CITY OF NORWALK
BOARD OF ESTIMATE & TAXATION
SPECIAL MEETING
MARCH 6, 2025

ATTENDANCE: Ed Abrams, Chair; Ed Camacho, Kendrick Constant, Troy Jellerette, Anne Yang; Mayor Harry Rilling (6:01 p.m.)

OTHERS Irene Dixon, City Clerk; Jared Schmitt, CFO; Deanna D'Amore, Health Department Director; Lamond Daniels, Community Services; Tom Ellis, AnaVivian Estrella, Human Services Director; Sherelle Harris, City Librarian; Ken Hughes, Parks and Public Property Superintendent; Neil Rennie; Robert Stowers, Recreation and Parks Director; Vanessa Valadares, Operations and Public Works Director; David Walenczyk, Youth Services

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Abrams called the meeting to order at 6:31 p.m. Mr. Abrams said that this was a workshop and there would be no public comment at this time. Public comments would be taken during the Public Hearings later in the month.

Ms. Dixon called the roll. A quorum was present.

Mr. Ellis displayed a budget spreadsheet on screen and gave a brief description of what the various columns represented.

- **Community Services**

Mr. Daniels greeted the Board and introduced himself. He said that his department included Human Services, the Library and the Health Department. Ms. Estrella, Ms. Harris and Ms. D'Amore were all present on the call to answer questions.

Mr. Ellis said that the Community Service budget was currently at 4.8%.

Early Childhood – There were no questions regarding the Early Childhood Department.

Fair Rent – Ms. Yang asked if Margaret Suib was included in this category. Mr. Daniels explained that Atty. Suib handled Fair Housing, which deals with discrimination in Housing. The Fair Rent department handles questions about increases in rent or housing repairs issues. Mr. Ellis said that Atty. Suib's hearing was scheduled for March 12th.

Ms. Yang asked for clarification about the housing issues. Mr. Daniels said that the Fair Rent unit was required by law for municipalities with a population over 70,000, but Norwalk had established this group 20 years before it became State Law.

Ms. Estrella then gave a brief overview of the process that a renter would follow regarding an increase in rent or dealing with a lack of maintenance. She reiterated that Norwalk had the unit for a long time and now other municipalities were looking to Norwalk for information.

Human Services – Mr. Ellis said that there were several increases in this area. Mr. Daniels said that he would like to thank the Mayor for this unit. It was established during COVID and was a program where philanthropy would help meet the needs of the community. However, the need continues to grow. The City has been recognized by its colleagues around the State. He said that they were excited to maintain this service, but it is not a social service unit.

Ms. Estrella said that this was originally funded with grant funding during COVID, but since then the administration realized that this filled a need in the community. She noted that the grant funding had been extended for an additional year. The City received an municipal award for their work. This unit would include three municipal employees that speak three different languages: Creole, Spanish and English.

Atty. Camacho asked for clarification on the $165,000 increase in salaries. Ms. Estrella was told that this included the three new employees and that they were starting off at the base grade. Discussion followed about the details and the fact that the program was very successful.

Ms. Estrella said that the unit had already assisted over 700 household this year. This includes resources for food, clothing and medical services. More and more Norwalk residents are accessing this service in order to lead successful lives.

Atty. Camacho asked if the service was basically a referral service. Ms. Estrella said that the non-profit organizations are experts in their designated areas. Because the City did not have a Social Service Department for many years, the City developed a strong relationship with these non-profits. Ms. Estrella gave several examples and said that the unit was more than just a referral service because they work with the individual to make sure they can get to the resources

Ms. Yang asked about the grant fundings. Mr. Daniel said that the grant funding was from the Dailio and Ritter fund. He explained that the funding would continue until June 30th of this year. He said that the City hopes to be able to find others to partner with them to continue the service. Mr. Daniels said that both foundations have been active in the City with other projects. Discussion followed about the original five employees, who were funded by the grant funding, and which will be reduced to three. Mayor Rilling noted that the employees were paid at the City's union scales, but were not union employees.

