CITY OF NORWALK
BOARD OF ESTIMATE & TAXATION
REGULAR MEETING
APRIL 7, 2025
VIA ZOOM VIRTUAL MEETING

ATTENDANCE: Harry Rillings; Mayor, Ed Abrams; Chair, Ed Comacho (6:37 p.m.), Kendrick Constant, Troy Jellerette, Anne Yang, Artie Kassimis

STAFF:, Jared Schmitt;Chief Financial Officer, Esther Murillo; Assistant City Clerk

OTHER: Tina Fogell; Personal and Labor Relations, Neil Rennie, Tom Livingston, Brian Lutz, Mickey Docimo, NPD Business Manager, Gino Gatto; Fire Chief. Ralph Kolb, Nelya Bauer, Jim Travers, Dan Phillips

I. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Abrams called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

II. ROLL CALL

Ms. Murillo called the roll as reflected above. A quorum was present.

Mr. Abrahms proposed a change in the order of the agenda.

** **MR. ABRAMS MOVED TO CHANGE THE AGENDA ORDER.**
** **MR. KASSIMISS SECONDED THE MOTION.**

Mr. Abrams requested to move the approval of the WPCA and the Norwalk Parking budgets ahead of the discussion of the tentative operating budget in section C.

** **THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

III. ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

A. March 3rd — BET Regular meeting
March 4th — BET Operating Budget Review
March 5th — BET Operating Budget Review
March 6th — BET Operating Budget Review
March 18th — BET Operating Budget Review
March 19th — BET Operating Budget Review
March 20th — BET Deliberation on Open Items
March 26, 2025 - BET Public Hearing

** **MR. KASSIMIS MOVED TO APPROVE THE MINUTES FOR THE ABOVE MEETINGS.**
** **THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

IV. SPECIAL APPROPRIATION AGENDA

Mr. Abrams stated there were no special appropriation items on the agenda.

V. TRANSFER AGENDA

A. Section B
1. Transfers

** **MR. KASSIMIS MOVED THE TRANSFER ITEMS FOR DISCCUSSION OR APPROVAL.**

- Mr. Ellis gave a breakdown of the transfers as the appear in the agenda packet. First was Ms. Fogell with Human Resources and Personnel. Ms. Fogell listed the two proposals, one for advertising and one for IT. She requested the movement of funds from the Other Professional Service budgets to the advertising budget. She made a similar request to move money for IT services.

Mr. Comacho joined the meeting at 6;37 p.m.

- Mr. Rennie discussed the request to move money from Contingency for building management and chief of staff as stated in the agenda package. Mr. Livingston provided a background that described plans to create office space and a conference room. He noted the $70,000 request made at the previous meeting. He stated after reviewing and receiving more bids the request was lowered to $65,000. Mr. Rennie provided the project details. Mr. Jellerette asked about the capacity of the new office space. Mr. Rennie said it would be two offices holding four to five people and the conference room would seat up to ten. Mr. Livingston added there would be workstations for the administrative assistants. He stated the two spaces would come to about $41/square foot. He also noted the request includes $15,000 for furniture. Mr. Livingston responded to Mr. Kassimis' question stating the space would be for in-house personnel relocated from ECD and TMP.

- The Police Mr. Docimo had five line item requests going into other repairs. He described it as the annual reshuffling and cleansing of accounts. He stated that the requests were for routine boat maintenance and would allow him to pay off existing bills. In response to Mr. Comacho, Mr. Docimo indicated that due to unanticipated costs, the amount needed exceeded what they had left in the budget.

- Chief Gatto discussed his request to transfer funds from the Retirement Payout account to the Wages and Salary Overtime and Telephone accounts.

** **THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

VI. OTHER BUSINESS

A. Section C

1. Approval of FY 2024-2025 WPCA Budget

** **MR. KASSIMI MOVED TO DISCUSS AND APPROVE THE WPCA BUDGET FOR FISCAL YEAR 2025-2026.**

Ms. Valadares gave an overview of the WPCA operating budget. She discussed all the factors that go into determining the customer rate fee.

Ms. Bauer went over the details of the operating budget as they appear on pages 146 and 147 of the agenda packet. She listed the multiple projects they have completed. She also listed line items they wanted to highlight.

