

Annual Town Budget Meeting Minutes 05/05/2014  
Printer-Friendly Version

2014 Annual Town Budget Meeting Minutes  
May 5, 2014

Town Council Chairman Mark W. Zacchio called the Annual Town Budget Meeting to order at 7:00 pm in the Avon Senior Center Community Room. He led the audience in the Pledge of Allegiance.

The first order of business was to call for nominations for a Moderator.

On a motion made by Peggy Roell and duly seconded by Bill Stokesbury, it was unanimously voted to elect Diane S. Hornaday as Moderator of the Annual Budget Meeting.

The Moderator, Diane S. Hornaday, welcomed all that came tonight. She reviewed the order of events for the evening and reminded the assembly that no decision will be made this evening, but the meeting will be adjourned to referendum to be held on May 14th. She requested the Town Clerk to come forward and read the call of the Town Meeting. The Clerk read the following notice:

LEGAL NOTICE

TOWN OF AVON

ANNUAL BUDGET MEETING

The Annual Budget meeting of the electors and citizens qualified to vote in Town Meetings of the Town of Avon, Connecticut will be held at the Avon Senior Center, 635 West Avon Road, in the Town of Avon, Connecticut on Monday, May 5, 2014 at 7:00 p.m. for the following purpose:

To receive and consider a resolution for the adoption of the 2014/2015 Annual Budget in the amount of \$83,887,095.00 as recommended by the Board of Finance, for the fiscal year commencing July 1, 2014.

Pursuant to Section 9.4.1 of the Avon Town Charter, the Annual Budget Meeting will be adjourned to a referendum vote on the aforesaid recommended budget to be held on Wednesday, May 14, 2014, between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Electors and persons who are not electors but who are qualified to vote at town meetings will vote at the Avon Senior Center, 635 West Avon Road, Avon, Connecticut.

Absentee ballots are available at the Town Clerk's Office in the Town Hall.

The aforesaid question will be placed on paper ballots under the following heading:

"Shall the Annual Town Budget in the amount of \$83,887,095.00 as recommended by the Board of Finance, for the fiscal year commencing July 1, 2014 be approved?"

Voters approving the proposed question will vote "Yes" and those opposing the proposed question will vote "No".

Dated at Avon, Connecticut, this 11th day of April, 2014.

The following is a summary of the budget showing estimated revenues by major sources and recommended appropriations by major sources.

---

Thomas F. Harrison, Chairman  
Board of Finance

Tom Harrison, chairman of the Board of Finance, stated he is going to read then move the following resolution:

"Shall the Annual Town Budget in the amount of \$83,887,095.00 as recommended by the Board of Finance for the fiscal year commencing July 1, 2014 be approved?"

Mr. Harrison moved the adoption of this motion.

Diane Hornaday called for a second to the motion. It was seconded by Peggy Roell, and Tom Harrison

was called upon to speak.

Mr. Harrison led the audience through a PowerPoint presentation. He described the role of the Board of Finance under the Town Charter. The Council and the Board of Education develop their budget requests and submit them to the Board of Finance. We hold a Public Hearing and following that the Board of Finance, under the Charter, has the right to make adjustments in the requested budgets. At the end of that process, we establish the recommended budget and that is what is before us tonight. This year, as was the case last year, we did not make any adjustments to the budget requests. There are factors the Board takes into consideration during the decision making process. A list of the overall increases and decreases to last year's budget resulted in a net spending increase of 2.6% or \$83,877,095. The required mill rate to support this budget is 28.32, up 2 mills from the current fiscal year. Slide 5 explains the differences we had as a result of the revaluation, it happens to us once every five years. The current mill rate, 26.32, applied to the old Grand List raised \$70,769,917. We used that \$70.7 million figure as the base point to judge comparisons of any additional spending requests. The revaluation produced a significantly lower Grand List. To raise the same \$70.7 million revenue the mill rate was revised to 27.65. Using the adjusted mill rate to get the numbers we need to support the budget requests of \$72.4 million the requested mill rate is 28.32. This is about 86% of our revenue source; the other 13% comes from non-property tax revenue such as grants from the state or federal government, fees, school passes and dog license fees. A slide showed a summary of categories that make up the total spending request of \$83.8 million, a spending increase of \$2.1 million or 2.6% of the current fiscal budget. The trends in the percentage of the mill rate increases reflected in 2009 was in the middle of the economic down turn and was the lowest percentage increase. 2010 was the largest increase and since then there has been a steady trend in the 2.5% range. The \$83,887,095 spending level is what you will be asked to vote on and I hope you will support it. Under the Charter if the voter turnout for the budget referendum is not 9%, then the budget is deemed automatically approved regardless of what the vote might have been. Last year the turnout was 8.9%, yes votes prevailed anyway by about two thirds. I would like to see a good turnout; last year was a disgraceful turnout for a town like Avon. Please come out to vote and get your friends and family out to vote for these very important budget decisions.

