

MINUTES OF TOWN COUNCIL PUBLIC HEARING ON PROPOSED 1997-1998
FISCAL YEAR BUDGET

March 26, 1997 Town Hall Auditorium 1344

President Nan Glass called the hearing to order at 7:20 p.m.

Present were Councilors Rob Bouvier, Kevin Connors, Liz Gillette, Nan Glass, Bernard Jacques, Sandy Klebanoff, Patrick McCabe, Madeline McKernan and Alfred Turco.

President Glass: Before we start I want to welcome you all here and apologize for being a little late but we had an Education Liaison Committee meeting and also a meeting with the members of the Board of Education to discuss their budget and that is a meeting that is required by State statute and I see Mrs. Rion, Nancy Rion the Chairman of the Board of Education is still with us and thank you, Nancy. I think just had a productive two hours and ten minutes of conversation with the Board. Now we are here to listen to you. We would ask you to be as brief as possible. I know we have a lot of people here tonight we would like to hear from. Our first speaker to sign up is Joseph Arbuglio. If you would come up to the podium and give us your name and address for the record.

Mr. Arbuglio: Thank you, Madam Mayor. My name is Joseph Arbuglio. I reside at 31 Grassmere Avenue. Also in the speech I am presenting here tonight is my brother Francis Arbuglio. We both made this speech.

Good evening, Madam Mayor, good evening Council members, good evening West Hartford residents assembled here tonight. The title of our speech is the tax lottery of West Hartford. I guess we all should line up with our check books in hand with the shocking news of our Town budget of \$129.4 million. I guess everyone who lives in this town is a winner. Look what you will receive for customer service. I say to residents of this town pay up or sell out if you cannot afford the Town of West Hartford taxes and become a winner sharing the services with your town residents.

The Webster Dictionary states the meaning of the word tax, quote, "a charge, burden imposed by authority. A charge laid upon persons or property for public purposes, a forced contribution of wealth to meet the public need". Mr. Barry Feldman our Town Manager quotes in his statement in the Hartford Courant on March 12th, 1997, "the budget tries to reflect what we have heard from our residents". I say the working residents of this town who have families see many expenses today in their paychecks; the so-called medical expense deduction from their health insurance, the deduction for State income tax, many companies offer no dental

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insurance any longer. This is out of pocket expenses that burden every family today in the working place and also counting into factor are other bills of running a household today.

I say this town has a lot of senior citizens who are on fixed incomes, also many are paying the price of supplemental insurance to cover their health needs. This town offers them a tax break on seniors who are on fixed incomes. With this new tax coming into being that will cut back what dollars they will receive from this program. I say to the Town Council, people in every surrounding town want a safe community to live in today but many residents of this town I say have spent dollars to install security alarm systems to guard their house. There is a monthly expense to keep the so-called intruders out but this town like our surrounding towns charges the residents a fine if there are so many calls.

If our town spends \$1 million a year on almost every residential street in West Hartford for street lights, a service that costs this town a year, why do people install security alarm systems in their house? This is an added expense to homeowners. Not too long ago a doctor and his wife were murdered in this town, what did lights do for them?

The Hartford Courant Town News section publishes almost daily that the West Hartford police news shows crime strikes here daily, day or night on our streets. Our town budget overall should be cut back. My brother and I say the Town Council elected here by the residents of this town should not let this happen to its residents or senior citizens. This is a heavy burden and is unfair.

Our refuse service with Sanitary Services who has a contract with this town does not do a very good job compared to our surrounding towns whose residents pay separate from their taxes. There have been many complaints against this company for not picking up the leaves and many other problems. If this company cannot fulfill its contract with this town, they should reimburse the town the dollars at the end of the year. Here is a savings to look into. Also cut back all overtime in every department in this town. Here is another savings. If we do not change our taxes here in our town houses in this town for sale will not sell unless you have the money to support the taxes levied upon you.

We say to the Town Council please vote on a fair tax package. I thank you for this time.

