

Council at Large:

Mr. Joshua Goldstein
Mr. Johan Lopez
Ms. Nicol Ayers

Mr. Jesse Buccolo
Mr. Colin Hosten

District A:

Mr. Jalin Sead

Mr. Broderick Sawyer

District B:

Mr. Dajuan Wiggins

Ms. Darlene Young

District C:

Ms. Nicolé Eaddy

Ms. Anne Wennerstrand

District D:

Mr. Jan Degenshein

Mr. Richard Dellinger

District E:

Mr. James Frayer

Mr. Brian Bailey

The meeting was called to order at 7:38 p.m. by Mayor Smyth. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

I. ROLL CALL

Ms. Elbourne, City Clerk, performed roll and a quorum was present.

II. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

A. Special Meeting: February 10, 2026

Ms. Wennerstrand noted that under Section C, Public Works, Item 2 (approve the honorary naming of Lincoln Avenue Extension to meet Master Chief Alexander Restrepo-Weig) should be recorded as tabled. Mr. Buccolo stated that a question he asked Jared about how the six contracts were spread out, along with the lengthy response provided, had been omitted from the minutes and must be included. Additional corrections included fixing several misspelled names throughout the document and adding comments made by Mr. Frayer on appointments that had not been recorded.

****MS. WENNERSTRAND MOVED TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF FEBRUARY 10, 2026, AS AMENDED.**

****THE MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY AS AMENDED.**

B. Regular Meeting: February 10, 2026

Ms. Eaddy requested that comments attributed to her on page 13 be removed entirely, stating she did not recall making any remarks at that point and believed they were recorded in error. No other corrections were offered. With this single amendment, the motion carried unanimously

****MR. SEAD MOVED TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF FEBRUARY 10, 2026, AS AMENDED.**

**** THE MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY AS AMENDED.**

III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Ms. Mariaj Jankowski, a long-time Norwalk resident, property owner, and business owner, expressed disappointment in the proposed operating budget, especially the funding allocated to the Board of Education. She characterized it as a pure maintenance budget with no new programs, projecting a \$6 million shortfall that would force cuts. She calculated that fully funding the Board's request would add approximately \$140 to her annual property tax bill but argued it was essential to sustain current staffing, programs, and teacher recruitment and retention, given ongoing difficulties attracting and keeping quality certified staff.

Dr. Carrie Sheffield, a school psychologist employed by Norwalk Public Schools and a clinical psychologist who works with boards of education statewide, stated that strong public schools are the foundation of strong, desirable communities because they protect property values, attract families and businesses, stabilize neighborhoods, and keep cities progressing. She reminded the Council that the majority of Norwalk households do not have school-age children yet still depend on excellent schools for their property values and quality of life, and urged restoration of the full 6.5% request so that the \$6.7 million gap would not harm services, staffing, or students.

Mr. Howard White, Chair of the Norwalk Public Schools Board of Education, thanked every Council member for their service. He explained that the Board had approved a 6.5% increase in December after holding the budget at status quo the prior year to focus on teachers and students, and that the 4% now proposed would reverse that progress rather than allow the district to move forward. He asked the Council to weigh the impact on children and educators when casting their votes.

Ms. Mary Ellen Flaherty Ludwig, resident of 89 Soundview Avenue and a member of the Board of Education, thanked the Council and Mayor for their time and described the upcoming vote as critically important for the community. She requested that the Council amend the Board of Education budget upward by 1% (to 5%), which would generate \$2.4 million and preserve approximately 20 teaching positions. She provided background on demographic trends showing a modest overall reduction in incoming kindergarten students scattered across schools, noted that reassignments would absorb most surpluses but some teacher positions would still be lost, and acknowledged the Council's strong past support for capital projects such as new schools (40% local share). She concluded by asking for the additional 1% to safeguard every classroom, program, and teacher.

Ms. Madara Thomas, parent of three Norwalk Public Schools students (past and present) and principal of Concord Magnet School, stated that all stakeholders love Norwalk and its children but view the issues through different lenses. She advocated for respectful dialogue that honors every perspective and urged full funding so that all children, not just hers, could compete with neighboring Gold Coast districts. Speaking also as "Mr. T," she asked on behalf of paraprofessionals, teachers, administrators, kitchen staff, custodians, and principals for the resources needed to fulfill their calling rather than perform miracles with insufficient support.

Ms. Mary Yorden, of Nine Mod Avenue, speaking on behalf of the Norwalk Federation of Teachers, recognized that the Council and the Federation share the goal of supporting Norwalk Public Schools and the city. She acknowledged the difficult budget gap and the impact on teachers who are uncertain about their careers, and asked the Council to work collaboratively with Board of Education leaders to right-size the budget while ensuring sufficient resources to operate the schools even as enrollment declines, because fixed overhead costs remain.

Ms. Ashley Gulyas (she/her), of 5 Cliffview Drive, Board of Education Secretary and parent of a second-grade student at Concord Magnet School, described her daughter's positive experience with enrichment in math and support in reading, and her daily eagerness to attend school. She stated that the \$6.5 million difference between the Board-approved 6.5% and the proposed 4% cannot be reconciled without harming student-facing programs and positions, and asked the Council at minimum to discuss the issue openly, consider revenue-generation options beyond taxes, and raise the Board of Education allocation above 4%.

Ms. Katie McFate (she/her), of 6 Rampart Road and parent of an 8- and 11-year-old at Concord Magnet School, asked the Council to fully fund the Board's 6.5% request, warning that the gap would land hardest on the most vulnerable families. She described recent cuts already felt by students (loss of Japanese program, reduced world-language support, near-loss of drama teacher) and the importance of no-cost breakfast, lunch, and after-school programs. She noted that repeated underfunding sends a message that talented teachers may be better appreciated elsewhere and that strong schools are central to attracting and retaining families and protecting the tax base.