The moderator thanked Mr. Harrison for his comments and then called upon the Chairman of the Town Council, Mark Zacchio to present the Council's request.

Mr. Zacchio introduced Council members that were present, Heather McGuire, David Pena, Bill Stokesbury and relayed regrets from Doug Evans. As always, our mission is to provide quality services at a reasonable cost to all citizens. We think this budget addresses the needs of our community for the next fiscal year. This budget, from a Town operating side, represents 3.08% increase over last year's budget or \$642,757. In all we approached the budget in a hierarchy of what can we fund that helps public safety, what can we fund that address social service needs and what do we fund to address infrastructure needs throughout the town. The 3.08% takes care of our labor pool, both current and retired employees. Secondly from our police perspective we have accelerated a hiring schedule for three patrol officers. We are in the final stages now of hiring and we expect to have them on the road earlier in the year than our budget anticipated. We are fully funding an additional day at the Senior Center; previously the Senior Center has only been open four days a week. This is important to our budget because it takes our part-time employee to full-time position. Sewer budget is up 6.44%. This does not get paid through the mill rate; it is fully covered by the sewer users in town. The debt service is down 5.48% reflecting our reduction in long term debt. The excess capacity has been shifted to the CIP budget. This is our infrastructure, road projects, any kind of building maintenance that needs to be done, roofing projects, equipment needs for the Fire Department, Police Department, Board of Education as well as the Highway Department. We have allocated \$790,000 for our roadways. The paving program is based on oil prices, as prices go up and down, so does the amount of paving we are able to accomplish each year. One of the more difficult issues this year will be to get the labor help to be able to do the roadways. We don't own the equipment to do the major repairs. We depend on some

of the larger State contractors to do the major road paving. As other communities are faced with the same issues from a hard winter, we are diligently securing contracts so we know that we will have the capacity to get the work done this year. \$520,000 is requested for Department of Public Work equipment. \$400,000 is requested for Fire Department apparatus. A new fire truck had not been purchased since 2001. Roaring Brook School is scheduled for flooring replacement, some of the flooring is from the 1970's and is worn out. Ceiling tiles are worn out. There is \$282,000 allocated for these repairs. The good news is some of the bids are coming back lower than forecast, so Mr. Mala is working to schedule additional repairs. At the town garage, the underground storage tanks have been removed and replaced by above ground tanks. The budgeted amount completes this project. There are several other projects included in the list and we are especially happy to be able to address all of these items.

I do want to take this opportunity to talk about the tax relief program we have in Avon. We encourage people to come forward and talk with Harry DerAsadourian, our Assessor, or anyone in Brandon Robertson's office, our Town Manager, about the program and to apply for it. Anyone 65 years or older, disabled, or income less than \$45,000 per year or less is eligible. The benefit range is currently \$430 - \$2160 per person. Those dollars or \$258,460 is shifted to the rest of the taxpayers in town. The State of Connecticut allows for \$41,600 as an income cap, in Avon we are at \$45,000. We currently have 240 residents who take advantage of this program.

One last comment, we do have a notification process. You can sign up with your e-mail account on the town's website and we will send you automatic updates on town news. It has been a successful method for us to communicate.

