

To allow public access, anyone may access a meeting by telephone, Zoom, and/or the City of Norwalk YouTube channel. Specific instructions and links can be found at www.norwalkct.gov/meetings

Members of the public can call in and listen to a meeting. They will not be able to speak or see any of the meeting participants. Each meeting will use a unique Meeting/Webinar ID. Please find the information using the link above.

Members of the public who wish to view the meeting, but are not participating, can view a live stream on the City of Norwalk YouTube channel. This stream is delayed by approximately 20 seconds. Please find the information using the link above. The meeting recording and minutes will be posted on the City of Norwalk website within seven (7) days after the meeting.

**CITY OF NORWALK
BOARD OF ESTIMATE AND TAXATION
SPECIAL MEETING
VIA TELECONFERENCE
MARCH 13, 2024**

ATTENDANCE: Ed Abrams; Mayor Harry Rilling; Edwin Camacho; Kendrick Constant; Troy Jellerette; Artie Kassimis; Anne Yang

STAFF: Thomas Ellis, Director Management and Budgets; Irene Dixon, City Clerk; Margaret Suib, Fair Housing

OTHERS: Brian Bidolli, Norwalk Redevelopment Agency; Alan Kibe, Harbor Commission; Matt Pentz, Transit District; Dr. Alexandra Estrella, Lunda Asmani, CFO; Robert Penning, Assistant Superintendent; Sandra Faioes, Deputy Superintendent, Norwalk Public Schools

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

Ms. Dixon called the Roll as indicated above. A Quorum was present.

Mayor Rilling offered opening remarks and expressed his thanks to everyone for working to create a budget that is fair and equitable.

1. Board of Estimate & Taxation – Budget Deliberations:

Fair Housing Officer (Grant)

Ms. Suib was present to review the grant request for the Fair Housing office for \$188,091. The majority of the request is for personnel costs. She noted she will be retiring in January and this position is required to be filled.

Mayor Rilling asked all grant funded departments to look at their accounts to be sure the money is being spent in the way it is intended. Mayor Rilling said he wants to be sure the money is being used. Mr. Abrams asked for a high level spend to date for all grants.

Probate Court (Grant)

Mr. Ellis reviewed the request, which is down slightly from last year.

The Probate Court grant will remain as an open item.

Transit District (Grant)

Mr. Pentz was present to review the grant request for \$660,000. He explained they have accumulated long term debt and have been working on applying for grants to reduce the local burden. Mr. Abrams asked about actual utilization of the grant funding. Mr. Pentz said they use every last dollar of it to pay long term debt, ADA transport in Norwalk and for training and employee morale.

Ms. Yang questioned the City's responsibility to pay off the debt and said it is the Transit District's responsibility and not the City's. Mr. Pentz said they are in a situation where they are not far from when they will no longer have debt.

Ms. Yang asked Mr. Pentz about revising the grant request to \$610,000. Mr. Pentz said he could settle on \$650,000. Ms. Yang explained that this is a difficult year for the residents and the City should not cover these expenses.

The Transit District request will remain as an open item.

Harbor Commission (Grant)

Mr. Kibbe was present to review the Harbor Commission's request for \$20,000 and answer questions. He explained they work closely with other boards. He said most of the personnel increases are due to activities related to the WALK Bridge project. He explained they manage all the moorings in the Harbor and are working on increasing transient moorings in the Harbor.

Ms. Yang asked about increasing the mooring costs from \$5.00 per foot to \$7.00 per foot. Mr. Kibbe said they just published their new fee schedule and would have to change the statute to make another change.

Mr. Abrams proposed keeping this as an open item and asking Mr. Kibbe to find out if it is possible to increase mooring fees.

Redevelopment Agency (Grant)

Mr. Bidolli was present to review the \$500,000 grant request and answer questions. He described the Redevelopment Agency's responsibilities on behalf of the City. Mr. Constant asked if efforts are made to find other sources of revenue. Mr. Bidolli said they are constantly seeking other sources of revenue and have a team of three grant writers.

Mayor Rilling said the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency and the City have a wonderful partnership with money coming back to the City through their efforts.

Board of Education

Mr. Asmani shared his screen. Dr. Estrella made opening remarks and highlighted student accomplishments. She acknowledged the work done by the teachers. She described the recent and upcoming school building projects. She said she highlighted these accomplishments because it is important for the community to see where their investment goes.