Mr. Nick Zerzan, of 1 Gene Avenue, called in from Florida and asked the Council to fully fund the budget, warning that flat funding would result in job losses and program eliminations such as music. He urged collaboration between Mayor Barbara C. Smyth and Council to avoid repeating last year's conflict, finger-pointing, and loss of good teachers, and expressed confidence in Mayor Smyth's ability to solve the inherited challenges.

Ms. Ana Tabachneck, of 4 Gilbert Street, speaking with her daughter Brenda present, asked the Council to fund the full 6.5% request, noting that the Board's budget is a true maintenance budget just like the city-side proposal. She observed that the overall tax impact of fully funding the Board would be negligible compared with the double-digit assessment-driven increases already facing residents, and that the cost of lost services and teachers far outweighs any modest additional expense.

Ms. Amanda De Miranda, of 25 County Street and parent of two autistic children attending Aramaic Elementary, expressed pride in living in Norwalk's diverse community but stressed that one in 34 children is diagnosed with autism and many students have invisible disabilities that require specialized services. She stated that early intervention is critical due to neuroplasticity and that cutting funding would leave vulnerable children behind during their most important developmental years.

Ms. Julia Bain, resident of 18 Crooked Trail and mother of a rising kindergartner and a second grader, implored the Council to fully fund the Board of Education’s requested budget to maintain the status quo in educational services. As a taxpayer and product of public education, she stated that the months-long uncertainty during the last two budget cycles had shaken her belief in the process. She described the four-month uncertainty from February through June the previous year and provided a snapshot of its personal impact as a parent: her second grader expressed hopes to play cello next year, love for her assistant principal, desire for her brother to have the same excellent teacher, and wish for her best friend to be in her class—each time met with the parent’s response of “I hope so,” while internally withholding the qualifiers “if music isn’t cut,” “if she isn’t reassigned,” “if she doesn’t lose her job,” or noting that one best friend had moved to a neighboring town and another was enrolled in private school due to the budget situation. Ms. Bain concluded that children, teachers, administrators, and the community deserve better than repeated “I hope so” answers and four months (a third of the year) of uncertainty and urged the Council to seek constructive solutions immediately for the sake of the community.

Ms. Amanda Robbins thanked everyone who had spoken in person and online, as well as the Council members for their service to the city. She added her voice to the many parents, educators, and doctors who had spoken in support of increasing the proposed 4% budget allocation to at least 1% more—or ideally the full 6.5% requested by the Board of Education. She emphasized that the Board’s request is a maintenance budget with few extras or additions, and expressed hope that rising national costs in healthcare, transportation, and food would not become an additional burden on students and children. She noted that property taxes are already rising and that she (and others) had voted for Council members who campaigned on supporting the school system. Ms. Robbins asked the Council to honor those campaign commitments, avoid leaving anyone in doubt, and use taxpayer funds in good faith to support families and children, describing a strong educational system as the best investment for the city’s future.

Public participation concluded.

IV. MAYOR

A. RESIGNATIONS AND APPOINTMENTS

1. RESIGNATIONS

a. Michelle Sawyer, Board of Ethics

The resignation was received and accepted.

2. REAPPOINTMENTS

a. Meggan Douglas, Board of Assessment Appeals, Alternate b. Ashley Petrides, Board of Assessment Appeals, Alternate c. Harriet Petrides, Board of Assessment Appeals, Alternate

****MR. FRAYER MOVED TO APPROVE THE REAPPOINTMENTS OF MEGGAN DOUGLAS, ASHLEY PETRIDES, AND HARRIET PETRIDES AS ALTERNATES TO THE BOARD OF ASSESSMENT APPEALS.**

Mr. Frayer stated that these women have served previous terms on the Board of Assessment Appeals and performed wonderfully. He noted that all three are very successful realtors in Norwalk and Darien, and that their expertise and experience would continue to benefit the work of the Board.

No other comments were offered.

****THE MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.**

d. John Church, Fair Rent Commission

****MS. EADDY MOVED TO APPROVE THE REAPPOINTMENT OF JOHN CHURCH TO THE FAIR RENT COMMISSION.**

Ms. Eaddy stated that Mr. Church is a Managing Director at Deloitte LLP, where he has worked for 13½ years handling audits, conflicts, and compliance requirements, and has held many positions within the firm. She added that he serves as a trustee at Temple Shalom of Norwalk and as a commissioner for the Norwalk Housing Authority. Mr. Church has served on the Fair Rent Commission for more than 20 years. To lighten the mood, Ms. Eaddy shared that his favorite food is a large cheese pizza from East Avenue Pizza and that he enjoys baseball, particularly as a fan of the Pittsburgh Pirates. She welcomed him back and thanked him for his continued service.

Mr. Young thanked Ms. Eaddy for the information and commended Mr. Church for his more than 20 years of service on the Fair Rent Commission. She shared that she had the pleasure of working with Mr. Church during his time on the Fair Rent and Human Relations Committee and noted that Mr. Church's long tenure speaks volumes about his character and commitment to the city, particularly in handling stressful housing insecurity situations and working to rectify and remediate them for residents.

No other comments were offered.

****THE MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.**

e. Dora Witherspoon, Fair Rent Commission, Alternate

****MS. EADDY MOVED TO APPROVE THE REAPPOINTMENT OF DORA WITHERSPOON AS AN ALTERNATE TO THE FAIR RENT COMMISSION.**

Ms. Eaddy stated that it was her pleasure to move Ms. Witherspoon's reappointment. Ms. Witherspoon is a senior-level IT professional who has worked for major corporations including Gartner, American Express, Pitney Bowes, and currently NBC Universal (where she has been for over 10 years). She specializes in test engineering, quality assurance, and programming, and has been involved in programming work for the Olympics for several years (noting that Ms. Witherspoon had been away the previous two weeks working at the Olympics). Ms. Eaddy

shared that Ms. Witherspoon’s favorite food is lasagna and that her hobby is bowling. She welcomed Ms. Witherspoon back and thanked her for her service.

