

**PUBLIC HEARING MEETING MINUTES**  
**Via Zoom Virtual Meeting**  
**FINANCIAL PLANNING and ALLOCATION COMMISSION**  
**Wednesday, May 13, 2020 – 7 pm**  
**Yeomans Hall**  
**323 Route 87, Columbia, CT**

**Members Present:** Ernie Sharpe, Chairman; Richard Szegda, Co-Vice Chairman; Kelly Peck Co-Vice Chairman; Judith Jordan; Brian Pedersen.

**Members Absent:** Mike Patel, Jeff Viens.

**Also Present:** Mark Walter, Town Administrator, Bev Ciurylo, Finance Director, Maria Geryk, Superintendent, Steven Everett, First Selectman; Chris Lent, Board of Education Chairman.

*This is a web-based call, so this meeting is operating under the following procedures: This session is being both video and audio-recorded. Commissioners and staff will generally remain on mute except when speaking or voting and will generally be keeping video of themselves on throughout the meeting. There will be public comment during this Public Hearing. If a member of the public creates an audio or video disruption, they may be manually ejected from the meeting upon recommendation of staff or the chair. During the public hearing there are multiple ways to make comments, state name and address, to make a comment you can use the wave feature, if using Chat function please type name and address and state your question.*

**CALL TO ORDER:** E. Sharpe called the meeting to order at 7:03 pm.

**1. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:**

- 2. PUBLIC HEARING ON THE PROPOSED FISCAL YEAR 2019-2020 BUDGET:** E. Sharpe stated he would allow questions or comments from the committee during the meeting. First Selectman, Steven Everett explained the procedures and Executive Orders enacted by the Governor to address how towns and municipalities address budget meetings, approving the annual town budget as well as setting the mill rate. He also noted that the Executive Order 7I allows the legislative body of the Town (the Board of Selectman) to authorize the budget making authority (FiPAC) to adopt the budget and set the mill rate.

**2.1 Presentations of the proposed budget by representatives of the Board of Education and the Board of Selectmen.** M. Geryk presented the Board of Education (BOE) budget for FY 2020-2021 school year. M. Geryk thanked the Board of Education members for their commitment to the students of Columbia, the Horace Porter staff, and Beverly Ciurylo, Finance Director for technical support and help in the process.

M. Geryk explained the four primary goal areas that make up school's continuous improvement plan for the school and briefly reviewed goals as outlined in her Powerpoint budget presentation.

The Board of Education proposed a budget of \$12,716,543 which is a 0.16% decrease in the budget. M. Geryk shared a slide on the historical

costs associated with the costs of the High School and Horace Porter budget cost comparisons and a historical snapshot of special education costs that are based on actual student needs. M. Geryk reviewed the notable increases in the proposed Board of Education Budget. She explained the primary drivers are health benefits, contractual obligations, and the security assessment to ensure infrastructure is secure. The notable decreases were in tuition lines, special education transportation, equipment, textbooks, and supplies. Grant funds are being used to assist in technology purchases plus some items that would have been in next year's budget are being purchased currently, such as, curriculum items.

M. Geryk explained the staffing profile which includes the historical certified and non-certified staff. There is a request to increase one teacher in grade 4 and a .5 or ½ position request for position in enrichment. The proposed budget maintains the level services which includes same class sizes, while maintaining the level of curricular needs, instructional needs and interventions and supports in place. There is no anticipation for any other staffing changes.

M. Geryk reviewed the student number projection. The number of students in the 2016 projections study anticipated that the Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade will be 387. The current number is 411 and it is anticipated that this number will remain stable. The projected High School count is 224, current number is 243 with an expected 20/21 count of 233.

The BOE approved a reduction in the 20/21 Capital request by completing a number of the originally proposed projects in 19/20 through the BOE operating budget, and some will be placed on hold. The 20/21 request is \$30,000 for regular building maintenance and feasibility study for the improvement of the track.

In regards to the COVID-19 outbreak, M. Geryk noted that during this challenging time, the school will be working over the next three months to adjust how the school will work with the Department of Public Health, the Governor and the Commissioner of Education. The District will adapt to the needs of the education and health and safety of the students.

C. Lent, Board of Education Chairman, thanked M. Geryk and the administration staff and the teachers for their hard work during extraordinary times and for putting forth a budget that meets the needs of the district.

M. Walter presented the Board of Selectmen (BOS) 20/21 proposed budget as outlined in a Powerpoint presentation. He thanked each member of the Board of Selectmen as well as Finance Director, B. Ciurylo, and Executive Assistant, J. LaVoie.