President Glass: Thank you. The next person to sign up is Anna Oshana:

Ms. Oshana: My name is Anna Oshana and I live at 143 Hampton Avenue. Good evening, Madam Mayor and Town Council members and residents of West Hartford assembled here tonight. My topic is the unfair tax budget. I'm a senior citizen. I have lived in West Hartford a good many years. I am here tonight to speak against the increase in taxes levied against me and my fellow senior citizens. I am on a fixed income and I do pay out of my pocket expenses on my health insurance, the difference that the coverage will not cover every time I go for medical attention.

Since I do not have any more dental coverage because the company I retired from has dropped the coverage when I became retired I take advantage of the Town of West Hartford's tax break every year, every other year, I'm sorry. Like many fellow seniors do this is a blessing but with the new taxes coming into being this will be a burden for me and all the other senior citizens because this will mean a cut back on what will we receive.

When we were having a debate on Home Depot and BJ's and the Town Council stated that when they came into being our town's taxes would be reduced for everyone. I guess there is no truth in this statement anymore. I do have a security alarm system protecting my house and I have to pay a monthly expense on this. I say that \$1 million we spend on our street lights a year do little for me in protecting my house from break-ins and what guarantees do I have like other residents of this town that street lights will do the same protection against crime that is why people put more trust in security alarm systems.

Our town budget overall should be cut back. You should not let this happen. This is a heavy burden on everyone who lives in this town. I say to the Town Council please do your job. The people of this town elected you. Please support a fair tax package for our town. I thank you for the time.

President Glass: Thank you very much. Our next speaker is Michael Wilder.

Mr. Wilder: I am Michael Wilder of 11 Fernwood Road and I'm here today speaking as Chairman of the Board of the West Hartford Library. I'm here to thank you for your support in the past and to give you a few comments looking backwards as to what last year was like and a little bit about next year.

Last year we made significant improvements in the Faxon Branch and we went to our second phase to improve our materials collection, improved our foreign languages collection, introduced the Internet at all three branches, computer equipment was improved. We moved forward with CD

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Rom's and we have now reached the level where West Hartford has the second largest circulation in the State behind only Greenwich. Your support in the past has been significant in getting us to the high level of library services that we have.

We have many people here today who have come to support the Library request and perhaps people who are here for the Libraries would stand up just to show some support that has come out today. Without them we wouldn't have as many people here to hear it. Thank you very much.

President Glass: Thank you.

Mr. Wilder: I want to observe something you may not be aware of that this coming year is the 100th anniversary of the Library, 100th birthday here. The budget request that we have will allow us to continue to improve our services and we are going to have a centennial celebration this fall. I hope you will all join us. Our budget request is for a 4.8 percent increase with no additional full time staff requested.

What are the key themes in the budget request? Improving the materials collection. This is a third phase. I use materials widely. We used to think of the Library as a place for books. There are so many different things in the Library today, CD rom's, videos. Just a marvelous collection of things. We have gotten many of them accessible to people at home through modems as more and more of our residents use this increased technology available to them.

We are going to maintain our current services with the present staff. One of the things we are doing in terms of technology for next year is that we are going to complete the connection to the branches through the Town network and the Library network. We do have a request for a part time support for technology. Boy, as someone who lives with that in the business world I can tell you that you can't have technology without support and it is really significant to us so we are addressing that with some part time technical assistance.

We are going to emphasize branch services. You know that the handicap access at Faxon is almost finished. I'm not sure the world knows it but Saturday, May 17th at 10 a.m. will be the grand opening. I hope you will all join us for our celebration at that time as we recognize a point of community pride for Elmwood.

Bishops Corner where we really began an outreach program last year is called for an improvement in our budget, some flat wall displays and other activities to improve what is

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going on and a major focus on our Bishops Corner area.

One of the areas we think that is really necessary and is in our budget is improving security for Library materials. We really do need a way to manage help people don't take materials out inappropriately. We have an intention to increase our outreach programs although at the moment there is nothing significant in the budget but we do hope to maintain that as an important objective. Thank you for your time and attention and your support.

President Glass: Thank you very much. Joseph Donahue.

Mr. Donahue: Joseph Donahue, Royal Oak Drive. Members of the Council, I have the highest respect for the Town Manager and his staff but I think you need to carefully examine their budget requests. In 1994-95 the Town side of the budget requested almost \$2 million more than it actually spent based on audited numbers. In 1995-96 it requested over \$2 million more than it actually spent based on audited numbers. I don't know yet how much the surplus will be for 96-97 but it probably will be at least \$1 million and the Town budget should be reduced by that amount to start.