Mr. Jellerette had questions about wages and salaries. He stated he wanted to know how many people work at the WPCA, the remaining length of the contract with Violia, and where they are with peak and off-peak usage. Mr. Kolb responded that the WPC has five full-time employees. He stated the Veolia contract started in May 2020 with an initial term of ten years with two five-year renewals. He finished by saying the peak flow is 12 million gallons per day. He added the treatment plant is designed for 18 million gallons per day putting them below the 90% capacity mark.

Mr. Kolb responded to Mayor Rilling saying the Wilton contract is through 2030. Mr. Kolb described the challenges with the Wilton flow that fluctuates year to year.. He noted the $850,000 rate was on the lower end to be conservative.

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

2. Approval of FY 2024-25 Norwalk Parking Authority Budget

**** MR. KASSIMI MOVED TO DISCUSS AND APPROVE THE NORWALK PARKING AUTHORITYBUDGET FOR FISCAL YEAR 2025-2026**

Mr. Lutz presented the Parking Authority 2026 budget summary as it appears on pages 148 to 150 of the budget summary. He stated the figures incorporate their revenue and expense projections. He noted an increase in revenue associated with people returning to work Tuesday through Thursday. Mr. Lutz continued providing the list of expenses driven by operational needs and strategic investments. He noted that the budget reflects a balanced approach to revenue growth and expense management.

Mr. Lutz responded to Mr. Jellerette saying there hjas been a significant increase in the occupancy at the train station but monthly passes for the garage are still available. He then stated the SONO Railroad Station Garage has a three year contract is with LAZ Parking at $100,000.

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

3. Adoption of the Tentative FY 2025-2026 Operating Budget

**** MR. KASSIMI MOVED TO DISCUSS THEADOPTION OF THE TENTATIVE OPERATING BUDGET FOR FY 2025-2026**

Mayor Rilling provided initial comments on the operating budget. He stated this is a very challenging budget year. He noted the departments stayed within the recommended guidelines. He went on to say for the past several years the departments have lived within their budgets.Mr. Rillings pointed out the unfortunate shift from commercial to residential because most of their office space is vacant. He cited the pandemic as a cause.

Mr Schmitt suggested they use the list of accounts on page 111 of the agenda package should be used as a guiding document.

Mr. Abrasms brought up additional an $50,000 funding into the library budget for library resources. He discussed the increase versus actuals funding and noted there was already an extra $71,000 built in to their current budget that could be used to fund raises. Mr. Schmitt offered further clarification.

Mr. Comacho wanted to know if the additional $71,000 was already allocated. Mr. Schmitt said how the money is used is at the Library's discretion. Ms. Yang wanted clarification that the library budget was sufficient to cover raises. Mr Schmitt indicated there is room to increase compensation in the budget. In response to Mr. Comacho, Mr. Schmitt stated the library provided a breakdown of expenses that can be found in the agenda packet. Mr. Jellerette pointed out they are at their cap and don't have extra money to spend.

**** MR. ABRAMS MOVED TO APPROVE KEEPING THE LIBRARY BUDGET AT $671,000.**
**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Mr. Abrams began a discussion about Human services, specifically the outreach staff. He stated the question was is there any benefit to bringing these people on as full-time employees of the city? He noted previously their positions were grantfunded but they were receiving benefits. Mr. Ellis stated the city has to offer grant-funded employee benefits. Mr. Abrams asked if there was any savings at this time. Mr. Ellis responded no. Ms. Yang wanted clarification about whether these employees were on the city payroll or contract workers. Mr. Ellis indicated there's a grant-funded entity but as of July 1st, they come off the grant payroll and will be put on the general fund payroll. Mayor Rilling noted the grant funding was for a total of 150,000. Ms. Yang wanted to scale back the budget request to the $150,000 covered by the grant. Mr. Abrams wanted to know if the $162,000 request would cover a standard cost of living raise and if was there an opportunity to keep the salaries at a flat year-to-year salary. Mayor Rilling said the agreement with the grantors was to take on the responsibility for the salaries. He stated that they agreed to the $150,000, not to the increase. He went on to say that he felt it's okay if they left it at $150,000.