Ms. Young thanked Ms. Eaddy for the information and stated that Ms. Witherspoon comes from a family that serves the city. She expressed appreciation for her and her family’s time and commitment to Norwalk and hoped she could soon move from the alternate list to become a full member of the Commission.

No other comments were offered.

****THE MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Mayor Smyth thanked all of the reappointees for continuing to serve the city and expressed appreciation for their ongoing commitment.

3. APPOINTMENTS

a. Jackeline Irias, Board of Assessment Appeals, Regular – subject to the approval of the Fourteen Day Rule waiver

****MR. FRAYER MOVED TO APPROVE THE APPOINTMENT OF JACKELINE IRIAS AS A REGULAR MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF ASSESSMENT APPEALS, SUBJECT TO THE APPROVAL OF THE FOURTEEN DAY RULE WAIVER.**

Mayor Smyth noted that the appointment was subject to the Fourteen Day Rule waiver (to be addressed on the consent calendar) due to urgency in moving the appointment forward.

Mr. Frayer stated that this is a new appointment (not a reappointment) and that Ms. Irias is a very well-recognized real estate agent in Darien (though she resides in Norwalk). He noted that she is very familiar with the area and would be a real asset to the Board of Assessment Appeals.

No other comments were offered.

****THE MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Mayor Smyth thanked Ms. Irias for agreeing to serve and assist with the assessment appeals, noting that there are quite a few pending cases awaiting her participation.

B. MAYOR’S REMARKS

Mayor Barbara C. Smyth delivered the following remarks:

On behalf of the City of Norwalk, Mayor Barbara C. Smyth extended warm wishes to the city’s Muslim residents for a peaceful and blessed Ramadan. She described the month as a meaningful time of fasting, reflection, and generosity, and offered hopes that it would bring strength, renewal, and joy. She concluded with “Ramadan Mubarak.”

Mayor Barbara C. Smyth also wished a Happy Lunar New Year to all who celebrate, noting that as families gather to welcome the new year, she hoped the season would bring happiness, good health, prosperity, and renewed hope, with peace and joy in the year ahead.

Mayor Barbara C. Smyth recognized Public Schools Week, a time to celebrate the incredible work occurring daily in Norwalk's classrooms. She thanked students, educators, and staff for their commitment, resilience, and belief in the power of public education, stating that she is proud of them and that while the week is dedicated to recognizing their efforts, the city celebrates them throughout the year.

Turning to the budget process, Mayor Barbara C. Smyth noted that the Council would discuss and vote on the budget cap that evening, after which the proposed budget would go to the Board of Estimate and Taxation (BET). The BET would meet with each department to review the budget line by line and make any necessary changes. She highlighted the next public opportunity to speak on the budget as the BET public hearing scheduled for March 25th and encouraged residents to mark their calendars for that important date.

Mayor Barbara C. Smyth referenced her previous comments at the Finance Committee meeting but briefly summarized key drivers of the current budget challenges: skyrocketing healthcare costs (affecting both the city and Board of Education sides and not unique to Norwalk), contractual obligations from six union agreements negotiated simultaneously this year, and the ongoing third year of the revaluation phase.

She emphasized that the recommended budget includes the full \$4.5 million supplemental funding provided at the end of the previous budget season as part of the base budget this year, so the proposed 4% increase is on top of that amount. Mayor Barbara C. Smyth stated that the administration is making responsible investments in Norwalk's future and developing a long-term plan to address these pressures.

She highlighted investments in the internal services fund to help offset cost increases for residents, growth in the grand list due to new businesses opening (with further changes expected in the next revaluation), and exploration of additional revenue streams to reduce reliance on property taxes.

Regarding education funding, Mayor Barbara C. Smyth reported working closely with other mayors, including meetings with Mayor Simmons of Stamford, to advocate for increased state education funding. She affirmed her ongoing commitment, stating she would not give up on securing more Education Cost Sharing (ECS) funding. She mentioned speaking with State Senator Will Haskell at a recent Democratic Town Committee meeting to ensure the message reaches the Governor, and planned to personally raise the issue with the Governor later that week. Mayor Barbara C. Smyth reiterated her dedication to advocating in Hartford and walking the walk as Mayor to increase funding for Norwalk Public Schools.

Finally, Mayor Barbara C. Smyth reminded residents that tickets for the Mayor's Ball, scheduled for March 6th, are still available for purchase via norwalkct.gov or the city's social media

channels. She noted that the two beneficiaries this year are Triangle Community Center and Mid-Fairfield Community Care Center, organizations providing vital support to marginalized and vulnerable youth and families in Norwalk.

V. COUNCIL PRESIDENT

A. RESIGNATIONS AND APPOINTMENTS

No additional resignations or appointments were presented.

B. CONSENT CALENDAR

Council President Joshua Goldstein thanked Mayor Barbara C. Smyth and acknowledged the significant work involved in the budget season, noting that additional comments would come later. He turned the reading of the Consent Calendar over to Councilmember Colin Hosten.

Councilmember Hosten read the Consent Calendar for February 24, 2026, as follows:

VI. REPORTS: DEPARTMENTS, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

A. Corporation Counsel:

1. Amend Charter § 10-5A from stating that it takes effect “on or before February 28th each year” to instead state that it takes effect “on or before February 28, 2027 and on or before February 28th each year thereafter.” Also, amend Charter § 11-5 to add language “and as amended pursuant to C.G.S. § 7-191b pertaining to the modification of budget adoption dates.”
2. Approve Fourteen Day Rule waiver.