The moderator thanked Mr. Zacchio and called upon Ms. Roell, Chairperson of the Board of Education, to comment. She introduced Gary Mala, Superintendent of Schools, to give a summary of the budget. Mr. Mala welcomed everyone and recognized Peggy Roell, Chairman and Kathy Zirolli, Vice-Chairman of the Board of Education. He began by extending a sincere thanks and appreciation to the Board of Finance for their review of the Board of Education's proposed budget and for their support in moving it forward. He also thanked members of the Town Council that were present for advancing a CIP budget as it relates to schools. The foundation of this budget is a mission statement, a statement of beliefs that you may have reviewed prior to this evening. I want to jump right into the goals of the budget request as it stands. The goals were to achieve the mission as stated in the District's strategic plan that is, and continues to be available on the school website and to support the implementation of the revised curricula aligned with the Common Core State Standards particularly in the areas of English, Language Arts and Mathematics. It also supports the curricula in Science and Social Studies for Pre-K-12. This budget maintains a commitment to professional development for all staff categories. It incrementally broadens the offerings available at all schools. It maintains existing class sizes at or around the totals that have been in place in Avon historically. It maintains a commitment to the Open Choice program. It aggressively incorporates recommendations from third party reviewers in all the major District operation areas, and it does advance the shared service model both at a local and regional level. It meets the contractual obligations that we have with our labor associations without adversely impacting programs. It meets our non-discretionary costs without adversely impacting those same programs or any advancement included in the strategic plan. It increases World Language offerings Kindergarten through Grade 12. It maintains a support system for teacher leadership particularly in the form of Department Coordinators in Grades 7-12. It adds to the program of studies at Avon High School and it supports the activities associated with further developing and maintaining positive school climate and cultures for our children to be educated in. It continues to meet the responsibility of operating during uncertain economic times that we continue to endure. The strategies used to prepare this budget are very simple. One, it's the oldest form of budgeting known to mankind, zero based budgeting, we start at zero and move forward to what is needed and not necessarily what all people want. It maintains competitive negotiations with vendors and contractors to secure the most reasonable

pricing we can for the varied products and services that we secure in our operating budget. We continue to utilize a very unique procurement process to secure technology supplies and equipment in all schools, and we've worked to identify opportunities, specific opportunities, for local and regional shared services that you'll hear about in the coming months. It did support commissioning those third party reviews that I did mention before. For many of you, you may know the Board of Education embarked upon a very aggressive energy conservation program. It was really all about changing people's behavior not investing in mechanical changes and to date it has realized cost avoidance of over \$1,500,000. We did secure competitive pricing for both regular and special education transportation as evidenced by the new contract offered a new vendor to provide those same services here in Avon next year. We have designed and developed regionally based programming for two special education programs with our neighboring school districts that are scheduled to commence in the fall of 2014. We continue to explore and secure alternative resources to offset the continued operating costs for the school district. We used a three pronged approach to come up with the proposed budget before you, and again, it's very simple. We reduced from requests that we received in excess of \$1,000,000. We re-appropriated some \$250,000 that were already approved and being used for something else. We shifted the use of those same dollars to realize other things, to make it happen within this budget. Last, but certainly not least, we looked at requests with a very unique eye on making sure that we could rationalize each and every expenditure and make a request that we believe to be fair and equitable to balance the needs of children as well as the burden on the local taxpayer. The next slide shows that the same enrollment and class size information that I referenced before. You'll notice that there aren't any great variances in the next year, that's always subject to change as people move into Avon and then exit Avon at different points in time. This budget supports full time equivalent positions of approximately 474 and on the next slide you'll see a total proposed budget for 2014/2015 supports fewer positions at 467. This is the aggregate of both certified and non-certified personnel. The next slide shows the gross budget table. When we calculate the gross budget we put all of the budget in there; General Fund, Cafeteria Operation, Facility Use and State & Federal Grants as Tom referenced in his earlier presentation. The bottom line is that it is how the gross number is arrived at and then we back out the non-local property tax revenue to realize the difference that is reflected on the next slide. A difference in dollars between the 2013 and 2014 budget is \$1,324,174. The next slide shows the current net per pupil expenditures this is a calculation that is completed by the State Department of Education, and it excludes debt service payment and transportation. It's commonly known as the equalizer number. If you want to compare District to District, a number of folks have asked us to do this periodically, and our position is maintained in the same location as it has been in the past. The details of this proposed budget, it manages significant increases in and out of District tuition and those are associated with Magnet tuitions as well as Special Education tuitions. It continues to respond to the State mandate to implement a revised evaluation system for all certified staff, prepare for the next generation of state-wide standardized assessments, and for those parents in the audience, we are in the process of administering those new state-wide assessments as we speak. It implements and manages professional development requirements for all staff as I referenced before and it implements the curriculum revision necessary to align with the Common Core State Standards as adopted by Connecticut and some 41 other States. One note in the detail, the capacity to realize efficiency in any budget decreases over time. You can only save so much given a period of time, and I'll reference the aggressive energy conservation program. While it's impressive that we have been able to have cost avoidance of some \$1,500,000; it's impossible to continue to realize that \$1,500,000 over the same time period, but we are committed to continuing to work to find areas to become more efficient on a daily basis. The details of the budget are exactly as they have been, it is a labor intensive budget as you know. 95% of the proposed budget is going to what we define as non-discretionary expenses. Those include salary, benefits, transportation, tuitions, utilities and those contracted services that we must have in place. That leaves the remaining 5% where there is some flexibility. Of that same amount 80.6% goes to salary and

