

# SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

## TOLLAND TOWN COUNCIL TOLLAND HIGH SCHOOL – AUDITORIUM APRIL 23, 2015 – 7:30 P.M.

### ANNUAL BUDGET PRESENTATION

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Jack Scavone, Chairman; William Eccles; Richard Field; Paul Krasusky and Jan Rubino

**MEMBERS ABSENT:** George Baker and Ben Stanford

**OTHERS PRESENT:** Steven Werbner, Town Manager; Michael Wilkinson, Director of Administrative Services

- 1. CALL TO ORDER:** Jack Scavone called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.
- 2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:** Recited.
- 3. MOMENT OF SILENCE:** None.
- 4. ANNUAL BUDGET PRESENTATION**

**4.1** Pursuant to C9-9 of the Town of Tolland Charter, the Town Council shall arrange for an annual budget presentation. The annual budget presentation is intended to provide information and encourage public discussion.

Mr. Scavone advised that prior to the Annual Budget Referendum the Town Council is required by Charter to arrange for an Annual Budget Presentation. He reviewed all the public meetings held on the budget to date, and advised that a presentation will be given on April 27<sup>th</sup> at the Senior Center. A PowerPoint was used.

The budget referendum will be on **Tuesday, May 5<sup>th</sup>**. The question on the ballot will be:

***“Shall the Town of Tolland’s proposed 2015-2016 budget of \$54,598,930, reflecting a spending increase of \$1,423,098 or 2.68% which requires a tax rate of 33.36 mills, be adopted? Yes/No”***

This budget will maintain important services, continue to provide a quality education for our children and this year provides for certain programmatic improvements and produces a fiscally responsible budget. With what is occurring in Hartford that is a challenge, because a good portion of our money comes from State of Connecticut aid.

He outlined the expenditures by departments: the Town will have a 2.11% increase, the Capital Expenditure has gone up 112.61%, the Debt Service is unchanged this year and the BOE’s budget has increased 2.92%. The recommended budget for 2015/16 is \$54,598,930 (2.68%). A pie chart was shown outlining where the money goes: 70% - BOE, 21% - Town Operating, 8% - Debt Service and 1% - Capital Improvements.

With regard to the BOE: The recommended budget for the Board of Education as approved by the Town Council has been endorsed by the Superintendent of Schools. The slight difference in funding from that originally requested by the BOE is a result of savings in health and energy accounts occurring after the BOE adopted their budget. \$38,275,831 = 2.92%.

This year was a 5 year statistical revaluation. The revaluation does not raise revenue; it redistributes the taxes based on property values of certain classes of properties. He read the following from a slide in the PowerPoint:

*Eighty nine percent (89%) of the properties in Tolland have decreased in value 1%-10% due to market forces over the five year period of time. In total the Town's Grand List of taxable property declined by 3.51% or a loss of \$1,418,664 in actual tax dollars. In comparison, Coventry, which is on the same revaluation cycle, had a decline of approximately 7% in their Grand List. With a decline in the Grand List a corresponding increase in the mill rate must occur in order for there to be sufficient tax dollars to fund current and/or future budgetary expenses. The final impact of the revaluation on each homeowner will vary greatly depending on your new assessment, the value of any cars owned and the mill rate established by the Town Council. On our website, [www.tolland.org](http://www.tolland.org), you can find a tax calculator that will allow you to determine the impact of the revaluation and this budget on your property tax payments.*

A 2.68% increase, does not necessarily mean you will have a 2.68% increase in your personal situation. Examples of different household scenarios were provided. It shows some taxes going up, and some going down. The residents are urged to go to the Town's website, [www.tolland.org](http://www.tolland.org), to use the Tax Calculation Form to figure out what their new taxes will be based on this new budget.

You ask what you can do as a citizen going forward - Citizens can get involved by signing up for the e-blast, like the town on Facebook, follow the town on Twitter, volunteer for Town Boards/Commissions, or submit suggestions that would be good for all of us. The town needs your knowledge, ideas and time to keep Tolland a great place to live.