As there were no additional questions at this time, the Board thanked Ms. Estrella for her time.

Ms. D’Amore then spoke about the Health Department employees who were paid with grant funding. Discussion followed about the role of the City’s obligation to these employees such as health benefits, and the number of non-profits in the City.

Mr. Abrams noted that Ms. Yang had suggested that Mr. Daniels investigate possible additional grants that would reduce the City’s financial obligations for this program. This should remain as an open item pending Mr. Daniels’ report.

Senior Services – Mr. Abrams noted that there was no funding allocated to Senior Services.

Youth Services – Mr. Ellis said that there were some significant increase and noted that Mr. Walenczyk was present to answer questions. Mr. Walenczyk said that that State was utilizing a new data system to collect information through DCYF. It is estimated that it will cost about $3,000 for this new contact. He also explained that when a particular long term City employee was transferred into the unit, the longevity was not calculate correctly. Another position was vacant during the hiring freeze and should be filled in the coming year.

Chief of Community Services – Mr. Ellis gave a brief overview of the highlights. Mr. Daniels said that there was a reduction in some areas and indicated where those reductions were noted on the spreadsheet. There were some matching fund requirements and some funding for the Norwalk Senior Center. He said that it was basically status quo.

Health Admin – Mr. Ellis said that there had been a handful of changes, but nothing significant. He noted that there was an increase in insurance claims. Ms. D’Amore greeted everyone and explained that there were only some contractual increases. She noted that the Department was fully staffed now. She spoke about the grant funding and summarized the City’s increase.

Building Maintenance – Mr. Ellis gave a brief overview of the items included in this category. He noted that these expenses were basically contractual. Mr. Neil Rennie then explained that the City had some buildings that were expected to go offline for a year such at 98 South Main and other buildings that were coming online, such as Mathews Mansion. The figures were all reallocated and adjusted. This included janitorial services.

Environmental Health and Housing – Ms. D’Amore gave a brief overview and indicated that there was a larger increase due to the hiring freeze. She also noted that they had requested that a Part Time position be increase to Full Time. Due to the State changing their mandate, they need more work on monitoring lead levels. There was also an additional line item added to the budget regarding evictions, which was done at the suggestion of the BET.

Ms. Yang asked about the non-tax revenue. Ms. D’Amore said that they have revenue from Weights and Measures along with Health and Housing and Environmental groups. The licensing can include food establishment, temporary events, septic and clinical revenue. Discussion followed about the details.

Weights & Measures – Ms. D’Amore explained that the increases here were basically contractual and due to longevity.

Community Health – Ms. D’Amore explained that the increases here were basically contractual and due to longevity.

Health Laboratory – There were no significant changes in the Health Laboratory.

Senior Services Coordinator – There were no expenses associated with the Senior Services Health Coordinator.

Preventable Diseases – Ms. D’Amore said the Department had requested an additional staff position for a Public Health Nurse that was recommended by both the Mayor and the CFO. The position had been funded through COVID-19 funding and some past grants. The nurse enabled the Department increase their capacity and provide more childhood immunizations and provide support for other health services. One of the grants has ended and two others will end in the coming year. Many of the Health Department grants are through Federal sources that are passed through the State Health Department. An order to pause the spending this year due to some of the governmental changes has been received and there are court cases underway. The various grant sources for the Public Health Nurse will no longer be available. Therefore, unless the City is able to fund that position, the Department will not be able to continue this position.

Ms. D’Amore thanked the Mayor, Mr. Daniels and the BET for all their past support. She noted that over the years the funding has fluctuated. Mayor Rilling said that this was a major priority and involves the overall health of the community.

Ms. Yang asked about the Norwalk Community Health Center on Connecticut Avenue. Ms. D’Amore said that they receive a lot of funding and they have increased their capacity. A recent study on immunizations revealed that there were still residents that had to wait a long time for appointments, keeping their children’s vaccinations current, and other, similar items. Discussion followed about the role of the Community Health Centers and the role of the Health Department.

