



**MINUTES OF PUBLIC HEARING ON PROPOSED FISCAL YEAR 2009-2010
BUDGET**

MARCH 26, 2009

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

President Scott Slifka called the meeting to order at 2:00 P.M.

President Slifka: Good afternoon. We'd like to call the hearing to order on the proposed fiscal year 2009-2010 budget. Just a couple of housekeeping things as we get started. This is the first of our two hearings on the budget. The next one will be a week from today at 7:00. That will be in the auditorium down the hall and the format will be much like the forum we held in January where we will of course take testimony but it's intended to be kind of open-ended and if you have questions we'll try to field them today... I'm sorry, that night. Today, although we will also be taking testimony per council rules we ask you to stay within a three minute time limit. If you do have questions we have obviously members of the Council but also our administration here today. We will attempt to answer your questions today to the extent that we are able to do that as well and within our time constraints and also my colleague, Mr. Adler, was unable to make it today due to a work commitment and the minority leader, Mr. Davidoff, also is unable to make it. He sent a note which he asked that we read. "I regret to inform you that I will be unable to attend this afternoon's public hearing on the budget. As you are aware, I, along with my immediate family members provide at-home care for my mother who suffers from Alzheimer's. Usually I am able to coordinate a schedule which allows me to attend the various meetings of the Town Council. However, today I was unable to arrange such coverage. I intend to watch the Public Hearing online via WHC-TV's live stream." So hello, Leon. I hope you're alright. "And I will review the minutes and transcripts if provided of this Public Hearing. Please share this letter with my Council colleagues and include it in the public record of the hearing. Very truly yours, Leon S. Davidoff, Minority Leader."

And with that can I have a roll call please, Ms. Labrot?

ROLL CALL

Present were Councilors Tim Brennan, Shari Cantor, Chuck Coursey, Scott Slifka, and Carolyn Thornberry, Joseph Verrengia and Joseph Visconti.

Councilors Adler and Davidoff were absent.

President Slifka: Thank you, Ms. Labrot. Okay. Again we will begin with the testimony. We ask that you per the Council rules stay within three minutes and if anybody is walking in now and did not sign up we'll just call on you at the end of the sheet since I already have it up here with me. So our first speaker is Joanna Wasilowski. Come on up.

Ms. Wasilowski: Oh, I didn't want to speak.

President Slifka: Oh, you're just like stating you were here? Oh, okay. Well, welcome Joanna. We'll note you're here. Next is Kevin Lynch.

Mr. Lynch: Does that count against my three minutes? Mr. Mayor, Councilors, thank you for listening to me today. I'm Kevin Lynch. I'm the president of the Senior West Hartford Advocacy Team. Our group meets at the West Hartford Senior Center in Bishop's Corner but I'm really speaking about senior needs.

President Slifka: Mr. Lynch, I will just note two things. One is as such you are allowed five minutes as a representative of a group and also if you could just state your address for the record and if all the other speakers could do that as well. Thanks.

Mr. Lynch: Thank you. I'm sorry. My address is 80 Barksdale Road, West Hartford. I'd like to speak about the self-interest of seniors first of all. The self-interest of seniors is to one extent seeing that their property values do not fall because their most precious possession, of course, is their home. I want to tell you about a survey that the New York Times did in the early 1980s. They looked at two towns in Westchester County, contiguous towns – the housing stock, the lot sizes relatively the same, the shape of the houses... The Times could only find one point of difference between these two towns besides, of course, the value of the homes because the value of the homes of A were selling for considerably more than the value of the town houses in B. The difference that the Times could find was the reputation of the schools. Because of the self-interest of seniors I am urging you to keep West Hartford schools first-rate.

