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**CITY OF NORWALK  
FINANCE CLAIMS COMMITTEE  
REGULAR MEETING  
JANUARY 11, 2024  
VIA TELECONFERENCE**

ATTENDANCE: Gregory Burnett, Chair; Heather Dunn; James Frayer; Johan Lopez; Melissa Murray; Douglas Sutton; Dajuan Wiggins

STAFF: Lisa Biagiarelli, Tax Collector; Lamon Daniels, Chief of Community Services; Paul Gorman, Interim Tax Assessor; Jessica Vonashek, Chief of Economic and Community Development

OTHERS: Denise Brown, Oak Hills Park Authority

**1. CALL TO ORDER**

Mr. Burnett called the meeting to order at 8:11 p.m.

**2. ROLL CALL**

Mr. Burnett called the Roll as indicated above. A Quorum was present.

**3. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There were no members of the public who wished to comment this evening.

**4. APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE FOLLOWING FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETINGS:**

December 7, 2023-Special Finance and Claims Committee Meeting

**\*\* MS. MURRAY MOVED TO APPROVE THE MINUTES AS PRESENTED  
\*\* MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**

December 14, 2023- Regular Meeting

**\*\* MR. LOPEZ MOVED TO APPROVE THE MINUTES AS PRESENTED  
\*\* MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**

**5. CLAIMS COMMITTEE: January 2024**

Ms. Biagiarelli reported one refund request for \$21,000.19. This refund was from an assessment appeal.

**\*\* MR. SUTTON MOVED TO APPROVE THE CLAIMS REPORT  
\*\* MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**

This item will go before the full Common Council on January 23, 2024.

6. **NARRATIVE ON TAX COLLECTIONS DATED JANUARY 2024** – Receive Report and discuss.

7. **MONTHLY TAX COLLECTOR'S REPORTS DATED DECEMBER 2023**– Receive Report and discuss.

Ms. Biagiarelli explained that property taxes make up approximately 90% of the City's revenue. She said she tries to provide a monthly report and narrative. The narrative also provides information about the activity in the departments. She asked if there were any questions. Mr. Burnett told Ms. Biagiarelli that she brings extremely great value to the Committee.

Ms. Biagiarelli reviewed the narrative that reflected the month of December.

Ms. Murray asked if the City provides any assistance to people impacted by the Tax Sale. Ms. Biagiarelli explained that by the time the property gets to the Tax Sale, the Department has made many efforts to come up with a remedy. The tax bills and past due bills are sent twice a year. She noted that it is her responsibility by Statute to collect the tax. She described the criteria that has to be met for a property to go on the Tax Sale.

Ms. Biagiarelli said Norwalk is the only city that does their own enforcement, saving the taxpayers in attorney fees. She added that she is not a financial planner or a financial advisor. She said she needs to treat everyone the same.

Mr. Burnett explained that the Tax Sale is the last resort; Ms. Biagiarelli's office does a lot of outreach. The purpose of the Tax Sale is to get the revenue in.

Mr. Lopez asked about the motor vehicle tax. Ms. Biagiarelli said the Motor Vehicle sends the bills and they have an agreement. If someone owes back taxes, they are not able to register their boat or vehicle.

#### 8. **TAX ASSESSOR UPDATE ON THE REVALUATION PROCESS.**

Mr. Gorman gave an update on the revaluation. He said they are in the middle of the informal hearing process. Once those meetings have been completed, formal notices will be sent.

Mr. Gorman reported they had a good response to people applying for tax relief.

Mr. Burnett asked how many meetings have been scheduled, related to the revaluation. Mr. Gorman explained that the commercial team had about 90 and the residential team had about 1,500 informal hearings. He said he will ask both revaluation teams for an exact number.

Mr. Frayer asked Mr. Gorman if he had any sense of the accuracy based on the request they are getting. Mr. Gorman said he feels there is a high level of acceptance and believes the number of people who will receive reductions will be low. He added the revaluations on both commercial and residential are very accurate.

**9. RECEIVED OAK HILLS AUTHORITY MONTHLY FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR NOVEMBER 2023.**

Ms. Brown reviewed the financials that were in the meeting packet. She noted the Oak Hills Park Authority made \$67,000 in payments since July. She said they are in their third year of five years for the carts. The lithium batteries are working very well. She reviewed their cash balance and said they feel they will be able to cover their expenses during the winter.

Mr. Burnett asked for a status update on the restaurant. Ms. Brown explained they have three interested parties. The Restaurant Committee will put together their final report for their meeting on Tuesday. They hope to have a decision in February and the restaurant up and running in April.