As there were no additional questions at this time, the Board thanked Ms. D’Amore for her time.

Library Administration – Mr. Ellis gave a brief overview of the Library budget submission. Ms. Harris, the Library Director, greeted the Board Members. She reviewed some of the contractual agreements, including the grounds maintenance and the parking agreement with the Eagles lot.

Mr. Jellerette asked why the Library was still renting from the Eagles when they just acquire another parcel for parking. Ms. Harris explained that when the renovations were underway, they would need the extra spots and there was a need when there is special programming underway.

Mr. Jellerette asked about the increase in Other Contractual Services. Mr. Ellis said that it was the regular maintenance. Mr. Rennie explained that this was when the costs were allocated for maintenance were allocated out to the various departments. Mr. Abrams asked for a report showing the allocations on one sheet, because this number is a 88% increase, but it is offset elsewhere. Discussion followed about 98 South Main, which was expected to go dark and then re-emerge next year.

Ms. Harris said that she had noted there was a reduction to the Part Time Budget and she was requesting that this funding be reinstated because the minimum wage had increased in January to $16.35. While the shelvers will be making this, there are several full time library staff who are making $17.00 an hour. She had proposed a salary raise for the part timers who had not had an increase since 2012. She gave the details. Connecticut is lagging behind in what they are paying their librarians. Mr. Abrams said that they could keep that item as an open item for discussion by the Board. Discussion followed.

Mr. Schmitt asked Ms. Harris to send him some information on this issue so he and Mr. Ellis could review it and send it to the BET members. Ms. Harris said she had that information and would send it to him.

Ms. Yang asked about whether the part time staff received benefits. Ms. Harris said that they did not receive benefits and are strictly part time.

As there were no additional questions at this time, the Board thanked Ms. Harris for her time. This concluded the section on Community Services.

- **Operations and Public Works/ Recreation and Parks**

Mr. Ellis gave a brief overview of the key budget figures and salary adjustment.

Ms. Valadares greeted the Board Members. She noted that there were a number of divisions under Public Works including Operations, Building Maintenance, Engineering and Recreation and Parks. The staff has worked hard to keep their budget spending in line. The only thing they could not control was the contractual issues. Otherwise they tried to keep the spending flat. Most of the divisions will not be adding staff but Parks has some employees that are grant funded. They have worked to come up with ideas to minimize the impact on the budget. The submitted budget is at 5.33% and that is because of contractual issues such as the solid waste contract. She went on to review the various percentages. Engineering is a flat budget.

Operations Chief Department - Mr. Abrams asked about the $93,000 transfer to Other Funds. Ms. Valadares explained that those funds were used to pay the sewer fees to the WPCA and similar bills. Mr. Ellis confirmed this and noted that the money covered the sewer fees for the City buildings, City Hall, DPW center and the amount they pay to the WPCA.

Operations Department – Ms. Yang said that her book doesn't break out the budget by divisions. She asked what the increase was in staff was. Ms. Valadares said that the only increase in staff was in Recreation and Parks where there was staff who had been funded from grant allocations.

Signs and Markings – There was very little variation on this budget.

Snow/Ice Removal – Mr. Abrams said that last year, they had cut the snow and ice removal funds and now the increase was for restocking. Ms. Valadares said that this year, there were 11 events and they required a total of 2,700 tons of salt so far.

Mr. Ellis asked Ms. Valadares, Chris and Mr. Rennie to speak about the condition of the shed and the impact it has on their ability to restock salt when it is at a good price. Ms. Valadares said that they were aware they need to repair the shed but now the condition has deteriorated to the point where it has to be totally replaced. They put in concrete barriers to protect the wall that is compromised but they couldn't fill it as much. The shed used to hold 7,000 tons of salt but they've only been able to keep 3,000 tons there. Ms. Valadares gave the cost figures for the salt.

Storm Drainage – There were no questions regarding the storm drainage.

