

SPECIAL FINANCE COMMITTEE
(BUDGET HEARINGS)

Special meeting of the Finance Committee was held on Tuesday, April 22, 2008 in the Cranston High School East Auditorium, 899 Park Ave., Cranston, Rhode Island.

The meeting was called to order at 6:40 P.M. by the Chair.

Present: Councilman Terence Livingston, Chair
Council Vice-President Paula McFarland, Vice-Chair
(appeared at 7:25 P.M.)
Councilman Jeffrey P. Barone
Councilman Emilio L. Navarro (appeared at 7:10 P.M.)
Councilman Anthony J. Lupino
Council President Aram G. Garabedian

Also Present: Councilman Richard D. Santamaria, Jr.
Councilman John E. Lanni, Jr.
Charles Garganese, Jr., Assistant City Solicitor
Steve Woerner, City Council Internal Auditor
Maria Medeiros Wall, City Clerk
Rosalba Zanni, Assistant City Clerk/Clerk of Committees
Meredith Mahoney, Stenographer

Chair addressed the members of the public and stated that the Council cannot indicate which programs to keep or which ones to cut; that is solely the function of the School Department. The Council's only task is to allocate the bottom line amount. He asked that the members of the public who would like to speak, make suggestions to the Council on ways to save money and save programs will be allowed to address the Committee prior to the School Department's presentation and followed by a discussion between the School Department Administration and the Council.

Andrea Iannazzi, School Committee Member, asked that the School Department requests that the School Department be allowed to make their presentation first and then followed by public comment.

Michael Traficante, Chair of School Committee, appeared to make a power point presentation.

Donna Tocco-Greenaway, School Committee Member, appeared to make a presentation regarding unfunded mandates.

Andrea Iannazzi, School Committee Member, appeared to make a power point presentation regarding recently created Budget Readability Sub-Committee.

Richard Scherza, Superintendent of Schools, appeared to speak and stated that the taxpayers of the City have been good to the Schools, but the Council needs to fully fund this budget. While on the City side, position's salaries have increased, the School side has not.

Public Speakers:

Suzanne O'Shea, 35 Raven Circle, appeared to speak and stated that level-funding is not supporting schools, level-funding the schools is required by law. She asked that the Council fund the schools.

Mark Calozzi, 490 Comstock Parkway, Program Supervisor for the Music Program for the Cranston Public Schools, appeared to speak and stated that the City needs to lobby the State, the Legislatures and the Governor to fund our school programs. He believes it is an absolute disgrace that State funding has decreased while the mandates have increased.

Richard Brown, 171 Hilltop Dr., parent of two small school students, appeared to speak and stated that the City needs new revenue sources. Underfunding our schools is not a solution. By electing to underfund the schools, we elect to underfund our future.

Janice Ruggieri, 45 Overhill Rd., appeared to speak and stated that the City should be looking at making cuts in private school students. Her children have never received any new books. Private schools students receive new books upon request every year. That is taking her tax money away from her children. Consolidation should be looked at, not just on the school side, but also on the City side. The Council, as elected officials, need to address the "fair share funding bill", which is being proposed by Senator Gallo and not many people area aware or know about this.

Steven Bloom, 54 Ingleside Rd., appeared to speak and stated that he has prepared an analysis of the school and the City budget. He is present this evening to present this alternate budget proposal for consideration. He stated that he sent this proposal to two members of the Council prior to this meeting and he will forward copies to the remainder of the members this evening. He stated that the Mayor's budget is fiscally irresponsible. His alternate budget leaves the City services intact and provides approximately 85% of the City school services intact.

Suzanne Arena, 62 Glen View Dr., appeared to speak and stated that she believes in tax increase. She does not believe the Rainy Day Fund is a solution. We need creative ideas.

Paul McDonald, 21 Jay Court, appeared to speak and stated that the City needs to look into alternative energy programs. He suggested that the Council ask for constituent's who are in the profession of law, accountants, energy consultants, etc., for help on a volunteer basis. He suggested looking at doing away with pensions and implementing a 401K.

Donna Vasconcelous, 766 Laten Knight Rd., appeared to speak and stated that the Mayor tells people that he supports education, but his budget tells something else. She asked the Council not to let the School Department file a Caruolo suit. We all lose when City departments sue each other.