Mr. Scavone completed his presentation by reminding the public that there are two polling locations in Tolland:

Voting District #1 & #3 vote at the Tolland Recreation Center at 104 Old Post Road, which is the old Parker School (in the gymnasium). Parking is available.

Voting District #2 votes at Tolland Senior Center at 674 Tolland Stage Road. Parking is available.

If you have any questions regarding your voting district, please feel free to call any of the following offices:

Registrars of Voters – (860) 871-3634  
Town Clerk's Office – (860) 871-3630  
Town Manager's Office – (860) 871-3600

## 5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:

**Bill Rita of 296 Goose Lane:** He has been watching this from a distance annually. The town is almost in a state of crisis if you are in a position where you want to sell your house. He spoke about the decline in enrollment in our schools. He believed the incoming 1<sup>st</sup> grade class was approximately 90 students, were in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade there is 180 students. He spoke to a friend who told him he moved out of Tolland to Willington due to the mill rate. The mill rate in Willington is still in the 20's. He thinks that people are thinking within a box. For the community as a whole, the taxes in Tolland are high. They are a

disincentive for businesses and homeowners. He stated that he sent an e-mail to the Town Manager where he said he didn't want Tolland to become a semi-rural Bridgeport. He suggested for next year's budget, that they adopt the same crisis mentality as his neighbor who needs to sell his home. Don't start with the assumption that our budget was \$52m; start with the reduction in enrollment. He stated that he will be opposing this budget. He finished by saying he was not here to criticize, but suggests people start thinking outside of the box.

*Mr. Scavone encouraged him to spend time reviewing the numbers.*

*Ms. Rubino remarked that she has never seen Mr. Rita at a Council meeting, or engaged in any BOE or community meeting. If he really wants to see a change in the budget, or if he really wants to understand it, because it is clear to her that he does not understand the process, she advised that he is able to attend every meeting open to the public.*

**Karen Moran:** She expressed her support of this budget and plan for next year and the future. Dr. Willett has already had a positive effect on our District. The work that Dr. Willett and Mr. Werbner have done has been great. She thanked everyone who has invested so much time and energy.

**Michelle Harold:** She is 100% behind this budget. She knows it isn't easy to have an increase, but we need it. She thinks the budget for the BOE is incredible responsible. She loves living in Tolland.

**Patrick Doyle, Vice-Chair BOE:** He is proud that the BOE and Council have worked together. The BOE did start the budget at zero. They looked at the key items they needed. It has been a great and hard budget process. Fifteen staff positions are being eliminated, which is difficult. The way they are able to do that, and do it responsibly, is by focusing on what is necessary to provide quality education to the students. This is not about dollars, it is about vision and staying focused. With regard to enrollment, he won't dispute that it hasn't gone down overtime. He reviewed the enrollment figures with the public. He believes that if they want to do well by all of the citizens, they want to have great schools that are focused on the right things that attract families who want to come here and buy houses.

**Jackie Kolb of 34 Susan Drive:** She has not been following all the details of the budget. What she does know is that everyone has taken hits. She thinks this is a responsible budget. She would like to see it supported.

Dr. Walter Willett, Superintendent spoke. He said the incoming class for the 1<sup>st</sup> grade class is about 177, and in 9<sup>th</sup> grade it is about 222. So, the numbers are much higher than what Bill Rita had outlined above. The budget increase is 2.92% for the BOE. It's been a great opportunity for him to work with Mr. Werbner and the town. They have worked hard together to create a situation where they have a responsible budget, in terms of providing a quality education to the students in Tolland at a responsible level of funding. The kids will get an excellence in education, but they are going to get it through a responsible budget. They have narrowed their focus to a critical core vision of language arts and mathematics, with curriculum development as a part of that. He commented that he has offered several workshops, meetings and dinners, in which parents have voiced their concerns about the value of education in Tolland and what they are getting. These are people who are committed to living in Tolland, and have expressed that if the education in Tolland ever turned south they would do what they had to. That certainly will not help the economics of Tolland. There is a deep commitment to the education in this town. The loss of 15 staff positions will be a major change in how they do things, but it is an important adjustment that needed to be done. They worked hard to be a responsible partner in the budgeting process.