Mr. Frayer asked if they had to take any special precautions to store the lithium batteries in the barn. Ms. Brown said she would ask the Superintendent.

**\*\* MR. LOPEZ MOVED TO APPROVE ARPA TRANSFER REQUEST FOR NORWALK COMMUNITY RECOVERY FUND PROGRAM -- ARPA ACCOUNT NO. 132010 5796 ACS03 IN THE AMOUNT OF \$1,170,000.62 FROM 134010-5796 APW01 DRG2021-1 DREAMY HOLLOW BETTS \$372,013.56; 134010-5796-APW06 STORMWATER MANAGEMENT PLAN \$48,462.06; 134010-5796-APW07 COASTAL RESILIENCY CITYWIDE \$350,000; 134010-5796-APW11 MUNICIPAL SOLID WASTE DISPOSAL \$78,553; 133710-5796-AEC12 DIGITILIZATION DOCUMENTATION \$190,972; 133710-5796-AEC13 BUSINESS NAVIGATION ONLINE \$130,000.**

Mr. Daniels reviewed the item. He said this item is a continuation of the City's commitment to fund non profits and the Health Department. They will be creating a new grant program.

Me. Wiggins asked for clarification. Mr. Daniels reviewed the request.

**\*\* MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**

This item will go before the full Common Council on January 23, 2024.

**\*\* MR. FRAYER MOVED TO APPROVE ARPA TRANSFER REQUEST FOR NORWALK COMMUNITY CARVER -- ARPA ACCOUNT NO. 132010 5796 ACS04 IN THE AMOUNT OF \$500,000 FROM 131310-5796-AFG01 ARPA GENERAL PURPOSE \$400,000; 131310-5796-AFN01 FIBER OPTIC CABLE \$71,677.50; 133710-5796-AEC12 DIGITIZATION DOCUMENTATION \$28,322.50.**

Mr. Daniels reviewed the request for \$500,000 to provide financial assistance for Norwalk residents whose children attend Norwalk Public Schools. The funding will go directly to the Carver Center. He noted that the general purpose of ARPA funding is to support after school programs.

Mr. Daniels said Ms. Peterkin, the Executive Director of the Carver Center will attend the next meeting of the Community Services Committee to answer any questions. Mr. Wiggins asked if there was an RFP process to receive these funds. Mr. Daniels explained to Mr. Wiggins that the City has a partnership with the Carver Center and the City funds programs for the children they serve.

Mr. Wiggins said he was curious about the process to come to the City and develop that partnership. Mr. Frayer said this action does not give money to the Carver Center; this action is taken to get the money into an account. Mr. Wiggins said he knows how this goes, but is trying to understand how the money got to this point.

Mr. Burnett explained this is an after-school program that was under the Board of Education. A partnership was created with the Carver Center to take over the after-school program for 600 Norwalk public school students in need of funding. Without this funding the children would not afford to attend this after-school program. Mr. Daniels noted that this relationship predates his tenure.

Mr. Daniels said his team could prepare a presentation, but Ms. Peterkin can explain why there is such a need for 600 students.

Mr. Wiggins said the process is extremely important and understands a lot is done due to relationships.

**\*\* MOTION PASSED WITH ONE (1) ABSTENTION**

This item will go before the full Common Council on January 23, 2024.

Due to a potential conflict of interest Ms. Murray recused herself and left the Common Council chambers.

**\*\* MR. FRAYER MOVED TO APPROVE ARPA TRANSFER REQUEST FOR MAYOR INITIATIVE -- ARPA ACCOUNT NO. 130100 5796 AMD01 IN THE AMOUNT OF \$450,000 FROM 133710-5796-AEC14 ADMINISTRATOR FOR ARPA \$304,250; 133710-5796-AEC10 INNOVATION GRANTS FOR START UP \$130,000 133710-5796-AEC2 DIGITIZATION DOCUMENTATION \$15,750.**

Ms. Vonashek reviewed the item and said the Mayor's Office is working on becoming the greenest city in the State of Connecticut.

**\*\* MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**

This item will go before the full Common Council on January 23, 2024.

Ms. Murray returned to the Common Council chambers.