M. Walter started with a review of proposed 20/21 revenues. The overall decrease of \$231,677 in intergovernmental revenue is due to a decrease in the Special Education Excess Cost grant and the anticipated LoCIP reimbursement. It is anticipated that this decrease will be offset with other budget revenue lines, such as municipal fees, interest and preschool

tuition. M. Walter noted that LoCIP is decreasing by over \$195,000 because the Town has applied for its full entitlement balance to the completed Salt Shed. The amount being budgeted for 20/21 is the new LoCIP entitlement which is \$39,068.

The key operating budget variables include the Health Insurance, staffing changes and information technology. The Town is currently in a health insurance consortium that was to help a long-term positive driver towards flattening out healthcare costs. Unfortunately, due to some big claims within the consortium, there is a 19.5% renewal increase in health care premiums. He stated that the hope is that this will not be the norm after this year. As for staff changes, it impacted the following departments: senior van services, public works, waste disposal and recreation. There is an increase in information technology due to an IT security assessment of both BOE and the Town that was completed to analyze the Town's weaknesses and vulnerability. The town has created an action plan against cybercrime and as a result, there are some extra costs in following the recommendations as well as training of employees.

M. Walter reviewed the notable increases in the operating budget. This included an increase in the senior van services costs for an additional van driver and dispatcher. Public works shifted from landscaping services to a part-time staff which resulted in a change within the DPW budget. There was an addition of a third transfer station attendant to accommodate the changing aspects of getting rid of waste and recyclables. Additional hours were given to the Recreation Assistant with funds shifted from Gate Monitoring. The Recreation Department moved their office to the Murphy House. One reason is to have permanent staff on hand at the lake as well as offer part-time/seasonal staff to help. This move ended up in a slight net decrease overall between those two departments and this is showing a net decrease.

M. Walter explained that the Social Services number may change for a Social Worker. The Town may bid and analyze the options or possibly hire a part-time Social Worker.

M. Walter noted that there is an addition to Elderly Services for the dispatcher and transportation services of \$31,000. This was approved by the BOS during this fiscal year.

The Public Works department has an increase for additional hours for an Administrative Assistant as well as added some hours for a seasonal staff person.

The Lake Management budget increased due to more lake monitoring for bacteria that could affect the lake which the Town is trying to get ahead on.

M. Walter explained that the proposed 20/21 Capital Budget has an overall net decrease of \$218,500 from this fiscal year. He highlighted the capital reductions:

- Henequin Road project went down because it is fully funded.
- Hunt Rd. culvert was reduced further by extending to a 4-year process which resulted in the budget going down by \$75,000 from the original \$175,000.
- Rec Park improvements were finalized at \$100,000 with a \$15,000 from this year.
- Department of Public Works capital is down due to shifting of projects and purchases to different fiscal year.
- Tree removal is up by standardizing the tree removal program to \$100,000 each year to get ahead of the hazardous tree situations in Town.
- Senior Center needed additional safety modifications for automated bathroom doors.
- Fire Department request is down \$150,000 for the rescue truck because the Town is moving forward with appropriating the funds from the General Fund sooner than anticipate due to CVFD needs.

M. Walter provided a snapshot of the budget which included the following:

- The BOS has an increase of \$236,932 or 5.88%.
- The BOE has a decrease of \$20,383 or -0.16%.
- No longer budgeting for teacher retirement because it is not believed the State will be shifting that cost to the town.
- The debt is down by \$7,250 or -4.55%.
- Capital budgets combined between the BOS and BOE is down by \$359,583 or -31.02%.

The overall proposed Town budget is \$18,053,480 which is an overall reduction of \$190,160 or -1.04% from last year.

M. Walter explained that FiPAC's goal is a 0-mill rate increase and has proposed to keep the mill rate at 29.33. After all the reductions and increases. To accomplish this, it is proposed that \$438,736 of the General Fund be used to remove any increase in the mill rate. The Powerpoint showed a graph indicating that the mill rate has been flat for the last 4 years.

S. Everett stated that the Town went into this budget season to continue the quality of life for the citizens of Columbia and with the COVID-19 emergency we took a hard look at the budgets in a financially responsible way. He said that we enjoy a healthy general fund, even borrowing or taking from the general fund and that we usually every year give back to the general fund. Some of these items include overtime from Department of Public Works because we did not use as much salt and there are

different areas in the school system that can give back. S. Everett stated he is confident using the general fund to avoid an increase in the mill rate.

S. Everett addressed a comment from a resident after a recent First Selectman update video. He wanted to clarify his statement about there is “something for everyone” in the budget. He stated that what he meant was that the town will continue to provide the quality of life residents of Columbia enjoy in this budget by pairing down the budget in Rec Park, providing funding for the rescue truck for the CVFD because emergency services is our highest priority, services for our senior citizens and meeting the needs of our citizens by adding a social worker.