**Bill Rita** asked if there were any decreases in fuel costs as they did this budget.

*Mr. Scavone said if he was part of the budget process and part of what goes on in this town, the town embarked in a \$10m energy services contract last year. Most of the town facilities were*

*gone through. Energy efficient lighting was installed, boilers, and all kinds of things that are associated with cost avoidance and future maintenance problems that could occur. All of these things are factored into the budgets. He also advised that every year, the utilities are negotiated and locked in for a year. Everything can change throughout the year, but Tolland is locked into a price bidding contract for a year. Mr. Werbner also added that any of the savings that Tolland accrues, associated with the efficiency or lower costs for utilities, are going towards paying for those improvements. In terms of the taxpayers' impact for the \$10m of improvements, it is neutral. The energy savings are paying for the energy improvements. It is a program that balances off. In terms of a lowering of the budget as a result of energy savings, the budget itself is not lowered, but those savings are being used for the capital improvements that would have had to have been financed with increased debt. So, if you are talking about thinking 'out-of-the-box', that is one of the most innovative ways of bringing about capital improvements without a cost impact to the residents for systems that were 2-3x's beyond their useful life. In a community like Tolland, we stretch every dollar. These were systems that were 30-40 years old, and should have been replaced when they were 15-20 years old.*

Mr. Werbner said there are concerns that he has locally and statewide with regards to property taxes. It is totally unfair to leave any impression that the Town of Tolland is equivalent to the financial situation of Bridgeport. Mr. Rita couldn't have used a worse comparison. Tolland is a triple A rated community, one of the few in the State of Connecticut our size. This is based upon our financial capacity, our management capacity and our fund balance. Bridgeport is nowhere near a triple A rating. Tolland has one of the higher economic demographics in the state. We are one of the wealthier counties in the state. We don't compare at all in terms of any of the demographics in any capacity to Bridgeport. That was not a responsible statement. This Council and prior Councils have been extremely concerned about the mill rate and the mill rate increase. If you go back and look at the average mill rate increase over the last six years, it has been less than 1%. At the same time, the cost of living has increased three times that amount. The town has taken enormous steps over the last 5-6 years to recognize the economic difficulties, and the BOE has been the brunt of a lot of that, because their increase have been significantly lower than what had been requested. If you compare our costs to the average of all communities with a population of 30,000 or less, you will find that the costs in Tolland are half of what the costs are in terms of the average of all those communities. Tolland which has a good reputation in the school system and a good reputation on the municipal side is doing that at half the cost of what all the other communities are doing. Why is our mill rate higher than Willington? Because, in the early 2000's, we were the fastest growing community. We needed to develop the infrastructure (school buildings, sewers, other capacities) in order to be able to have those people live here. There was a cost associated with that. That cost is different than the cost of Willington. Willington doesn't have the same population that we do; they don't have the same services that we do. People need to make a choice. Do they want the services that Tolland can provide, or do they want to live in a community that might have lesser taxes, but a different level of services. He added that Tolland could save a couple hundred thousand dollars a year by going to a different level of service, but it would be unacceptable for the residents of this community. This is one of the most fiscally, conservative and prudent communities that he has been involved with, and has some of the best services.

**Mrs. Rita:** Her concern is with real estate. Why are people having trouble selling their homes? On her road, they have properties for sale.

*Mr. Scavone said this is a personal answer – Approximately 10-15 years ago Pratt & Whitney hired 250 engineers. Most of them moved to Tolland and most of them bought big houses. They were here for about 6-10 years, and then Pratt & Whitney moved them all to Florida. Those houses are here without anyone who wants them. That is supply and demand. We need to wait for the next round of people that want to buy the houses that were built for them when they came to Tolland. The town doesn't control the free market. We are in America, this is the free market.*

*If people want your house, and they want to live where you live, your house will sell. He understood her concern.*

Mr. Scavone acknowledged the members of the BOE and Town Council, and thanked them all.

6. **ADJOURNMENT:** Rick Field moved to adjourn the meeting; Seconded by Paul Krasusky at 8:18 p.m. All were in favor.

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Jack Scavone, Council Chair

**Michelle A. Finnegan**  
**Town Council Clerk**