Now to speak further about the self-interest of seniors I really have to speak for human services, not simply seniors. What seniors need, of course are Dial-a-Ride. They need the volunteer services which pair people with seniors in need. They need the services of the Food Pantry. Who doesn't these days? They need Medicare and general counseling. You've never heard of the Connecticut Fuel Oil Conservation Board. It's really a little secretive but the most money that they spent for any service to replace a burner, an oil burner, was spent in West Hartford. Now if you know about their income guidelines you know that it is not de jure a senior program but de facto it is because you have to be pauperized to avail yourself of this aid. Well, the most money that they spent was spent in West Hartford so don't think... And you have to go through the human services of the town to avail yourself of that kind of aid. I'd like you to know that there has been a 50 percent increase in those over 80 at our Senior Centers over the last 10 years. West Hartford is aging but we're aging in place and we need those services and we need Senior Centers. If you look at your town budget, if you go to page 169 what you discover is that 44,000, practically 45,000 people use one program or another. Now 16,500, 27 percent, is the number of people in West Hartford over 60. Well, counting on your fingers and toes you figured out well ahead of me that one person is generally using about three services. Of course, it's a lot more than that because of course not all 16,000 are using those services but, you know, if you average it out it would be three. In other words, the Senior Center services are being used and they're being used continuously and

being used more and more every year. Suppose you close a Senior Center? Tell somebody from Elmwood that there's only one Senior Center and it's in Bishop's Corner. As far as they're concerned you've just closed the Senior Center in West Hartford. Similarly, tell someone from Steele Road that now the Senior Center is off Quaker Lane and Park Avenue. You've closed the Senior Center for them and so your statistics will show that the use of a Senior Center has fallen but it will be a false reading, friends, because the need for the Senior Center will not have decreased, only the availability of the Senior Center to West Hartford seniors. This is a rather cowardly presentation because all I'm doing is telling you how to spend money. I'm not telling you a word about how to save it and that's a bit cowardly, I understand. But for the sake of the seniors I would certainly hope that you would be able to maintain our schools – it's in our self-interest – and our Senior Centers and our human services. Thank you for listening.

President Slifka: Thank you Mr. Lynch. The next speaker is Rita Schor.

Ms. Schor: Hi. My name is Rita Schor and I live at 110 Montclair Drive. I just wanted to say I stopped in Town Hall on Monday and spoke to Ellen Guest in the office there to find out the protocol for this and I specifically said, "Is there a time limit?" She said, "Just a minute," went into her office, came back and said no time limit so there has been some miscommunication. I know what I planned to say is more than three minutes so I hope...

President Slifka: We will be liberal with our time keeping.

Ms. Schor: Thank you very, very much. Okay. I'm here today to speak to you about a facility that is used and enjoyed by every age group in town, the libraries. The libraries supply story hours for toddlers, homework and study resources for school kids of every age and facilities and book discussions for young adults, adults like me who are called seniors and I guess the others are regular adults and I'm asking the Town Council not to cut the library budget as it is written in the Town Manager's Proposed Budget any further. I understand that this is a year of hard times and harsh realities and I understand that you who serve on the Town Council have an onerous task of reducing the budget by a few million dollars or several million dollars while keeping as many taxpayers as possible if not exactly happy, at least feeling okay with your decisions and I don't envy you your task. In fact, I want to take this opportunity to thank you right now for the service you give to the town without pay. Believe me, I do not take your service for granted so here it is. Thank you very much. But back to my issue, which is preserving the budget of the library. The library board and management submitted to Mr. Van Winkle, which he in turn gave to you, and in the spirit of full disclosure I love libraries and I go to all three of them. The library came up with a bare-bones budget, keeping discretionary expenditures the same or lower than they were in fiscal years 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 and in the general fund summary by department on page S5 of the Annual Budget the library's adopted budget for fiscal year 2008-2009 and proposed for 2009-2010 are identical. The library worked diligently to come to you with a zero increase and succeeded. To do this hours have already been cut back from what they were a few years ago and positions eliminated. You know the expression "No good deed goes

unpunished?" Well, I don't think the library's good deeds should be punished with more budget cuts. As Mr. VanWinkle said when presenting the budget, "During a recession use of public services goes up." For example, police departments see more activity and libraries are fuller and busier. One way the library implemented savings is by opening the main library an hour later next year at 10:00 a.m. instead of 9:00 a.m. I submit to you that reducing library hours further in the center or at the branches could be penny-wise and pound foolish with possibly some unfortunate unintended consequences.