VII. CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES

A. Finance and Claims Committee:

1. Narrative on Tax Collections dated February 2026.
2. Monthly Tax Collector’s Reports dated January 2026.
3. Claims Committee Report dated February 2026.
4. RESOLUTION: Approve a special appropriation totaling \$140,000 for the Norwalk Recovery Program account 570000-5617-OPI01. Norwalk Recovery Program includes the hiring of a Recovery Coach position with the Norwalk Police Department and grants to substance use organizations serving Norwalk residents.
5. RESOLUTION TO TRANSFER UNEXPENDED FUNDS TO A NEW PROJECT:

BE IT RESOLVED, that a special capital appropriation of \$275,000 is hereby transferred from the Combined Dispatch Capital Project for the Communications Upgrade (account # 09213610-5777-C0638) to the City’s Office of Building Management Department (on behalf of the Historical Commission) for the Conservatory project account 09266310-5777-C0857 referenced below.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that a special capital appropriation of \$275,000 is hereby transferred to the City's Office of Building Management Department (on behalf of the Historical Commission) for the research, design, and engineering work associated with the Conservatory at the Lockwood Mathews Mansion. Funds will be appropriated to a new account 09266310-5777-C0857 established upon final approval from the City Council.

B. Ordinance:

1. Approve changes to Chapter 33A (Complete Streets), Section 33A-8 (Exceptions).
2. Approve changes to Chapter 29 (Cannabis), Section 29-6 (Enforcement; fines/citation; hearing; report).

C. Recreation, Parks and Cultural Affairs:

1. Authorize the Mayor, Barbara C. Smyth, to enter into an agreement for the use of Calf Pasture Beach by Coachmen Car Club for their Car Show to be held on Tuesday, May 12th, June 9th, July 14th and August 11th, 2026 from 4:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M with rain dates on Friday, May 15th, June 12th, July 17th and August 14th, 2026. Approximately 150 people.
2. Authorize the Mayor, Barbara C. Smyth, to enter into an agreement for the use of Veteran's Park by Norwalk Seaport for their Oyster Festival to be held on Friday, September 11th, 2026 from 6:00 P.M. to 11:00 P.M., Saturday, September 12th, 2026 from 11:00 A.M. to 11:00 P.M. and Sunday, September 13th, 2026, from 11:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. Set-up on Friday, August 14th, 2026 at 8:00 A.M. with tear-down by Wednesday, September 30th, 2026 at 8:00 P.M. Approximately 35,000 people.
3. Authorize the Mayor, Barbara C. Smyth, to enter into an agreement for the use of Veteran's Park by Sonotainment for their 2nd Annual Juneteenth Carnival Fundraiser to be held on Friday, June 19th, 2026 from 6:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M., Saturday, June 20th, 2026 from 12:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M. and Sunday, June 21st, 2026 from 12:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M. Set-up on Wednesday, June 17th, 2026 at 8:00 A.M. with tear-down by Tuesday, June 23rd at 9:00 P.M. Approximately 200 people.
4. Authorize the Mayor, Barbara C. Smyth, to enter into an agreement for the use of Calf Pasture Beach by Whittingham Cancer Center for their Northwell Walk to Raise Health to be held on Sunday, May 17th, 2026 from 7:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. Set-up on Saturday, May 16th, 2026 at 7:00 A.M. Approximately 700 people.
5. Authorize the Mayor, Barbara C. Smyth, to enter into an agreement for the use of Rowayton School Field by Rowayton PTA for their Rowayton Elementary School Carnival to be held on Friday, May 1st, 2026 from 4:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M. and Saturday, May 2nd, 2026 from 10:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M with a rain date on Sunday, May 3rd. Set-up on Wednesday, April 29th, 2026 at 7:00 A.M. with tear-down by Sunday, May 3rd at 10:00 A.M. Approximately 2,000 people.
6. Authorize the Mayor, Barbara C. Smyth, to approve the 12/1/2025 lease amendment to the original contract dated 6/3/2016, by and between the City of Norwalk and the Aspetuck Land Trust, Inc. for a lease agreement for a portion of 328 Flax Hill Road, known as Fodor Farm.

7. Authorize the purchasing agent to issue a sole source purchase order to SignPro Inc., in an amount not to exceed \$100,000, for the manufacture and installation of 32 gateway signs at various park locations, from account 09266030 5777 C0737.

D. Public Safety and General Government:

1. Authorize the Mayor, Barbara C. Smyth to execute any and all agreements and other documents to extend the term of the law department's document management software, "NetDocuments" for a period of three years, in the amount of \$10,477.28 year 1, \$11,001.04 year 2, and \$11,660.96 year 3, on a sole source procurement basis.

Council President Goldstein thanked Councilmember Hosten for reading the Consent Calendar.

****COUNCIL PRESIDENT JOSHUA GOLDSTEIN MOVED TO APPROVE THE
CONSENT CALENDAR AS READ.**

****THE MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Council President Goldstein returned the floor to the Mayor.

VII. CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES

A. FINANCE AND CLAIMS COMMITTEE

6. Recommended FY 2026 – 2027 Operating Budget
Maximum Limit on Total Appropriations
Pursuant to Section 10-5 (A) of the City Charter

WHEREAS, Section 10-5 (A) of the Norwalk Charter requires that a majority of the City Council vote to establish a specific limit on local appropriations during the process of establishing the next fiscal year's operating budget.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NORWALK THAT:

The maximum limit on the total appropriation for the City of Norwalk's General Fund for Fiscal Year beginning July 1, 2026 shall be no more than \$483,978,290. Be it further resolved that the result of this vote and resolution, be forwarded by the Clerk of the City of Norwalk to the Board of Estimate and Taxation.