providing benefits for the staff complement as referenced for the upcoming year. Of the total amount, 36.7% is associated with meeting those same salary obligations; again, this is the percentage of dollar difference between the two years and also 24.9% is to manage those new tuitions that I referenced before. The next slide is simply a chart depicting exactly what I have just described; you can see these are the drivers of this budget request, again primarily driven by salary and benefits. The next slide shows the major areas that are included in the \$1,324,174 proposed increase. I'll end by showing you the list of items that are included in this budget; to answer the question "What does this budget achieve?". I won't go down and read each one of those, you have a presentation in front of you. But it meets exactly what I stated in the beginning, it allows for program expansion and a responsible budget proposal. I am pleased on behalf of the Board to present this for your consideration; our commitments have not changed, for the past number of years. We enjoy and appreciate having the working relationship among all three boards that we do today. Thank you very much.

The moderator thanked the boards and asked if there were any other town officials who wished to comment. There were none. She stated that the audience has heard the recommendations and requests. Instructions were given on who may comment from the public. You must be either a registered voter in the town of Avon or own taxable property that is assessed for \$1000 of value. The moderator opened the meeting to comments and questions about the budget as presented. There will be a two minute limit.

Barbara Shuckra, 78 Deepwood Drive

I have asked this question for several years in a row. Mr. Mala said he would take a look at the positions of all the teachers as they would in industry; a Kindergarten teacher gets her Doctorate degree and immediately gets a great boost in her salary. That doesn't happen in industry, you have a job description and you stay at that salary level until you get more responsibility. Another thing I have a question on is why is it that we are sending so many children outside of Avon schools. Magnet schools, you name it, what is wrong with our education? It's a public school education. Parents should pay for private school at their own expense. I want to address an issue about the Town, you have had \$45,000 as the maximum allowable income before you even entertain the thought of giving somebody tax relief. The IRS a long time ago has given up and increased that amount. There are people in town, a lot of older people who are going into their principal, myself included, because of the increases in the taxes. We didn't get help getting any of our roads done, we don't get help getting other services, but the teachers do and why Chinese? Why Latin? Why not Spanish?

Mr. Mala responded that teacher increases are driven by a collective bargaining agreement which is negotiated between a subcommittee of the Board of Education, ultimately approve by the full Board, and the organized labor union. I don't unilaterally control that conversation or stipends or advanced degrees, they are all subject to collective bargaining.

Barbara Shuckra: Why can't we say "I'm giving you \$50,000,000 – you work it out". Teachers want more money; we don't have the money for you. That's how our budgets get done at home, in industry.

Mr. Mala responded that he shares her frustration. He can only repeat that it is subject to collective bargaining and that is part of what our State requires. There is nothing wrong with education in Avon. Frankly it's among the finest systems that you'll see. We have students that choose, their families choose, to exercise the right that they have pursuant to Connecticut law to pursue enrollment in a magnet school. We can't stop that. The law requires us to pay the tuition if they choose that as an option. There are other students who we do pay a tuition for where they are categorized as disabled learners and when we can no longer meet their unique needs of 80% for any program option in District. We work diligently, and that's my reference to shared regional services, so we won't have to send them out, we are working to keep them in, but there are some students who require types of services that we are ill equipped to provide. As a public education institution we are responsible for all of the children that move to Avon regardless of what their need might be. Why Chinese, and you also said why not Spanish. We put Spanish in this particular budget; the community was in support of that. We have it in

place for K-12. I have been asked that very question many times by telephone and I link it to what's the research that rationalized that request for this year by citing the projected demographics of our country. Number two, Spanish is the most frequently studied language at the college and university level. We felt we had to advance world languages at younger ages because the research indicates that's the optimum time for them to grasp that. Chinese is number two on Bloomberg's list of the most frequently used languages in the business community. French is number one, but Chinese is number two and that's the logic behind offering Chinese. What I have not been clear about in this presentation, and I have in some others, is that we have a very unique opportunity. We were able to establish the study of the Chinese language and culture at a very modest expense because of the relationship we have with Central Connecticut State University. They are paying a majority of the cost associated with bringing Chinese to Avon with no expectation in return and no timeframe for ending. I'm not one to recommend to a Board of Education that we establish something that we can't sustain over time and I refer to that as creating a funding crisis. So this is a long term relationship that we have a very unique opportunity to bring here.