Mr. Comacho asked if the employees would stay for a net zero increase. Mr. Abrams clarified by asking if the resources would become a flight risk if they don't get a raise in 2026. Mr. Comacho noted the budget cap includes the $162,000 amount. Mr. Abrams stated this amount was not going to make a difference in the tax liability of the citizens.

** **MR. ABRAMS MOVED TO KEEP THE BUDGET OF $162,711 AS CURRENTLY INDICATED IN THE TENTATIVE BUDGET.**

** **THE MOTION PASSED WITH FIVE IN FAVOR AND TWO OPPOSED (MR. JELLERETTE AND MS. YANG.)**

Mr. Abram raised for discussion the preventable diseases line item. Ms. Yang felt giving the $129,000 to the Community Health Center would be a better use of funds. Mr. Abrams asked if she was proposing they not fund the increase in the budget for a nurse, but she would be in favor of providing more funding to the Community Health Center. Her response was yes. Mr. Comacho indicated the money had been through review and was voted on. He made the point that the discussion has been had and he couldn't imagine having a nurse available to the public in the clinic could be a bad thing. He stated he would be in favor of leaving the item as is. In response to Mr. Constant, it was indicated that the nurse position was new. Mr. Constant asked if the community center was equipped to take on that role. Mr. Abrams stated there has been no conversation with the community center about taking on that responsibility. Mayor Rilling stated the community center will not be open for another eight to nine months.

** **MAYOR RILLING MOVED TO LEAVE THE BUDGET LINE ITEM AS IS.**

** **THE MOTION PASSED WITH SIX IN FAVOR AND ONE OPPOSED (ANNE YANG)**

Mr. Abrams proposed they table the continued conversation with Rec and Parks on their moving of funding. H stated Mr. Stowers and Mr. Schmitt were still working on the proposal. Mayor Rilling said once ironed out it would be a policy decission that if agreed on would go back to the BET.

Mr. Abrams brought up the next item that is in the area of Economic and Community development. He continued by saying it involved the Arts Commission's request for incremental funding versus a flat rate. It was stated that this would result in a proposed increase of $13,900 to $20,800. He stated the money was in the budget and the suggestion is to leave it flat. Ms. Yang proposed they were asking for a $20,000 increase. Mr. Ellis described the project the commission wanted to use the funding on. Ms. Yang Felt that based on public hearings, the press, and commentary the people would prefer the money be spent on more essential items. Mr. Comacho said he felt that was an extrapolation on Ms. Yang's part. He stated he didn't know that anyone specifically commented on the Arts. He noted for the sake of the city it was money well spent. He felt it was short-sighted to not think of it as something that's not an investment in the city of Norwalk. Mr. Comacho proposed to leave it as it is. Mr. Kassimi described the public's view of essentials as librarians or teachers. Mr. Comacho felt that the money would used to enrich the lives of everyone in the city. He said he considered it an essential contribution. Ms. Yang felt the proposed budget was not taking into consideration the current and potential economy. Mr. Comacho pointed out that when the day is darkest that is when you need cultural Enrichment the most. He also noted the budget was bare bones. It has been reviewed by the Department of Finance, and the Mayor’s office has gone through it. He said slashing a nurse and cultural activities to save a few thousand dollars when the world is falling apart around us is wrong-headed. Mr. Jellerette discussed issues on the capital budget side. He also wanted to know if the Board felt they would still have their AAA rating in the fall. Mr. Ellis said he couldn’t guarantee that but he felt very good about it. Ms. Yang stated she would have preferred the budget come in at a lower number to lessen the burden on the taxpayer. Mr. Abrams took the opportunity to correct several statements about budget increases. He noted that there has been no material change in terms of an actual tax increase. Mayor Rilling noted that nobody anticipated the effect the pandemic would have on commercial real estate. He noted since 2013 they’ve been very fiscally responsible. Since 2013 they have made every attempt to keep the budget and the increases as low as possible.