I made the same comments last night regarding the School Board. Their requests are usually at least \$1 million more than they actually spent for the particular year so they could cut \$1 million off the top. I have pointed out to the School Board where they should be able to operate with no increase and the Town should do the same.

Some areas that need further review is the eleven percent increase in the overtime account. Also, I question the need to refurbish all the vehicles used in the drug busts. Do we really need seven vehicles for undercover work? At two per vehicle I have trouble believing that we need fourteen detectives around the clock doing undercover work. The Public Works is looking for vehicles. Maybe they should get some of the drug bust vehicles.

A thirteen percent increase in vehicle maintenance when we are buying new vehicles seems strange. Please review the entire vehicle needs for the town.

I'm not going to go through all of the budget items. I expect you to do that. I totally disagree with those who think the Council should not get involved with a \$129 million budget, that your job is to sit there and come up with more policy decisions that require more spending. I know you deal with a variety of time consuming subjects and I appreciate that but I think the budget deserves some serious detailed review during the relatively short time it is on the table.

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If the School Board does not significantly reduce or eliminate its budget increase request then you must do it for them. It is not enough for you to sit there and say we can't interfere with the School Board. By requiring them to manage what they have, you are not interfering, you are helping them and the taxpayers.

For those less concerned with budgets and more concerned with politics let me point out that at this time, March and April, residents are reminded of the taxes they will have to pay. In three short months in July they will again be reminded when they pay their taxes. In four short months later in November they will vote. I think the taxpayers will remember in November. That is not a threatening statement, it points out some political realities for those that are politically inclined.

Finally, I am concerned about the capital budget. I pointed out nearly \$4 million in savings with the school renovations from Project 21. I understand there is an Oversight Committee looking at the projects but I do not have much hope for cost containment. When like minded people get together to spend other people's money they usually come up with more ways to spend rather than save. I don't know why the schools need to overbuild. The Council must get involved with capital spending and ask some serious questions. Thank you.

President Glass: Thank you. Our next speaker is Fern Howden.

Ms. Howden: My name is Fern Howden and I live at 41 Colonial Street and I'm off the cuff because I wasn't prepared to speak but it has never been a problem before. The last time I spoke at a public meeting was for Cornerstone Pool and I think that was like five years ago and we got the money to expand that so I figure I'm on a roll and five years later I am coming back and I would like to talk about the Library tonight.

I think I have a right to talk about the Library and the budget because I was one of those volunteers who went door to door knocking on people's doors to be asking for money for the Library for the handicapped accessibility and I also went to businesses. I had people who are senior citizens and they told me my husband is in a nursing home and he has Alzheimer's and I can't give the \$10.73, could I give \$1.00 to you and I said sure. I had a lady, believe it or not, who said ask the Town Council for the money and shut the door in my face. I have seen it all.

The reason I think that the Library budget should be, not be cut is it is one of the services in town that every age group is able to make available from the youngest child,

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from story time to borrowing toys. The school children, I think part of the reason that the schools are such excellent schools in West Hartford is because the Library is available to the children and senior citizens can go and read the paper, meet their friends and use the computers. Not everybody in town, believe it or not, has their own computers in their home. The Library has this and it is accessible to everybody and I just found out that I can get on the Internet and that's wonderful. I learned how to do that Monday night right at my Faxon Library.

They have travel logs. They have programs how to raise your children and it is available to everybody and I think it is something that when you are a senior citizen and you say well my kids are out of school and I don't want to pay any money into the school budget or I'm not a senior citizen and I don't really care if the senior centers get money for their budget. I think the Library is open and available to all ages of Town citizens and I think it is user friendly and I would like to keep the budget at least the way it is and please not to make any cuts. Thank you.

President Glass: Thank you. Wendell Stephenson.

Mr. Stephenson: My name is Wendell Stephenson. I live at 45 Blue Ridge Lane. My remarks will be brief. My concern is that over recent years the members of the Town Council seem to have considered something other than zero base budgeting when they consider the Town Manager's budget. Most of us in our own lives have to start from point zero and I'm concerned that in recent years as I indicate the figure of three percent seems to be almost a zero figure. I feel that all of the areas which the Town Manager has recommended should be looked at with the idea that no more than a minimum amount be increased. Obviously different departments need different kinds of approaches but I feel again that the members of the Town Council should consider individually to start from base one, from zero and then build on what you need to based on the needs of the town. Thanks very much.