Now I want to speak about the budget options that were in those budgets or accompanied the budget. The current hours of the two library branches should not be cut. There is a section called options where 15 departments or services gave options to either raise additional revenues or lower expenditures. It is not my intention to pit one town service or program against another but there were several services and programs that offered no budget saving options to the Council and there are only a couple besides the library that made an effort to prioritize their options. Therefore, I think the library system has unfairly set itself up to shoulder too much of the burden for cost-saving measures. If the Town Council finds it necessary to cut spending further it has to be fair by cutting similar percentages from every service and program, whether or not that service or program offered you options. The Town Council should not expect the libraries to shoulder a larger burden of budget cuts than Leisure Services or other programs. Remember, both library branches were there to pick up the slack while the main library was closed for renovations. When the main library reopened, those of us who used the branches found hours cut back and Friday closings. Please do not attack the branches' schedules even further.

And finally I want to say something specific about Faxon because I think there was something said at the February 4th Budget Forum about the Faxon branch. I was not at the forum but have been told that in response to the statement made by a resident about libraries being important there was a comment that closing the library in Elmwood would lead to a significant decrease in the budget. I hope this was only said to put in perspective the serious challenges the Council faces and not said to put forth the closing of Faxon as a recommendation. Let me be clear, closing Faxon is unacceptable and it's unacceptable for several reasons but I'll only list three. Lucky for you I'll only list three. One, it's wrong to treat one area of town differently from another area. Residents of Elmwood have the same mill rate as those who live near Bishop's Corner. Both neighborhoods must keep their branches open. Secondly, a library is a point of stability in a community. After Mr. Winkle, VanWinkle, excuse me, presented his budget proposal Mayor Slifka said the proposed budget must come down but, Mr. Mayor, you also said we must be careful that budget cuts don't affect the fabric of the community. The closing of Faxon would hurt the fabric of the Elmwood community. And finally, a library should be within a reasonable distance of the people who use it. I see neighborhood kids coming on bikes to Faxon after school. I know adults who walk there and depend on the use of the internet that the library provides. Faxon provides computer services and foreign language services that fill needs that are unique to this neighborhood. It is not reasonable to expect these patrons to go to the center for Bishop's Corner. So I began my talk today by asking you not to cut the proposed library budget. I hope I've made my case and I'm ending with a quote I cut out of the Hartford Courant a few months ago and kept hanging on my refrigerator. It was before I knew I'd be speaking today. This is the quote,

“Libraries will get you through times with no money better than money will get you through times with no libraries.” Thank you.

President Slifka: Thank you Mrs. Schor. To clear a few things up the Council and Town Manager have not proposed closing Faxon Library. We have gotten a few emails to that effect and I think there's a bit of confusion that occurs with lots of programs where, as you stated, in light of the gravity of the times Mr. VanWinkle and the Superintendent on the school side have listed what the cost would be and the budget impact would be of some very drastic measures but they are largely for illustrative purposes but, again, because of the gravity of the times it's enough that we have to discuss it but we have not proposed closing it and Mr. VanWinkle did not recommend that in his budget so thank you for the presentation. Also, we should point out Mr. VanWinkle has cited the Library Board's efforts in bringing in that zero budget previously. I think he mentioned it at one of our earlier meetings that you were the first department to come in with such a proposal and we do greatly appreciate that. The next speaker is Darren Hudson.

Mr. Hudson: Mr. Mayor, I am not speaking.

President Slifka: Oh, okay. Thank you Mr. Hudson. I have bad news, George. Mr. Kennedy, it's you now. There's nobody else. You wanted to go further down.

Mr. Kennedy: Bad news for you or for me?

President Slifka: For you. You wanted to go later but the whole list has been gone through.

Mr. Kennedy: You know, democracy is wonderful and coming in here there are so many, you know, sacred cows you can't gore them. It's like a ranch out there. Anyway, I'd like to pass this around. My name is George Kennedy. I live at 19 Waterside Lane. I'm President of the West Hartford Taxpayers Association. I've lived in town since 1951 and I'm a graduate of the schools. In any event, I'd like to address the Council on our concerns and what our meeting shared with us. Fortunately I'm not going to ramble. I have some prepared notes. In this economic climate, which is no secret to anybody here, we need a zero percent increase in the budget. Anything less is basically an abdication of leadership. I hate to say it but that's true and frankly we are aware, the West Hartford Taxpayer Association, that this Council has risen above so far, in trying to get this budget into perspective and get it down to zero and we appreciate that. What we're doing is saying come on, keep going. You're doing okay. You've got further to go. Since 2002 property taxes have risen over 40 percent in this town. The budget problem is not services. People want to cut services. It's not services. We all know what it is. Just look at it mathematically. It's salaries and benefits. We have too many people earning too much money. Basically the excessive salaries and benefits – these are not available to people who don't work for the town and town employees should not be shielded against this economic tsunami. It's not fair and not right. We need the Council to simply tell town employees give back say 5 percent or face layoffs and to tell the Board of Education no more money over the 2008-2009 budget. Let them sort it out. Believe me.