During consideration of Item 7A6, Mr. Frayer moved the resolution pursuant to Section 10-5A of the Norwalk Charter establishing the maximum limit on total appropriations for the Fiscal Year 2026–2027 General Fund budget at \$483,978,290. Mr. Frayer explained that the Charter requires the Council to establish a specific ceiling on total local appropriations during the budget process and emphasized that the action taken this evening sets a cap rather than the final tax rate. He outlined the budget timeline, noting that the Board of Estimate and Taxation will conduct departmental reviews from March 1 through March 19, hold a public hearing on March 25, vote on April 6, and return the proposed budget to the Council for final consideration on April 14. Mr.

Frayer stated that the tentative operating budget totals approximately \$484 million, representing an increase of over \$32 million from the prior year, including approximately \$22 million, or 11 percent, on the City side and approximately \$11 million, or 4 percent, on the Board of Education side. He detailed major cost drivers including healthcare, fringe benefits, workers' compensation, insurance, debt service, the impact of revaluation, and retroactive collective bargaining agreements. He further explained that a 7 percent cap would result in estimated increases to the median residential taxpayer ranging from approximately 10.1 percent to 16.8 percent, or approximately \$990 to \$2,632 annually, and that raising the cap to 7.5 percent would increase that impact further.

Mr. Lopez spoke first in discussion and thanked parents and community members for their engagement in the budget process. He reflected on his own experience attending underfunded schools and expressed appreciation for advocacy on behalf of students. He described the ongoing tension between protecting educational services and addressing the financial strain on families facing rising property taxes and housing costs. He acknowledged the difficulty of balancing those competing interests.

Mr. Hosten then proposed an amendment to increase the cap to approximately \$486.3 million, with the intent of increasing the Board of Education allocation from 4 percent to approximately 5.2 percent. He stated that although no member wished to raise taxes, the proposed budget already represents a significant increase and is largely a maintenance budget with little excess to cut. Mr. Hosten asserted that meaningful reductions would directly impact personnel and services. He emphasized that the Council must be honest with taxpayers that taxes are increasing regardless of the amendment and that modest additional flexibility could better stabilize school operations. He described the funding challenges as systemic and largely outside local control, particularly healthcare cost escalation. He stated that the largest driver of the increase is healthcare premiums, which total approximately \$11.4 million across both the City and Board of Education budgets combined, and noted that federal healthcare policy changes contribute to those costs. Mr. Hosten characterized the amendment as a compromise that does not fully meet the Board of Education request but seeks balance. He further stressed that a 7.54 percent overall increase is not sustainable long term and called for structural reform, state advocacy, and creative revenue strategies.

The Chief Financial Officer clarified that the precise amended cap reflecting a half-percent increase over 7.04 percent would total \$486,218,642, representing a 7.54 percent overall increase, and that if the additional amount were allocated to the Board of Education, the Board's increase would approximate 4.9 percent rather than 5.2 percent due to rounding.

Mr. Goldstein spoke in support of the amendment, describing the current budget season as particularly difficult due to healthcare inflation. He reiterated that healthcare premiums account for more than half of the City's major cost increases and directly affect property taxes. Mr. Goldstein stated that the amendment represents a prudent investment in education while maintaining fiscal responsibility and protecting the City's AAA bond rating. He emphasized improved collaboration between the Council and Board of Education leadership and expressed hope that the current process would avoid the discord experienced in prior years.

Ms. Ayers raised procedural questions regarding the amendment process and stated she did not oppose the amendment. However, she expressed concern about long-term sustainability and the absence of multi-year structural planning. She urged development of forward-looking financial strategies, questioned potential duplication of services such as information technology and communications, and emphasized the importance of considering residents who are not actively engaged in school advocacy, including seniors and fixed-income households. Ms. Ayers repeatedly stressed that the Council cannot continue approving increases at this level without a clear long-term plan.

The Chief Financial Officer reported that the City is developing a comprehensive five-year financial projection to be completed by the end of the summer and will expand capital planning to a ten-year horizon.

Board of Education Chief Financial Officer Linda Asmani addressed the Council. She thanked the Mayor, greeted members, and thanked Councilmember Hosten for the proposed amendment. She noted that the Council had received the Board's budget book, which, as required by the Association of School Business Officials International, includes a five-year outlook. She stated that the Board of Education has provided five-year projections in its budget documents for the fourth consecutive year. She expressed appreciation that the City is now developing similar long-range planning and indicated that the Board would merge its projections and assumptions with the City's to ensure consistency. Regarding capital planning, she welcomed the proposed ten-year forecast and noted that the Board maintains a 25-year facilities plan that could be incorporated into the City's five-year plan.

Ms. Asmani stated that the amendment would be helpful. She reported that the Board had met with school principals that morning to begin reconciliation discussions and to review potential reduction targets. She expressed hope that the amendment would advance, reducing the need for school-level cuts. She thanked Board of Education Finance Committee members, Councilmember Lopez, Councilmember Goldstein's team, CFO Jared Schmidt, and ongoing collaborators including Garrett Oliver, Sherry McCready-Pritchett, and herself for continued mutual conversations. She noted positive collaboration between the Mayor, Superintendent, and respective teams, and offered to provide additional information or answer questions throughout the process.

Councilmember Buccolo addressed Ms. Asmani directly. He thanked her for her presentation and expressed appreciation for Councilmember Hosten's amendment. As a Council member only seven weeks into his term, he stated that he continues to focus on the significant tax increases facing Norwalk families, which he believes could push residents out of the City. He acknowledged the risks on the taxpayer side but stated that he struggles to fully understand the practical meaning of the \$6.1 million shortfall for Norwalk Public Schools. He noted that Councilmember Hosten's amendment would reduce that gap (roughly in half, by rough numbers) and asked CFO Schmidt if that characterization was accurate. Mr. Schmidt replied that it would reduce the gap by about one-third.