Brenda Carbone, 23 Red Oak Dr., appeared to speak and stated that she is very worried about the effects of proposed cuts will have on the students. The Mayor went to her home and what bothered her was the statement that he made stating that only two out of the nine Council members are in favor of not giving the schools more money. She questions how many Council members have children who attend Cranston schools. She asked that the Council consider our children and put them first in the City.

Jean Greco, 21 Hillcrest Dr., Program Supervisor for K-12, appeared to speak and asked that the schools be fully funded, even if it means a tax increase.

Jan Johnson Wall, 4 Grove Ave., parent of two school students, appeared to speak and stated that parents are trying to be creative in helping the schools. The City needs to work together. If we need to set a special tax, set it aside just for educational expenses. This she is willing to accept.

Sharli Polanco, 39 Bartlett Ave., appeared to speak and stated that she is very saddened about what is happening in the City and in the schools.

Sam Parente, 15 Lauren Court, appeared to speak regarding reality and consequences. The Council must have a closer relationship with the School Committee.

Mark Tetreault, 7 Hummingbird Lane, appeared to speak and stated that he is willing to help come up with creative solutions.

Barbara Gordan, 146 Albert Ave., appeared to speak and stated that this is all about priorities and values. She asked the Council to please support the schools and fund the budget.

Kenneth Blackman, 65 Amy Dr., Principal of Rhodes School, appeared to speak and asked that the schools be fully funded.

Lisa Gargario, 29 Scaralia Rd., appeared to speak and stated that if the taxes are increased, she would like to see those funds go to education.

Jeff Zarella, 853 Pontiac Ave., parent of a special need student at Garden City School, appeared to speak and asked that the schools be fully funded in order to keep the programs for special ed.

Councilman Lupino asked what the amount the School Department, in their adjusted budget, is looking for in the 2008-09 budget. Mr. Traficante stated that if they are not successful in negotiations or Caruolo, they will be facing a \$7.4 million shortfall. If they are successful in negotiations or Caruolo, they are looking at \$4.1 million, \$1 million of which has already been appropriated by the Mayor, which would make it \$3.1 million shortfall.

Councilman Lupino asked if an assessment has been done by the Department of Education. Richard Scherza, Superintendent of Schools, appeared to speak and stated that that has not been done this year.

Norman Laliberte, Executive Director of Education Programs and Services, appeared to speak regarding the loss of one of the Speech Pathologist position and Articulation Therapy guidelines. He stated that two positions are not being replaced.

Councilman Barone stated that in the power point presentation made by Ms. Iannazzi earlier, the salary line item shows raises. He asked if the union leaders have been approached regarding this line item, and if so, is that going to effect year one. Mr. Traficante stated that negotiations are in progress presently. As to the cut in the salary line item, no one has been approached. The unions are just going to be told that we do not have the money.

Councilman Barone asked for status of Project ReDirect. Mr. Traficante stated that he met with every department head and he drafted a report on the departments he looked at, such as Building Maintenance, among others. He met with Mr. Carlucci approximately one month ago and discussed the draft report. He also submitted a draft report regarding the Personnel Department, MIS Department and Finance Department. He stated that he is waiting to sit with the Council, Mayor and the School Committee to review these reports of recommendations. The Mayor did not consult him regarding these reports when he presented his budget.

Council President Garabedian questioned if the teachers pay 5% towards their medical coverage. Mr. Scherza stated, yes.

Council President Garabedian indicated that when making a decision on this budget, he has to make it on the whole of the City, since he represents the whole City. The issue of affordability is an issue of how much we can give the City.

Councilman Lanni stated that this is a balancing act. We cannot raise taxes that would force more people out of their homes. An area to look at is Project ReDirect to consolidate School and City resources, but we have to have the will to do it.

Council Vice-President McFarland stated that she reviewed Mr. Bloom's proposal and is willing to have him meet with the Council and discuss his proposals in more detail. A concern she has is she found out the unfunded pension liability that the School is carrying over. She would like to see a Resolution passed supporting Senator Gallo's bill and possibly have it placed it on the next Council docket. Educational assessments should be done every year. She asked that the Council look at all City departments and make fair cuts. Positions need to be consolidated either through attrition or as people retire. Stabilization accounts need to be re-allocated. As suggested by some speakers, we should be working together as a group. Project ReDirect efforts need to continue.

The meeting adjourned at 10:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosalba Zanni
Assistant City Clerk/Clerk of Committees