You could knock more than that off and they'd come up with a solution. The Board of Education frankly in our opinion is totally out of control and what they do is they come up with a budget number and they drop it on our good Mayor here and the Council and say go get the money guys. You become the nasty people. That's wrong. Put it back in their lap. They're the ones coming up with this. The point - the Board of Education budget is 58.5 percent of the total town budget. Salaries and benefits are 85 percent of the Board of Education budget or 107 million dollars and climbing. Since 2000 the Board of Education has increased spending 66.9 percent from 76 million to 123 million. What are the results of all of this? We just gave a \$40,000 raise to the new superintendent who doesn't even live in our town and doesn't recycle her money by paying our property taxes. We gave lifetime medical to the departing superintendent. The lowest test scores right now are West Hartford. In our DERG we have the lowest test scores. Farmington and Avon, it's rather interesting in terms of what they publish. I'm sure you've all see it. Connecticut Magazine's top ten high schools - Avon, Farmington, Simsbury. Gentlemen it says something about the quality of the schools. I went to these schools. These are not the schools we have any longer. The Board of Education and the education industry has perpetrated something on America across the board and you've all heard this. They literally have increased their money and at the same time our kids are now 21st in the world. It's gone down like that. I would say it does tie a bit to houses. You're right there to a degree, but this has got to stop. We're paying for a Cadillac and we're getting a Ford. Not one West Hartford school is in the top 25 Connecticut schools any longer but three of our schools that I just read you are and they're not in West Hartford. Hall and Conard, which used to be considered almost prep schools are now ranked 47 and 53 respectively and as a country, and this is President Obama's thing is to get our education up, but not just by throwing money at it. How about getting other things in place. The U.S. is now 21 in developed countries. The West Hartford brand that I heard tossed around? What a joke! It's all about the kiddies according to Dr. Sklarz. It hasn't been about the kiddies for years. It's been about salaries and benefits, period. I mean, let's put it right on the table. We have crisis times. Let's deal with it that way. We elected you folks to lead the town, not them. The Board of Education understands power completely. They have the power of the numbers and they have the power of the budget which they dump on you, so basically we all are abdicating to them. They're doing what they want. We have a budget that has a strain now and they want 25 million for a new school? Let's be a little serious here. We elected you to lead the town, not them, so let's start even getting more strong about it. But here's an idea for you. You want to think outside the box? The magnet schools - we take all 10,000 kids. We send them to magnet schools - 25 million dollars. You save 100 million right there. We could close the Board of Education. Is that outside the box enough? It's supposed to be a joke but the reality is we can't afford ourselves any longer.

The real solutions - I would like you folks to agree to explore and perhaps form a Citizen's Due Diligence Best Practice Audit Task Force. This isn't a witch hunt. You pick the people. We'll simply introduce you to the people who can train them and they'll do it for free. You have nothing to lose. Say no to any additional Project Choice kids. We already have a 35 percent minority in our schools. Bristol has said no and other towns are saying no because we can't afford it. If the state wants to give us full funding, then do it. It's that simple. And just give the Board of Education the same dollar amount

as 2008. Let them sort it out. The impact if these points aren't followed? You have in your Town Manager a rather eminent regional economist and I don't think he would disagree although he hasn't heard this. The taxes continue to rise. If they do, empty nesters and retirees are going to start leaving and they're going to have to sell at discounted prices in a bad market. Now the bottom line impact of this is if you go to a bank and you buy a bond that offers less interest than the going rate you know they discount the bond. If they offer more, they premium the bond. The point is when the houses sell less then people who couldn't move in before are going to move in and they're going to bring more kids. There's nothing wrong with kids but there's a balance. There's an equation here and if we go beyond it and tilt too far what you have is a bunch of families with young kids coming into the school system and there aren't going to be people like me to pay for them so where do you get your funds then? You're straining the system. I'm preaching to the choir. You know this. The question is, will you do anything about it? The empty nesters are now paying a bill. What happens when we lose them? Who pays? There's your situation and this is why I don't envy your choices here and I do feel a bit sorry for you but at the same time we not only elected you to lead but over time these administrations have allowed this thing to build up. It's a pyramid in the Board of Education particularly and the other unions, the benefits are out of control and that's the only way you're going to control this budget. Thank you.