Dr. Estrella described the outreach that took place to gather feedback across the District on the budget. From those conversations, they were able to highlight the priorities for the community. In addition, they engaged with the student leadership and students to compile this budget.

Mr. Asmani reviewed the FY2024-2025 tentative approved operating budget request and said what he is sharing is lifted from the book provided to the members of the Board of Estimate and Taxation in January. He reviewed strategic priorities, goals and the budget process cycle.

Mr. Asmani reviewed the current enrollment and said it did not change a lot, but there was a change to the mix. He said an updated census will be available in April.

Mr. Pennington reviewed the Multi Language Learner enrollment rate and count as of March 1, 2024. He said that they are currently at 22%. He also reviewed the SPED Prevalence rate and said they are currently at 16.4%. Mr. Pennington said that overall the numbers remain flat, but they are seeing an increase in the needs of the students.

Mr. Asmani reviewed how the budget is broken down and said that 13% is grant funded, 85% is general fund, 2% is the school lunch fund.

Mr. Jellerette asked about the free and reduced lunch program and said he read that the City provides free lunch to all students regardless of their ability to pay. Ms. Faioes explained that half of the families require assistance.

City of Norwalk

Board of Estimate and Taxation

Special Meeting

Via Teleconference

March 13, 2024

Page 3

Mr. Amani reviewed grant funding by object and by major grants. Ms. Faioes provided context and highlighted their success in securing grants. She noted grants have limitations and they are very competitive in securing grants.

Mr. Abrams asked if there were any outstanding grant applications. Ms. Faioes said there is one outstanding grant request for HVAC, but it will not have a substantial impact on the budget.

Mr. Jellerette asked about Education Cost Sharing from the State and said it looks static over the last two years. Mr. Asmani explained that the ECS goes to the cities and towns and the Board of Education gets a percentage. He said the amount has been fairly flat and they have been following up with Senator Duff to get a greater share of the ECS.

Ms. Yang asked about the \$7 million request for other services. Mr. Asmani said page 42 of the budget book provides that information. He added that the costs include out of district tuition for Special Education.

Mr. Asmani reviewed the school lunch funding summary and said the grant is restricted. He said during covid, the federal government provided grants to feed all students.

Mr. Asmani reviewed the FY 2023-2024 budget recap and said the Board of Education reconciled their budget request to 4%. He presented how funds are spent with 84.2% in salaries and benefits and other services making up the remaining 15%.

Ms. Yang asked about the number of certified teachers. Mr. Kassimis said he noticed there were 170 central office staff and asked about the total cost for the central office. Ms. Faioes said some of the positions labeled central office are located in the schools. Mr. Asmani said there are 1,080 certified teachers.

Mr. Jellerette asked if the school lunch finding is a District decision or a mandate. Ms. Faioes explained that all students receive meals, regardless of their ability to pay. She reviewed the history of school lunches and said they applied for an All Eat Free program that pays for a portion and the District pays the remainder. Prior to covid, they had \$1 million in debt in the school lunch fund. She added that if a student does not qualify for SNAP benefits, that does not mean they would not qualify for free lunch.

Mr. Abrams asked Mr. Asmani to break out salaries and benefits by categories. Mr. Asmani summarized the buckets and reviewed the actual history beginning in FY 2020-2021. Ms. Yang asked for a breakdown of student support categories by position. Mr. Asmani noted additional information is on the website.

Mr. Jellerette asked about the ECS funding over the last couple of years. Ms. Yang noted that Norwalk spends about \$24,000 per student and asked how that compares to other districts.

Mr. Abrams noted this is an extremely challenging budget year and the future of Norwalk is highly dependent on the students; however, he said he also recognizes compromises are required this year. Dr. Estrella said she understands the predicament the City is in. She noted that last year was a very difficult year for the schools and hope that will be taken into consideration. Further reduction will put at risk the great work they have done. She added that great schools create great communities. Mr. Abrams told Dr. Estrella she made great points, but they need to balance the need and wants of many.

Mr. Ellis provided CES funding information. In 2019, the City received \$9.7 million and in 2024 \$10.1 million. Funding has been consistent over the past few years.

Mr. Asmani said the Board of Estimate and Taxation will get the answers to all their questions to help them make an informed decision.

Mr. Abrams expressed his thanks to everyone.

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

There was no further business, and the meeting was unanimously adjourned at 8:38 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosemarie Lombardi
Telesco Secretarial Services