Councilmember Buccolo asked Ms. Asmani to illustrate what the \$6.1 million gap would mean for the district and how the amendment would help mitigate impacts at the school level. Ms. Asmani responded that, as detailed in the budget book, 75 to 80 percent of the Board's budget is personnel-related. Any significant reductions would therefore be difficult to achieve without affecting staffing. She noted that the Board faces similar cost pressures as the City, including healthcare, goods, and services inflation. The Board's goal, consistent with statements from the Superintendent, is to preserve school positions and budgets to the greatest extent possible. The amendment's reduction of the gap would allow the Board to achieve that target with lesser impact on schools and to explore additional internal adjustments, similar to the City's approach. This would safeguard schools and help avoid repeating last year's challenges. She added that school-based budgets are developed collaboratively with principals and consider factors such as enrollment, making it difficult to specify exact reductions in advance. However, at the amended funding level (approximately 5.2 percent or the final calculated percentage), the impact on schools would be very minimal.

Mayor Smyth thanked Ms. Asmani and followed up with a question about healthcare costs and long-term inflationary pressures. She asked Ms. Asmani to describe the current plan and its implications for residents. Ms. Asmani explained that the Board initially shared the City's plan after both entities moved away from self-insurance. Approximately three years ago, through collective bargaining, the teachers' union transitioned from the state plan to a high-deductible health plan managed by Cigna. To contain costs, the Board employs strategies similar to the City's, including health and wellness initiatives. Contracts include cost-sharing provisions (employee and employer portions), and recent negotiations have increased the employee share of health expenses where agreement was reached. She acknowledged that many cost drivers—national trends, claims experience, and healthcare inflation—are beyond local control. She noted that Fairfield County receives a 1 percent regional adjustment under the state plan (e.g., a 2 percent statewide increase becomes 3 percent locally). Controllable elements are managed collaboratively; the City and Board share the same health insurance advisor (Terry DeMatti), who works with both CFO Schmidt and Ms. Asmani to handle renewals, reviews, and rate management.

Mr. Bailey thanked the Mayor. He began by thanking all parents and even children who had spoken during public participation that evening and over the preceding weeks. He stated that he personally appreciated their concerns and emphasized that the Council does not take them lightly. As a first-year Council member, he described the current budget year as extremely difficult and noted that the Council had invested significant effort over the past several weeks examining every possible solution. He highlighted that his fellow Council members had worked diligently to educate themselves on the issues and stressed that the Council views this responsibility as enormous. He expressed determination to avoid repeating the difficulties experienced the previous year. Mr. Bailey confirmed that he had served on the Finance Committee and initially supported the original proposed budget. Following subsequent discussions, he acknowledged the clear cost pressures affecting both the City and the Board of Education. He announced his support for Councilmember Hosten's amendment that evening.

He further noted that, consistent with earlier remarks by the Mayor, the current action sets only the spending cap; the Board of Estimate and Taxation (BET) will conduct its detailed review next. He stated that increasing the cap from the original recommendation should help reduce the level of community stress experienced during last year's process. He emphasized that the Council and community are "all on the same team" and share the goal of achieving fiscal responsibility while adequately funding essential services. Mr. Bailey echoed prior comments regarding the upcoming five-year financial plan. He stated that once that plan is in place, the Council will be better positioned to identify and implement structural fixes to recurring budget challenges. He acknowledged that such structural changes will involve difficult conversations and significant effort but expressed confidence that the five-year projections will provide the necessary insight to guide those decisions.

Mr. Degenshein thanked the Mayor. He described himself as "between the horns of a dilemma." He recalled that, prior to taking office, he had publicly advocated for increased school funding even if it required higher taxes, including speaking at the podium and writing letters in prior years. He affirmed that he stands by that position today. He acknowledged, however, that the current proposed increase far exceeds what he anticipated and is largely beyond the control of both the City Council and the Board of Education. He stated that the increase will affect residential taxpayers and will also impact commercial property taxes at a time when the City is actively working to retain and attract businesses to help balance the budget and relieve pressure on residential taxpayers. Mr. Degenshein announced his support for the increase but requested assurance that any additional funding would provide equal benefit to all students across the district. He described the vote as a "new beginning" requiring continued hard work. He noted that the Board of Estimate and Taxation has historically identified savings and efficiencies without harming agency, commission, or departmental operations. He urged the BET to continue that practice and, where possible, to redirect any identified savings toward the Board of Education rather than reducing the proposed school allocation. He emphasized that his priority is the future and the City's children. While he would prefer to fully fund the Board of Education's original request, he recognized that doing so would place an excessive burden on taxpayers. He thanked Councilmember Hosten for his work on the amendment, appreciated the scrutiny applied by the budget team, and urged moving forward.

Mr. Sawyer thanked the Mayor. As a newly seated Council member, he described the work as difficult. He thanked parents who had reached out and noted that he had received relatively little input from parents without children in the schools or from seniors (though he was unsure if others had). He expressed appreciation for Councilmember Hosten's amendment and stated that he is "definitely on board" with it. He emphasized the need to "meet in the middle" and affirmed that the Council must continue working to identify new revenue sources. He expressed confidence that his colleagues share that commitment.