President Slifka: Thank you Mr. Kennedy. That concluded our sign-up sheet. Is there anybody who did not sign up who wished to speak? Judy, you coming up?

Ms. Aaron: Good afternoon. This is Judy Aaron from 40 North Quaker Lane. I am deeply concerned about the proposal to cut full-day kindergarten from the budget. Why? I don't have any kids in the system, but I care about our school system and the kids and the families that it serves. But really what this represents to me is yet another cut in programs and services in deference to the salaries and benefits that the bargaining units in this town have negotiated. We seem forever at their mercy and they have done very little to help us. I understand fully what we are facing and more so in the face of the economic environment affecting us locally, statewide and nationwide. Many are barely hanging onto their jobs. Some families have had to absorb cuts in their family incomes and yet, with all the discussion about the budget, we're still looking at a 5.6 percent increase in the budget. Even if there is a zero percent increase in spending we are still looking at a 4 percent increase in our tax bills at least. We cannot hand this to our residents this year. Yes, I know the Mayor has come out practically begging and pleading with the Board of Education to bring a zero percent spending increase to the table but in reality it is he and you, the Town Council, that control the purse strings to the Board of Education. I've looked at the town side of the budget and I believe that our Town Manager, Ron VanWinkle, has in good faith done a very good job working with his directors to reign in spending. The fact remains that we still have a deficit to make up and have little clue as to what state funding will come to West Hartford this coming year. More needs to be done and if the truth be told, the West Hartford Taxpayer's Association has made it clear to its leadership last night that if tax bills go up they will pursue a referendum. They said you will leave them no choice because people cannot afford to pay for all of these union increases anymore, especially in this economy. The question is with the lion's share of

the budget that goes to salaries and benefits what happens is that continually we must give up services to pay for those increases in salaries and wages...benefits. Town bargaining units are receiving a 3.25 percent to 3.5 percent increase in salaries this time and there are many other perks in the budget that are bound by their contracts. That they would not help us in this difficult economic time is very unfortunate because we have been very good to them in the past. Now we are faced with cutting library hours or firehouses or pools, eliminating vacuum leaf collection in order to pay for these union increases and I say we keep the services and fire the union members instead unless they agree to some concessions or work furloughs or something. We have to work out something. I've heard that each bargaining unit says that they won't take concessions without someone else going first. How about our town directors taking the first step to lead the way? Maybe take a temporary 5-10 percent pay cut. How about Karen List refusing to take an increase in salary for her new superintendent position, or how about Superintendent Sklarz giving back some of his salary as well? Let's show some leadership and maybe the money saved can save programs like all-day kindergarten. Let's truly make this about what we can do for our children and our town. I'm so tired of paying more every year and getting less services as a sacrifice to union contracts. It's just not right and it's about time we sent the union leaders and members, especially the ones who do not live in our town and pay taxes here, a strong message. And where are our state elected officials? They seem busy enough proposing legislation other than that which would help us reform binding arbitration or release us from unfunded mandates or get us more than the 12 cents on the dollar return from the state on our taxes. They need to fight for us, especially now since we are faced with taking in double the amount of Open Choice students without appropriate and commensurate funding. We have spoken to the Mayor and the Town Manager. They feel helpless and hamstrung just like us taxpayers. They seem to understand what we are facing economically this year and next year and in the coming years. The Mayor and the Town Council and Board of Education have the power to make important budget decisions and hold the purse strings and what you need to do is send out many pink slips if the bargaining units will not help us. It's not even about keeping West Hartford affordable. It's about keeping our budget sustainable. Thank you.

President Slifka: Thank you, Judy. Again we've concluded the sign-up sheet. Is there anyone else who did not sign up who wished to speak? I'm sorry. We have two. I apologize.

