cut. He has supported every budget put forward but could not support this budget.

Ms. Yudichak commented that at the joint Council/BOE meeting, it was asked that regardless of the budget put forward that it be supported by both sides. While one might not like the number, everyone needs to support it. While no one likes the number, it is a disservice not to support it and it will cause another failed referendum.

Mr. Noonan commented that at the joint Council/BOE meeting, he noted that this needs to be fixed at the state level. He added that Ms. Stargardter said that she would speak with the Chair of the BOE and that they would both speak with the State Representatives. He believes this still needs to be done. Ms. Stargardter agreed and asked that the Town Manager ask that the state delegation meet with the Council.

Ms. Buckler commented that as soon as a budget has been passed, she has supported it, and supported people voting "yes". When a budget fails, they end up having to cut further. She would have liked to have been able to do this but believes it is unfair to say to Mr. Moran that he does not support the budget and that it is better that it is supported but when the Councilors leave the room, they do not all support the budget and perhaps this is on purpose. Maybe some have purposely not supported the budget publicly, so they end up where they are now.

Ms. Stargardter asked that Ms. Buckler not speak on the motivations of others.

Ms. Buckler responded that she is not specifically stating any Councilors.

Ms. Stargardter noted that this is in the spirit of the direction.

Ms. Buckler noted that she understands this. A comment was directed toward Mr. Moran, and it is unfair to say that he does not have a right to say what he did and that was uncalled for. Ms. Buckler explained that it is getting to the point where it is unfair to the public to continue to ignore the e-mails and comments received and say that they are only going to cut from the BOE. E-mails have said not to cut from the BOE. It would have been more fair to split the reduction. The BOE is not at a level services budget and over \$500K in cuts have been made to the BOE. The Superintendent has said that with each \$58K/\$59K another position is reduced. Ms. Buckler commented that it is at the point where they are doing an injustice to the BOE. She wants to support the budget and understands where Mr. Moran is coming from when he says he cannot support it. It does not feel like they are doing the right thing.

Mr. Moran commented that he agrees that it is important that the Council stand behind the budget put forward. He has done this every time even when there were cuts that he did not feel were in the best interest of the town because it is important that they work together and compromise. He refuses to let this be one-sided and to be forced to support something when he feels like he is not getting a corresponding compromise. Mr. Moran commented that in good conscience he cannot support it. It is not fair to require this when it has not happened from every Councilor in past budgets.

A roll call vote was taken.

In favor: Sce, Noonan, Yudichak, Marie

Opposed: Moran, Buckler, Stargardter

Abstentions: none

Motion passed (4-3).

7. **APPROVAL OF A RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING THE FORM OF THE BALLOT FOR THE JUNE 18, 2024 BUDGET REFERENDUM AND ANY SUBSEQUENT BUDGET REFERENDUM; THE TIME AND PLACE FOR THE BUDGET REFERENDUM; AUTHORIZING THE TOWN MANAGER OR HIS DESIGNEE TO PLACE THE REQUIRED LEGAL NOTICES IN THE LOCAL NEWSPAPERS; AND AUTHORIZING THE PREPARATION AND PRINTING OF AN EXPLANATORY TEXT AND THE MAILING OF SAME TO LOCAL RESIDENTS AND IN ADDITION SENT OUT VIA THE TOWN'S TOLLAND NOTIFICATION SYSTEM AND INCLUDED WITH ABSENTEE BALLOTS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PROVISIONS OF CT GENERAL STATUTES 9-369B EXPLAINING THE BUDGET REFERENDUM QUESTION.**

Mr. Marie motioned,

WHEREAS, the Tolland Town Council has adopted a proposed FY 2024-2025 Town Operating and Capital Budget to be considered by the Tolland electorate at a June 18, 2024 budget referendum; and

WHEREAS, the Council must now establish the appropriate ballot language for this referendum and the date, time and place of said referendum;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Tolland Town Council the following:

1. *The ballot question for the June 18th referendum shall be worded as follows:*

“Shall the Town of Tolland’s proposed 2024-2025 budget of \$63,665,940, reflecting a spending increase of \$2,114,583 or 3.44% which requires an estimated tax rate of 37.77 mills for an increase of .44 mills or 1.18% be adopted? Yes/No.”
2. *The time and place for the referendum shall be between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. on June 18, 2024 at the Library Program Room.*
3. *The Town Manager or his designee is hereby authorized to place the required legal notices in the Journal Inquirer and other places as conditions permit, advertising the June 18, 2024 Referendum.*
4. *The Town Manager or his designee is authorized to prepare and print an explanatory text and the mailing of the same to local residents; to be included with absentee ballots and documented via*

the Town's Tolland Notification system in accordance with the provisions of CT General Statutes 9-369b explaining the budget referendum question.

Mr. Noonan seconded the motion.

Discussion:

Mr. Noonan noted that it is important to note the comments made regarding the expenses incurred by the town for each budget going forward so people know the cost if the referendum fails. Mr. Foley noted that the cost is \$5K for the referendum in addition to the information provided by Ms. Bartlett.

Vote:

In favor: Noonan, Sce, Stargardter, Marie, Yudichak

Opposed: none

Abstentions: Buckler, Moran

Motion passed (5-2).

7. ADJOURNMENT

Meeting adjourned without objection at 7:54PM.

Respectfully submitted,



Lisa Pascuzzi
Town Council Clerk

Town Council Chair