Ms. Ayers continued her remarks. She reiterated that the proposed increase is not sustainable and emphasized that the Council cannot continue approving similar percentage increases in future years. She questioned what the Council and Board of Education would do next year when facing the same structural pressures, urging that planning for the next cycle begin immediately rather than reacting annually. She stated that the City lacks the revenue capacity to meet the full

request, not due to unwillingness but due to budgetary constraints. Ms. Ayers affirmed continued support for the school system while standing shoulder-to-shoulder with education advocates. She directed a question to the Mayor, noting that multiple City-side needs remain unmet since she joined the Council, including deficiencies in various departments. She specifically highlighted the Information Technology (IT) department as an example, referencing Councilmember Frayer's earlier observation of duplication of services between the City and Board of Education. She asked why, during a budget crisis, the City maintains two separate IT departments and two communications departments. She encouraged constituents to raise these questions and to consider how services could be restructured more efficiently. Ms. Ayers stressed that no single solution—state advocacy, philanthropy, or eliminating duplication—will fully resolve the challenges, but pursuing them collectively could make meaningful progress. She encouraged parents to continue advocating strongly for their children but urged them to broaden their focus beyond the Board of Education, as other municipal services (such as pothole repairs, traffic management, and City communications/website functionality) directly affect daily life. She noted that poor City communications and website issues were a frequent complaint during her campaign. She explained that resources for improvements in those areas have been constrained by higher-priority needs. She clarified that her comments were not intended to assign blame but to prompt ongoing collective reflection and discussion toward long-term solutions. She thanked the Mayor and concluded her remarks.

Mayor Smyth thanked Ms. Ayers. She acknowledged that duplication of services and opportunities for greater collaboration between the City and Board of Education have been recurring topics year after year. She reported that she and Chief of Staff Lamond Daniels have been meeting with all department directors to explore shared services. She highlighted a recent meeting with Comptroller Chitsamay, who detailed significant existing collaboration in the Comptroller's office between the City and Board of Education. Mayor Smyth stated that similar discussions regarding IT are ongoing and will continue, along with exploration of other areas for potential efficiencies. She confirmed that these conversations between the City and Board of Education have been active and will persist.

Mr. Wiggins thanked the Mayor. He posed one or two questions, noting that the \$4.5 million supplemental funding provided by the City the previous year had been incorporated into the Board of Education's base budget (a step not taken in the initial proposed budget or in most prior years). He asked CFO Jared Schmidt to confirm what the Board's percentage increase would have been without that \$4.5 million inclusion, assuming the current proposed 4.9 percent figure.

Mr. Schmidt responded that without the \$4.5 million rolled into the base, the effective increase would be approximately 2 percent. Mr. Wiggins calculated that the current proposal therefore equates to roughly 6.9 percent when viewed in that context (rough numbers). He thanked the Mayor and CFO for that approach, noting that it was not strictly required but reflected sound judgment given the ongoing needs (particularly in special education, music, and art programs).

Mayor Smyth agreed it was the right decision and explained that prior supplemental funds (in some cases from ARPA or state sources) had often been restricted to one-time uses and not

rolled into the base. The \$4.5 million was different because it directly reinstated positions and was appropriated to the Board, justifying its inclusion as base funding.

Board of Education CFO Linda Asmani confirmed that discussions had occurred during the joint meeting and initial presentation; this marked the third year of City supplemental support to the Board, with prior instances involving different restrictions (e.g., ARPA one-time uses where funds remained with the City and bills were paid on the Board's behalf). She expressed appreciation for the current treatment as base funding.

Mr. Wiggins emphasized the importance of acknowledging this step, as it effectively positioned the increase closer to 6.9 percent. He expressed agreement with the approach and support for the amendment, noting he did not wish to prolong the meeting further.

Ms. Young stated that she had been listening carefully to the discussion and appreciated the perspectives shared by her colleagues. She emphasized the recurring nature of these budget challenges and the need for the Council to remain solution oriented. She acknowledged the difficulty in finding structural fixes to the perennial tension between rising taxes and adequate school funding, noting that the issue had persisted throughout her time on the Council. She highlighted the importance of improved communication, transparency, and accountability in how budget dollars are spent, particularly on the Board of Education side. She observed that Norwalk has grown to approximately 93,000 residents, with about 12,000 children in the school system, and reiterated the shared goal of making Norwalk a desirable place where families choose to live because of strong public education and overall quality of life—not just love for the city, but confidence in its schools. Ms. Young agreed with prior speakers (including Ms. Ayers) that the Council must be proactive and solution focused. She stressed the need for incremental but substantial changes, better demonstration of spending decisions, and creativity in addressing revenue constraints (including philanthropy, though acknowledging uncertainties). She expressed hope for clearer accountability from the Board of Education to help build trust and support. She confirmed her support for the amendment, stating that the goal was to do better through more open dialogue and collaboration.

Mr. Sead spoke next. He reflected on his long tenure and the repetitive nature of these budget discussions year after year. He praised Mr. Wiggins as solution-oriented and acknowledged the difficulty of finding lasting fixes to recurring structural issues. He appreciated the newer Council members and noted that the process can be surprising upon entering office, particularly regarding the limited direct authority over final budget numbers. He echoed Councilmember Ayers' call for proactive change to avoid identical conversations next year.

He thanked Councilmember Hosten for the amendment suggestion (noting prior attempts by himself and others, sometimes less effectively) and affirmed the Council's commitment to equity. He observed that cuts typically fall more heavily on the City side, requiring concessions there to balance the process. He warned that neglecting City services (e.g., park maintenance, recreation, pothole repairs) would generate public outrage, forcing future trade-offs and merely delaying burdens.

Mr. Sead welcomed the five-year projections as the right approach. He stressed the need for improved communication, transparency, and accountability in spending, particularly from the Board of Education, as the City has grown to approximately 93,000 residents with about 12,000 students in the school system. He expressed the shared goal of making Norwalk a destination city where families choose to live because of strong education and overall quality of life. He agreed with Ms. Ayers on the importance of solution-oriented thinking and incremental substantial changes. He hoped for clearer demonstration of how dollars are spent on the Board side to build trust. While acknowledging philanthropy's limitations and uncertainties, he urged creativity and mindfulness in revenue strategies.