Mr. Fay: Last one in, first one out. My name's Arthur Fay. I live at 18 Gloucester Lane. First of all I want to congratulate the Town Manager and the Council on the excellent job they've done up to this point. It's a real job and I know that you really have the interest of the town and concern. You're doing a good job. It's pretty tough to bring the rest into line and it don't have to go too far. I know the revenues are down and it's going to be tough but I'd like to take a couple of things and talk a little bit historically. When it comes to pools I was there when we built the last pool. We had a school population of 17,000. Now it's only 10,000 and I think the... You know, you have to take a look at which pools get the least use. You have to close one, so you close one. When it comes to the firehouses there's an old Fire Chief by the name of Moran and his philosophy was

you build a firehouse on the outskirts of town, they rush in to the center. The Jewish Community Center used to be a firehouse. I know that Mr. VanWinkle knows that but I didn't know if you knew that. That was a theory and I don't think we need the one on Prospect Avenue. I know the fire department will give you a lot of grief but take a little courage in that one. Believe me. I've been there when they gave me grief. The other thing I think that the board should look at is school transportation. You have to pick up the children and bring them to school. However, we have a lot of schools around town. It doesn't make sense that you have to meet at every corner in town. I think those young children who are healthy enough and old enough could walk to a school or at certain gathering points. You certainly could reduce the cost of transportation if you did that. Other than that I think you're doing a great job at this point and I wish you luck. Thank you.

President Slifka: Thank you, Mr. Fay. Minou?

Mr. Fay: One more thing.

President Slifka: Oh, sure.

Mr. Fay: I hope you don't cut the kindergarten.

President Slifka: Thank you.

Ms. Roufail: Good afternoon. My name is Minou Roufail, 11 Seymour Avenue. I hadn't intended to comment today so forgive me if I'm a bit incoherent. I did want to contest some of the remarks that I heard earlier and that echoed an article that I read in the West Hartford News by Mr. Kennedy and Ms. Aaron. I found it to be extraordinary, particularly in its willful disregard of the fact that education is a foundation of this town. The notion... And it was indeed a flattering letter to the Mayor and Town Council and a vilification of the Board of Education, but to suggest that the Board of Education is running the town into the ground is absurd. The board is safeguarding, and I would say very conscientiously, what I consider the fundamental feature of life in West Hartford, and that is the quality of the education. The idea that families who come to this town for the schools are not paying taxes to support the system is ludicrous. In fact, if the school system is eroded those families may well leave. A number of things were said and I certainly won't be able to respond to them all. Oh, town employees should not be exempt from the economic tsunami. Many people have already lost their jobs. They're not exempt. They're out of work. And the notion that the public sector and the private sector are apples to apples is simply not true. Thank goodness as we have seen with what the private sector has wreaked upon the country. Dr. List's salary – Dr. List was promoted to run a massive organization. Why shouldn't she get an increase in salary? That's absurd. Oh yes, the ongoing lament about test scores in our district. Well, this is routinely brought out as a kind of cudgel against the Board of Education however there's never any acknowledgement of the shifting conditions that the Board is trying to address. There is never any offer of thoughtful solutions to how West Hartford should best resolve its challenges. Rather there is an ongoing drum beat and relentless criticism against these

volunteers on the Board of Education for in all good conscience trying to find solutions. I whole-heartedly object to it. In addition, I too am a taxpayer and I am aware of other taxpayers in the part of town by the way that was seriously affected by re-val., just clobbered by re-val. Our assessments went sky-high and we're taxpayers too and yet I and others are willing to pay a tax hike to preserve the quality of life and education in West Hartford. Thank you very much.

President Slifka: Thank you Minou. Okay. Again we have concluded the sign-up sheet. Is there anyone else who did not sign up who wishes to speak? Okay, if not just one thing in closing. My colleague, Dr. Thornberry, has reminded me that amongst the other things we wanted to clear up there was a... I mentioned earlier about a proposal to close Senior Centers. There is no proposal to close either of the two Senior Centers. Again, it is something presented as an option. We know what the cost would be but the Council has not proposed that, nor has Mr. VanWinkle recommended it as part of the budget but it is in there for informational purposes. Okay, thank you all for being here. We hope to see you again next Thursday at 7:00.

The Public Hearing adjourned at 2:38 p.m.

Essie S. Labrot
Town Clerk/Council Clerk

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