** **MR. ABRAMS MOVED TO KEEP THE BUDGET AS CURRENTLY PLANNED INCLUDING THE INCREMENTAL $20,000 FOR AN ARTIST RESIDENCE PROGRAM FOR FY 2026.**

** **THE MOTION PASSED WITH FIVE IN FAVOR AND TWO OPPOSED (MR. JELLERETTE AND MS. YANG).**

Ms. Yang listed the line items she had issues with. Mr. Comacho said the agenda was to discuss open items. Mr. Schmitt proceeded to address Ms. Yang's issues. In the case of the probate court is subject to state mandates. He stated they were still looking into the situation with the transit district. Mr. Abrams stated her issues were items that could be discussed but would not be resolved in a way that would result in any type of savings to the operating budget at this particular time.

Mr. Schmidt mentioned the headcount at the TMP. He indicated the position in question was already approved. It is not adding to the budget it is reflecting what has already been added. Mr. Ellis commented on the city lap benefits, stating it hadn’t been funded for the past two years. He explained they felt it would be prudent to start funding it again due to the dwindling balance. Mr. Ellis finished by discussing the organizational memberships. He stated they were for two organizations they belonged to. Mayor Rilling proceeded to describe the association with West COG. He went on to describe the benefits of their membership in the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities. Mr. Elliss noted the GOGs are a source of grant funding.

Mr. Abrams brought up a final item, the Harbor Commission great for $10,000. He stated they had enough money in their account to cover and break even on their expenses. He noted that wasan area they could take to the bottom line.

** **MR. ABRAMS MOVED TO REDUCE THE HARBOR COMMISSION GRANT BY $10,000 TO ZERO.**

** **THE MOTION PASSED WITH FIVE IN FAVOR AND TWO OPPOSED (MAYOR RILLING AND MR. COMACHO)**

Mr. Abrams stated on behalf of the board he would strongly encourage them to look at other line items within their budgets to solve the challenges presented.

4. Appointment of Auditors to Audit FY 2024-25

** **MAYOR RILLING MOVED TO APPROVE THE AUDITOR TO AUDIT THE FY 2024-2025 AUDIT,**

MR. Schmitt explained why they needed a new auditor to do the financial planning report. After looking over the bids they went with their current firm, CLA. He stated they were happy to keep them on for the next five years. Mr. Schmitt discussed the price increase. He stated they knew it was coming.

** **THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

5. Contingency Tracker

Mr. Lutz stated for the third month in a row there has been no activity on the contingency tracker. He reviewed the information as presented on page 151 in the agenda package.

Mayor Rilling provided an update on labor negotiations. He stated they have five contracts in negotiation.

6. NPS School Construction - Monthly Project Update - February 2025

Mr. Phillips presented the Monthly Project Update. The details of which can be found on pages 160– 177. He concentrated his presentation on the cash flow analysis on page 177. He said there was little difference from last month but they were in the process of updating and would have more information next month.

Responding to Mr. Jellerete, Mr. Phillips stated they were on budget and on time for the SONO school. He mentioned there were a few challenges, but they came up with solutions for them. He stated he was confident they would complete the project on budget and on time. Mr. Phillips said that also applied for the new high school. Responding to Ms. Yang and Mr. Phillips there were future estimated costs. He said those costs were anticipated not backloaded.

Mayor Rilling had some comments about sidewalks and a roundabout. He also said he can arrange a tour of the High school.

VII. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The following items were not discussed but the reports can be found in the agenda package.

A. Financial Reports
   1. Oak Hills Park Authority Monthly Financial Statements for February 2025
   2. Narrative on Tax Collections dated February 2025
   3. Monthly Tax Collector's Reports dated February 2025
   4. Year-to-date Capital Budget Report - FY 2024-2025
   5. Year-to-date Operating Expenditure Report - FY 2024-2025
   6. Year-to-date Operating Revenue Report - FY 2024-2025
   7. Police Wages - FY 2024-2025
   8. Fire Wages - FY 2024-2025
   9. Public Works Wages - FY 2024-2025
   10. Year-to-date BOE Operating Expenditure Report - FY 2024-2025

VIII. ADJOURNMENT

**** MR. KASSIMIS MOVED TO ADJOURN THE MEETING.**
**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting was adjourned at 8:37 p.m.

Respectfully submitted
China Mayhew
Telesco Secretarial Services