The moderator asked that questions be addressed to the Chair and that we not get involved in dialog. If it is a form of follow up question then she asks that the question be held to all others have the opportunity to ask a question. She asked for Mr. Zacchio to address the tax question.

Mark Zacchio: We as a Council look at our thresholds each year prior to the budget cycle. That threshold is indexed to this budget, so it doesn't stay static it keeps pace with what the budgets are doing. We've asked the assessor on several occasions during those times to look at what increments might we raise the threshold and how many more people would it capture. Exceeding even some of the numbers that we see in surrounding communities, didn't capture, the last time we looked at it, enough people to make it worth moving the threshold up. We didn't talk about the other program. There are two programs available to us in Connecticut. The Circuit Breaker program, which is the program we have in place and most communities choose to have, and there's a Freeze program which essentially would freeze your taxes at the amount you pay the year in which we would invoke it. The hitch is it also then sets a lien on your home. That lien pays for the taxes plus interest at the time of your estate. So most people in Connecticut choose not to go down that route and don't like that program for that very reason and choose the Circuit Breaker program. But we will continue each year prior to the budget season, look at our thresholds and whether or not a significant increase captures a significant amount of people, it just hasn't in the past enough to raise it.

The moderator calls on the next speaker.

Tom Keene, 19 Hillsboro Lane

I have been a Avon resident for 16 years and I live over in the Carriage Club neighborhood. As a result of where I live I travel Country Club Road on a daily basis and I have a narrow question on behalf of improvements. There was a comment made earlier about the voter turnout during the budget referendums being unacceptable, something along those lines. I feel as though the condition of that road has become borderline unacceptable for a town with the resources that the Town of Avon has. So my narrow question is this; what is the plan to resurface that road, particularly between West Avon Road and Lovely Street?

Mark Zacchio: I have good news; included in this number is a re-mill and also drainage work from West Avon Road to Lovely Street. 100% of Country Club Road will be repaved. This will be done this summer. It's about \$480,000 of that number is going just Country Club Road. There are significant drainage issues there as well so the basins not have to be raised in order to take up the space of the new pavement, but the basins underneath are starting to deteriorate and fall apart. So when we go through this process, all of those basins get rebuilt, the drainage get rebuilt, they get raised, then we do a re-mill and overlay of the entire section. This probably wasn't on the plan for another 3-5 years. The storm we had in October of 2011, the road traffic of the trucks carrying all of the debris, it's our main artery from east to west, really significantly deteriorated the road much quicker than we had anticipated because

that weight is really a detriment to us.

Dick Burkett, 40 School Street

I've lived in Avon for 40 years. I live on the Ho Chi Min trail of Avon. For 4 years now I've been calling the Town, I've been calling the people who do the roads and they keep telling me they're going to fix it. [inaudible] There is no way you can get a car between a school bus and the curb. I have a second comment, about Chinese. Why teach Chinese. I have several Chinese friends. When I read in the paper that there's going to be Chinese, I asked them if they speak Chinese. None of them speak Chinese. They don't want to learn Chinese, they want to learn English. So, if the Chinese don't want to learn Chinese, why do we want to teach Chinese? It's not a practical expense to the taxpayers. I can't get my senior discount; I can't get my military discount because I make over \$45,000.

Brandon Robertson: We have talked to Mr. Burkett a couple of times about his issue, most recently 6-7 weeks ago. Going into the fiscal year 2015 capital budget process we had to reorder the work that we were going to do on the roads, and one of the roads that was on the list was School Street. At the conclusion of the winter season, Public Works always goes out and takes a look at the state of the roads and that's where we recognized Country Club being such an issue. Country Club, that section from West Avon to Lovely, takes a lot of air out of the room. It takes about \$475,000 to do that. As a result of changing around priorities, some of the smaller roads has to come off the list, but we'll get back to it next year and if not then, shortly thereafter.

Mark Zacchio: On the roads, we couldn't agree with you more. We passed a policy 8-9 months ago that requires anyone that disrupts our roads, to do much more extensive paving than. It is tied to the permit process.

The moderator called for any other comments or questions. There was none. The moderator moved to adjourn this meeting to the Referendum to be held on Wednesday, May 14th in the Senior Center from 6:00 am to 8:00 pm.

The meeting adjourned at 8:03pm

Attest

Ann Dearstyne

Town Clerk