- 2.2 Opportunity for any elector or qualified voter to be heard regarding the recommended appropriations.** M. Walter stated as referenced earlier in S. Everett’s comment, there was a comment from John Volger, 6 Collins Road, that was emailed to publicinput@columbiact.org. It reads as follows: “As you move forward with unilateral budget and tax plans it is imperative that you consider the situation of those you serve. It would be unconscionable and flatly against everything that this town, state, and nation stand for to raise taxes or fees without the consent of the governed.

The comment on last week’s First Selectman’s YouTube post that “...there is a little something for everyone...” in what is being discussed/proposed, causes pause.

No doubt Town and BOE employees, who have experienced no financial hardship through any of this, are all due for contractual salary increases. (I suppose that cannot be controlled.) Beyond that, ANY increase in town outlays, any excuse not to roll the current year’s surpluses (snow removal moneys among them) back into savings in next year’s budget, is indefensible given the current and ongoing financial hardship a large share of the townspeople face.

I will return to the most foundational American phrase we share and hold dear. -Consent of the governed- It is our right, and IT IS your responsibility.”

In Chat Room were the following questions and the responses:

- Denise Egan, 16 Lake Rd., President of the Library Board: “I have been asked by the Library board to request that our recent decrease of \$2,306 be reinstated due to the increased costs associated with COVID.” Denise Egan stated that the board dropped from 3.07% to 2.5% but due to COVID-19, health costs have increased for covered employees and the need for. E. Sharpe stated under FiPAC will take the request under consideration,
- Mary Roickle, Erdoni Rd.: “Will the BOE budget adequately support a ‘return to school’ normal in the Fall 2020, a ‘return to school’ with a hybrid model of 1/2 days or modification to protect children and/or long-distance learning?” M. Geryk stated that this is difficult to answer that question because the reopening advisory committee is still in the midst of work and is checking with the

Department of Public Health on what is needed. In a couple of months, we will have a better understanding of what is needed. We may need PPE or other adaptive equipment, thermometers etc. based on the DPH's recommendations. A lot of this is unknown. Purchasing will be from the funding in this budget and as necessary, we would come to FiPAC if more funding is needed from the non-lapsing account. I feel comfortable with the budget that was presented.

- Carol Kubala, 37 Lake Rd. stated she would like to see the \$2000 plus reinstated to the Library budget due to COVID 19 concerns, increased insurance cost and increases in minimum wage, just like the rest of the town. She stated that she finds it hard to be negative about a 0 increase; much is due to postponing of projects and from general fund. She stated to keep that in mind throughout the year, so when we get to the budget process next year, she may have comments.
- Su Epstein, Library Director stated that she is also asking for the return of the \$2,306. It is included in the amount originally requested and was going to cover the Mandatory salary increases and vendor cost. With this cost and additional costs with COVID-19, we are further behind and would like that to be reconsidered.
- Joan Hill, 23 Cards Mill Rd. "Could you expand on the necessity of the Rec Park improvements that will be completed under this year's budget request." M. Walter explained that the pavilion will be completed, the addition of handicapped components to the playscape, the completing pickleball court and we will be finishing the basketball court which will amount to the \$100,000 budget.
- Joan Hill, 23 Cards Mill Rd. "Could you expand on the BOS decision to fund the Fire Department Capital item from the general fund outside of the town meeting procedure." M. Walter explained the CVFD was concerned with mechanical and electrical problems with the rescue truck. They felt they needed to escalate the two-year cycle and requested to purchase the truck as soon as possible. They will need to plan to go out to bid. He explained that the CVFD wanted to make sure that the money was approved before they started seeking replacement of the truck.
- Randi Daher, Upper Woodland Terrace. "Health Insurance premiums are expected to increase by 19.5% for FY 20/21. What percentage did employees contribute to Health Insurance premiums in FY 19/20? Is any of this 19.5% increase being passed on to employees to help subsidize this increase for FY20/21?" M. Walter explained that employees do pay a percentage toward their health care. Different bargaining units have different co-pays. Each group also has a different contribution to their health savings account. On the Town side, there was an increased a percentage to their contribution. BOE did not.
- Mary Roickle: "Thank you to FiPAC and Town Officials!"

E. Sharpe stated that the public can still correspond through the [publicinput@columbiact.org](mailto:publicinput@columbiact.org) email. FiPAC will be meeting next week to go over the public input and further discuss the 20/21 budget.

R. Szegda stated he liked the rationale for increasing the library budget by \$2,300 from the fund balance. E. Sharpe stated we understand that this was a voluntary cut from the Library, but this will be addressed in next week's meeting. E. Sharpe also stated that at the next meeting, there will not be public input.

3. **RECESS:** None
4. **OLD BUSINESS:** None
5. **NEW BUSINESS:** None
6. **TRANSFERS:** None
7. **NEXT MEETING:** Wednesday, May 20, 2020 at 7:00 PM
8. **ADJOURNMENT:** Adjourned at 7:59PM.

Respectfully Submitted by Jennifer C. LaVoie