Solid Waste – Mr. Abrams said that this was where the contractual increases were. Ms. Valadares gave the details about the new Toters for the Fourth Taxing District. This will allow the vendor to use automated trucks. That should reduce costs. The city no longer makes any money on recycling. Once it was a revenue item, but now it is an expense. She gave the details.

Ms. Yang asked about the increase in recycling and wish to know if the volume had increase or the rate had increased. Ms. Valadares said that since COVID, the recycling market no longer exists. Since this is a national problem, there are companies that are trying to reinvent the recycling market. There is still a tiny portion that can generate revenue, but 80% of the recycling is an expense.

Tree Maintenance – There were no questions regarding tree maintenance.

Engineering – There were no questions regarding engineering.

Disposal – Mr. Jellerette asked about the Other Contractual Services. Mr. Rennie said that this was the line item where the cost of Household Hazardous Waste Day is reflected. Norwalk, Wilton, Westport and Stamford hold an event and residents can bring their waste for collection. Ms. Valadares spoke about how they ended up moving some of the employees to different divisions, which means one division may have an increase in staff, but there is a similar staff reduction in another division.

Recycling – This was discussed earlier.

Centralized Fleet Management – There were no questions regarding Fleet Management.

Treatment Plant – There were no questions regarding the Treatment Plant.

Building Maintenance – Mr. Rennie said that he had just sent a spreadsheet to Mr. Ellis that would clarify the allocations for all of the buildings.

There were no questions regarding Building Maintenance.

Engineering Facilities – [North Ely, Roosevelt, Franklin, City Hall, Fillow, Concert, Lockwood House, DPW Center, 90 New Canaan Ave, 56 Van Zant, 180 Westport Ave, 23 Meadow 98 Main, 1 Meadow Street Ext.]

There were no questions regarding the listed locations.

3 Belden Avenue – Mr. Abrams asked about the substantial increases in the utilities costs. Mr. Rennie explained that the building just came back on line in July of last year, so there was only partial information regarding the utility costs.

Recreation and Parks – Mr. Ellis said that Mr. Stowers and Mr. Hughes were available to answer questions. He then reviewed the highlights of the budget spreadsheet.

Mr. Stowers said that the department has been reviewing their priorities to be budget neutral while continuing to provide the same programs and facilities. It is basically flat, but next year the new recreation center will open and they are working to allocate funding for those increased costs in November.

Mr. Stowers said that the Department has been very pleased with the addition of an arborist and horticulturalist who joined the Department over a year ago. The staff member was hired with ARPA funding but there had been a strong emphasis on tree maintenance and the urban forest.

Ms. Yang asked for confirmation of the fact that the budget was flat except for a half year salary for the arborist. Mr. Stowers said that they were also asking for the three quarters of salary for the new Recreation Manager for 98 Main Street. The new staff member will have to be employed before the center opens. Discussion of the details followed including the fact that the center may generate revenue due to program fees along with all the revenue that the department generates. Mr. Stowers said that the biggest revenue generator was parking fees.

Ms. Yang thanked Mr. Stowers for trying to keep the budget contained and looking for additional revenue. Mr. Jellerette said that the budget was fiscally sound. Mr. Stowers noted that

Mr. Hughes had done a great deal of work on it. Mr. Abrams acknowledged both men's work. He thanked them for adhering to the guidance.

Mr. Abrams asked if there were any additional comments. Ms. Yang asked that copies of the requests for staff additions for each department and which ones were related to grant funding. This will allow the BET to evaluate the various positions since the Federal Government may no longer fund. The State government may have to pick up some of these grants. The City might end up now bearing the costs of those additional positions. Discussion followed.

Mayor Rilling said that the City side had checked within the 2.5% limit that he had set, but noted that the City was in negotiations of at least four contracts. He said that he appreciates the hard work everyone has done. As far as the grant funded staff, the City's policy is that except for very rare circumstances, the position expires when the grant does.

ADJOURNMENT

**** MS. YANG MOVED TO ADJOURN.**
**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**.

The meeting adjourned at 8:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

S. L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services