### 13. ADJOURNMENT.

**\*\* MS. MURRAY MOVED TO ADJOURN**

**\*\* MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**

There was no further business, and the meeting was unanimously adjourned at 9:32 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosemarie Lombardi  
Telesco Secretarial Services

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**CITY OF NORWALK  
FINANCE CLAIMS COMMITTEE AND  
BOARD OF EDUCATION FINANCE COMMITTEE  
SPECIAL MEETING  
JANUARY 11, 2024  
COMMON COUNCIL CHAMBERS AND VIA TELECONFERENCE**

City of Norwalk  
Finance Claims Committee And  
Board of Education Finance Committee  
Special Meeting  
January 11, 2024  
Common Council Chambers and Via Teleconference  
Page 1

ATTENDANCE (Common Council): Gregory Burnett, Chair; Mayor Harry Rilling; Heather Dunn; James Frayer; Johan Lopez; Melissa Murray; Doug Sutton; Dujan Wiggins

ATTENDANCE (Board of Education): Sheri McCready, Chair, Finance Committee; Diana Carpio, Chair Board of Education;

STAFF (City of Norwalk): Thomas Ellis, Director of Management and Budgets

STAFF (Board of Education): Dr. Alexxandra Estrella, Superintendent of Schools; Lunda Asmani, Chief Financial Officer; Sandra Faioes, Deputy Superintendent; Roert Pennington, Assistant Superintendent of Schools

OTHERS (City of Norwalk): Jalen Sead and Barbara Smyth , Common Council members

OTHERS (Board of Education): Ashley Gulyas; Janine Randolph; Samantha Pleasants (Board of Education members)

### **I. CALL TO ORDER**

Mr. Burnett called the meeting to order at 6:07 p.m.

### **II. ROLL CALL**- Common Council and BOE Finance Chairpersons

Mr. Burnett and Ms. McCready called the Roll for their respective committees as indicated above.

Mayor Rilling gave opening remarks and described the budget process. He noted that it will be challenging to create a budget that is fair and equitable, but they will have to work together and make concessions where needed. He said they try to function on a needs vs wants process. Mayor Rilling said they want to hear from the public.

Dr. Estrella reviewed the Board of Education budget process and said it is not an easy process. The community is best served when the students are educated. She explained that they looked at the strategic plan when they went through the budget process and kept in mind the need to support the teachers.

Mr. Burnett explained that this joint meeting is one of several opportunities for both committees to understand the goals and challenges. He said he Board has tentatively approved their budget request as it relates to the operating budget.

Ms. McCready Pritchett said the goal is to share thoughts, ideas and concerns. She said the Norwalk Public School system is the most successful city school system in Connecticut, but there is a lot more to be done. She reviewed some of the key drivers in the budget and said that on behalf of the Board of Education, they look forward to continuing the discussion and collaboration.

### **III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There were no members of the public who wished to comment this evening.

### **IV. FINANCE DEPARTMENT OF THE CITY AND CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER OF NORWALK PUBLIC SCHOOLS PRESENTATIONS:**

#### **a. City- Guidelines for Preparation of FYE 2025 Operating Budgets**

Mr. Ellis shared his screen and presented the guidelines for the preparation of the FYE 2025 budget. He reviewed the challenging economic outlook and how it can impact the City's budgeting process. He added that there are concerns about the economic impact of the high interest rates on the taxpayers. He reviewed what the City proposes to do to provide essential municipal services and minimize tax increases for Norwalk residents.

Ms. Carpio commented that they are talking about educating children and wants vs. needs is no education vs. a quality education. She said she hoped everyone would keep that in mind. She added that they have to think about the staff, but the dialogue of wants vs. needs has to change.

Mr. Burnett asked about the timing of the contracts. Mr. Ellis said negotiations are just beginning.

Mr. Ellis addressed the grants process and said they have a part time grants coordinator who does a very good job. He added that the individual departments with specific expertise also search for grants and that process seems to work.

Mr. Frayer asked about the rainy day fund. Mr. Ellis said it continues to trend in the right direction. They would not take any action without significant guidance from their bond advisor. Mayor Rilling explained that each year they budget to draw down from the rainy day fund, but due to careful spending they have not had to use that money. Ms. McCready Pritchett asked if the City pursues grants. Mayor Rilling said it is a daily process.

In response to a question about the impact of ARPA funds on the budget, Mr. Ellis said those funds took the pressure off the capital side and some items from the operating budget. Mr. Ellis said the government cautioned recipients of the ARPA funding to not use the funds for re-occurring expenses.

#### b. BOE- Key Issues Impacting FY25 Operating Budget

Mr. Asmani shared his screen and reviewed the Board of Education's FY 2024-2025 tentatively approved budget. He reviewed the five strategic priorities. He added that this year, for the second year in a row, they provided a budget book.

Mr. Asmani presented the Board of Education's general fund summary and a budget comparison from six different school districts. He presented student demographics and enrollment for multi-language learners and special education students. He noted that in terms of enrollment, they are flat.