Mr. Sead confirmed his support for the amendment but emphasized the broader goal of doing better through improved dialogue and collaboration.

****Roll Call Vote on the Amendment To increase the maximum limit on total appropriations for the General Fund for Fiscal Year beginning July 1, 2026, from \$483,978,290 to \$486,218,642**

Council President Goldstein requested a roll call vote for transparency.

The Clerk called the roll as follows:

- **Nicol Ayers** – Yes
- **Brian Bailey** – Yes
- **Jesse Buccolo** – Yes
- **Jan Degenshein** – Yes
- **Richard Dellinger** – Yes
- **Nicolé Eaddy** – Yes
- **James Frayer** – Yes
- **Joshua Goldstein** (Council President) – Yes
- **Colin Hosten** – Yes
- **Johan Lopez** – Yes
- **Broderick Sawyer** – Yes
- **Jalin T. Sead Sr.** – Yes
- **Anne Wennerstrand** – Yes
- **Dajuan C. Wiggins Sr.** – Yes
- **Darlene Young** – Yes

****THE AMENDMENT PASSED UNANIMOUSLY (15-0).**

****Roll Call Vote on the Resolution as Amended Setting the maximum limit on total appropriations for the General Fund for Fiscal Year beginning July 1, 2026, at \$486,218,642**

The Clerk called the roll as follows:

- **Nicol Ayers** – Yes
- **Brian Bailey** – Yes
- **Jesse Buccolo** – Yes
- **Jan Degenshein** – Yes
- **Richard Dellinger** – Yes
- **Nicolé Eaddy** – Yes
- **James Frayer** – Yes
- **Joshua Goldstein** (Council President) – Yes
- **Colin Hosten** – Yes
- **Johan Lopez** – Yes
- **Broderick Sawyer** – Yes
- **Jalin T. Sead Sr.** – Yes
- **Anne Wennerstrand** – Yes
- **Dajuan C. Wiggins Sr.** – Yes
- **Darlene Young** – Yes

****THE RESOLUTION AS AMENDED PASSED UNANIMOUSLY (15–0).**

Mayor Barbara C. Smyth thanked the Council for its thoughtful deliberation and emphasized the need for continued collaboration, improved communication, structural reform, and state-level advocacy to address long-term funding challenges. The Council then proceeded to the next agenda item.

B. ORDINANCE

3. Approve changes to Chapter 112A (Vape Shops), Section 112A-13 (Penalties) MR. SEAD MOVED TO APPROVE CHANGES TO CHAPTER 112A (VAPE SHOPS), SECTION 112A-13 (PENALTIES).

Mr. Sead spoke in favor of the motion. He stated that he would be brief and wanted to highlight the excellent enforcement work being conducted by the Norwalk Police Department. He noted that the existing Vape Shop Ordinance, adopted last year with significant input from Councilmember Lopez, included a flat penalty of \$250 per violation.

He reported that the Police Department has been actively inspecting and citing vape shops on a weekly basis, as documented on their social media channels. Mr. Sead explained that the current \$250 penalty has proven insufficient as a deterrent. The proposed amendment increases the penalty to \$250 per day of continued violation, with the intent to strengthen enforcement tools available to the Police Department and help ensure the safety of Norwalk residents, particularly youth, by discouraging illegal sales of THC and other prohibited products in unlicensed establishments.

Mr. Wiggins asked for clarification on the prior penalty structure and the application of the new daily fine. Mr. Sead responded that the original \$250 was a one-time fine per citation. Under the amendment, the \$250 daily penalty would apply until the violation is corrected (i.e., until the establishment ceases selling prohibited products). He further explained the progressive

enforcement structure: a first offense results in a \$250 fine; a second offense within a specified period leads to a six-month license suspension; a third offense within a 12-month period results in permanent license revocation. After revocation, continued operation would trigger the \$250 daily penalty until the activity stops.

Mr. Wiggins inquired about the practical effect if a business is shut down or goes out of operation—whether the daily fine remains collectible. Mr. Sead acknowledged the concern, stating that the primary goal is to eliminate illegal sales entirely. If a business is closed (e.g., via health department or police action for operating without a valid license), the daily fine becomes moot because the prohibited activity ceases. He noted that only three licensed dispensaries in Norwalk are permitted to sell THC products; smoke shops and vape shops are not authorized to do so.

Corporation Counsel Mario Coppola interjected to provide additional context. He stated that Mr. Wiggins had identified a key enforcement challenge not only in Norwalk but statewide: collecting fines from businesses that close or lack assets (such as real property for liens). He confirmed that this is an ongoing concern and that the City is actively exploring potential further amendments to the ordinance to strengthen collection mechanisms as enforcement experience accumulates. He noted that additional changes may be proposed in the future if collection difficulties persist or new issues arise.

Mr. Sead thanked Corporation Counsel Coppola for the clarification and reiterated that the amendment represents an important step to support police enforcement efforts and protect public safety.

****THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

VIII. RESOLUTIONS FROM CITY COUNCIL

No resolutions were presented.

IX. MOTIONS POSTPONED TO A SPECIFIC DATE

None.

X. SUSPENSION OF RULES

None.

XI. ADJOURNMENT

**** MS. YOUNG MOTIONED TO ADJOURN.**

****THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned around 10 PM.

**CITY COUNCIL
NORWALK,
CONNECTICUT**

**SPECIAL MEETING
7:30 PM**

**FEBRUARY 24, 2026
HYBRID VIA ZOOM**

Respectfully Submitted,
Courtney Baldwin
Recording Secretary