President Glass: Is there anyone else?

Ms. Aron: Good evening. My name is Judy Aron and I live at 40 North Quaker Lane and I'm also going to be speaking off the cuff I would like to thank the Board for having us here this evening. What I want to make a comment about is the Library budget. The Library is, I think, one of the jewels in the West Hartford crown. It is a tremendous resource. I don't believe that we should cut anything from this budget for the Library. We are a family who home schools and we use the Library extensively. The resources that the Library offers are just wonderful. Between the computers that they have there, the books, the tapes, the programs, it is just a

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top notch operation there and I do thank Mr. Wilder for managing such a wonderful place. We go there practically every day and it is a great place and I really hope that you continue support for the Library and keep the budget as it is or make more, have more money allocated to it. Thank you very much.

President Glass: Is there anyone who wishes to address the Council?

Mr. Lauwers: Hi, my name is Jim Lauwers and I live at 5 Cherryfield Drive. It just came to my mind. No one, well not many people ask the kids what they think and I have observed a few things. I agree the snow plow people and the leaf sucking people are not doing a good job. I don't know why, I read in the paper, I don't know when it was, that someone said that they were doing a good job. I don't know why because we don't get our leaves picked up until like the middle of winter. They don't do a good job plowing the snow.

Also, I go to a public school, and I don't know why we have to pay taxes for, I mean I go to a private school and I don't know why we have to pay taxes for the public school because I don't really use it. I mean the other taxes I agree with and I guess that's it.

President Glass: Mr. Bigelow.

Mr. Bigelow: Good evening. Peter Bigelow from 10 Colton Road. Madam Mayor, Town Manager and members of the Town Council, citizens of West Hartford. I have lived in this town for twenty nine years now and I have never spoken at a public hearing. It is small enough tonight so that I'm not as intimidated as usual. Let me point out initially in specific compliment of Mr. Feldman that the leaf collection process last year was greatly improved and I would like to compliment him on that service.

Let me also point out that as far as the services in this town are concerned I think they are marvelous. There is no question in my mind that we need to pay for those services and I'm not one that sits here to say that we can get more for less or there is absolutely a way that we can cut our taxes. The only thing I can say is that I agree with a comment that was made earlier this evening and that is that we seem to start with a built in proposition that taxes should increase by something like two or three percent and people can handle that, anything less than that is not likely to occur and anything more than that is certainly going to be unpalatable. I think any increase at this point in time is unpalatable to the citizens of West Hartford on average.

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I think that there are people that can pay more. There is no question about it. From the standpoint of my personal circumstances I can pay an increase in taxes and I can handle it but there are plenty of people that I associate with and affiliate with in town who are having difficulty in that regard, with increasing difficulty as we look to the senior citizens in this town.

I think it is time that we adopt a process in this town whereby we establish a bare minimum, if that is zero base budgeting, that is what we should do and what we should try to do is to validate each and every increase and expense from that bottom line number. I'm not here to knock the Library. I think it is very important that we have Internet access and computers and all the rest and have a Library that is second to none or second only to Greenwich. I think that is great but we have to look at all the services we provide relative to the ability of town to pay and I think that the ability of the town to pay has been stretched to a point where it cannot really be stretched any further and the sentiment was made earlier today by Mr. Donahue that the people will remember in November. I think that the time has come when people are going to pay attention to what this Town Council does in terms of their budget dealings and I would urge you in the strongest possible terms to attempt seriously to get down to zero. If it can't be done please justify precisely why it can't be done. If it can be done, you will find an awful lot of people will compliment for your efforts. Thank you very much.

President Glass: Thank you. We do have two other public hearings on the budget. They are on Wednesday, April 2, 1997 at 3:00 p.m. in the Council Chambers and April 3rd in the Auditorium at 7:00 p.m. Any further comment? If not I will adjourn this public hearing.

The hearing adjourned at 7:47 p.m.

Norma W. Cronin
Town Clerk/Council Clerk