Mr. Asmani presented the 2024-2025 combined budgets showing the general fund at 85%, the grants fund at 13% and the school lunch fund at 2%. He noted that when the funds dry up, the needs do not and they have to make tough decisions.

Ms. Faioes reviewed the school lunch program and noted that the school lunch program is critical to the health of the students. She described the former lunch program and the current program where all students receive free breakfast and lunch. She said they currently served over 500,000 meals and this year they are trending higher with parents having their children eat breakfast and lunch at school.

Mr. Asmani presented the general fund showing that 85% of the budget is for salaries and benefits. He also presented the staff distribution chart, noting that the bulk of employees are in the elementary and high schools.

Mr. Asmani presented the budget drivers showing how they achieved an 8.2% increase in the Superintendent's FY 2025 recommended budget.

Mr. Asmani said this is the first of many conversations they will be having. He said they have a dedicated page on the Board of Education's website with the budget information. In addition, the meetings are available on YouTube and that information is always being added to the website.

Mayor Rilling noted that the Board of Education's budget request has not been approved. He said their projection for FY2024 is the only year lower than FY2021; this dispels the comments that the developments are straining the schools.

## **V. DISCUSSION**

The staff members responded to questions from the Committee members. In answer to a question, Ms. Faioes said that following the efficiency study, her department works with their partners on the City side. Mr. Asmani added that one of the things outlined in the efficiency study was how the City and Board of Education Finance departments could collaborate on projects. Dr. Estrella said the City and Board of Education teams work very well together.

Mr. Burnett addressed the lunch fund and said he agrees it is vital to the success of the students, but expressed concern over food waste. He asked if there is any data available regarding the food waste and what may be causing that. Ms. Faioes said they recently changed food vendors. She said for Norwalk Public Schools to get reimbursed, there is a formula that all students have to take a certain number of food items for it to count as a meal. She agreed it is wasteful, but it is a federal law. She added that they are trying to offer students many different options. She said they are not measuring food waste.

Mr. Burnett said that in universities and corporations they measure food waster and make necessary changes. Ms. McCready Pritchett said they try to encourage students to eat a complete meal. Ms. Faioes said they do not know how much is thrown out.

Dr. Estrella said they may be able to calculate the food waste, but may not be able to do anything about it, because they are required to serve a certain amount of food to the students.

Mr. Frayer asked if all the schools compost. He said composting will provide information about the food waste. A committee member asked about donating the unused food; however, Ms. Faioes said regulations prevent them from re-using food. Dr. Estrella said there is a cost associated with composting, but said she would look into it.

A question was asked about the administrative period for teachers. It was explained that this time will provide teachers with the time they need to plan their days. Ms. Faioes added that nationally there is a teacher shortage and this is a way to make sure the teachers are supported and to retain the teachers.

Mr. Frayer asked about the increase given the fact that enrollment has been flat for the last five years. He was told there is an increase of over 15% for early target intervention for students and the number of students needing special services are going up.

Mr. Frayer said that several years ago, the City put \$3 million in the budget for students needing special services. Mr. Pennington said the \$3 million was an amazing investment and it helped support keeping the students in district rather than placing them out of the district. Last year they had 105 students and this year they are at 110. Ms. McCreedy Pritchett noted that sometimes Norwalk Public Schools does not have the capacity to keep the student in the District. Mr. Pennington said the focus is to provide the best services to all the students.

Mr. Burnett asked about the impact of some of the drivers. Dr. Estrella said programs come at a cost. Mr. Burnett noted that the City does not have control over how the money is spent. He asked Dr. Estrella what would happen if they do not receive the \$2 million request for the magnet school program. She said the program would end – that it runs the risk of being eliminated. She added they will have to figure out how to save jobs and the program.

Mr. Burnett said he was trying to understand the impact if the full amount requested is not allocated. Dr. Estrella replied that if the \$2 million is not allocated for the magnet school program it will go away. Mr. Frayer asked what would happen if the \$2 million is not allocated. Dr. Estrella said they would have to look at ways to reduce in other areas or modify the program.

Dr. Estrella said they are engaged in partnerships to support their budget. She said grants are challenging because they are very specific on how they are spent. Ms. Faioes said 13% of their budget comes from grants.

Mr. Burnett thanked the members of the Board of Education for their presentation and the dialogue.

#### **VI. ADJOURN**

There was no further discussion, and the meeting was unanimously adjourned at 7:46 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosemarie Lombardi  
Telesco Secretarial Services