

# TOWN OF WILLINGTON

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## BOARD OF FINANCE

Budget Meeting  
Hybrid — In Person and Online

February 22, 2024  
7:00 PM

*\*Minutes are not official until approved at the next regular meeting*

**Members Present (a quorum of 4 members is required to conduct business):**

Bruce Lawler <b>Chair</b>	Geoffrey Prusak <b>Vice Chairman</b>	Christina Mailhos <b>Secretary</b>	Walter Parsell	Jason Ross	Stephanie Summers	Melissa Miller (ALT)	Britt Rothausen (ALT)
In Person	In person	In Person	In Person	In person	In Person	Via Zoom	Absent

**Also Present:**

Donna Latincsics, Business Manager  
Phil Stevens, Superintendent of Schools  
Briana Ross, Chairman Board of Education  
Residents in person and via Zoom

Chairman Bruce Lawler called the meeting to order at 7:06 PM.

**SEATING OF ALTERNATES:**

No alternates need to be seated.

**Approval of Minutes:** Stef Summers moved to accept the minutes of the February 8, 2024 budget meeting with the following corrections and additions: page 2 under Fire Marshal, paragraph 2, second line from the bottom change submits to submit and add "when completed" between one and to and "Business Manager" between to and Donna. At the bottom of page 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> line from the bottom change I am responding to IamResponding. The top of page 3 first line add "building??" between the and insurance. Page 3, paragraph 2, line 3 change warrantee to "warranty", same paragraph line 28 add "over the years" between them and that, same paragraph, line 39 scratch 2<sup>nd</sup> "that" and in the next line add "stated between Chief Moore and that. Page 4, paragraph 5 line 5 add "without sharing costs for 13 years under the PSA agreement" after there, same page, same paragraph, line 7 add "almost" between of and \$13,000, same page, same paragraph, line 14 add "thought was" and cross out "thinks is" between BOF and a, add in "in 2021" after amount, same page, same paragraph, line 16 add "and" between mutual aid and other and cross out "and the fact that Fund 17 is the only one that gives back to the Town" between Town, and etc. Page 5, paragraph 2, line 5 add "building?"

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apparatus?" between the and insurance, same page paragraph 4, line 3 cross out "that is" between because and the. Page 7, paragraph 3, line 3 cross out "past" add "missed" and an "s" to filing between WFD#1's and with.

Seconded by Christina Mailhos.

Motion passed (6-0).

Stef Summers moved to accept the minutes of the February 15, 2024 meeting with the following corrections and additions: On page 1 at the top, change Budget Meeting to Business Meeting. Page 6, paragraph E, line 2 add "Kara Fishman" and cross out "Karen Cote" between with and the. Page 8, paragraph H, sub paragraph 2, line 6, add "process" between plan and ., same page, next paragraph, line 1 add "about \$300,000 between the and ARPA. Page 9, paragraph 4, line 2 add "except for \$30,000 in cell tower revenue" between offsets and .

Seconded by Jason Ross.

Motion passed (5-0-1 abstention-Parsell)

## PRESENT TO SPEAK:

Peter Latincsics, 97 Trask Road stated that he would like to address two issues tonight. The first issue is the CIP process, and he appreciates their efforts. He especially appreciated CIP last night as it was a marathon meeting. He was hopeful that he understood the entire CIP budget a little bit in preparation for coming to this meeting, but once again it ascended into total chaos with both fire departments and what they are trying to accomplish. He went to the CIP meeting when the fire departments made their presentations. He did not think it could be even more confusing than that meeting, but it was. He applauds the CIP folks for trying to understand it. He stated that they barely touched on the rest of the CIP schedule. He stated that he was encouraged by two things in the CIP meeting. One was that Mike Makuch was kind enough to share with everyone that Mike said that no one will say in public, which is that both departments seemed concerned about moving forward and services are rationalized in some way, which given the scale of the requests they are making of CIP have to happen. Neither one of them want to lose anything but they can't say that. He believes that is adding to the confusion. Peter stated that was very helpful from Mike. Peter stated that the second thing that was encouraging to him was (this was what he asked the BOF to pursue working with CIP) the First Selectman creating a fire building committee, and that would be a committee primarily composed of townspeople not the fire departments. He thinks that is essential and given the scale of these projects and the cost of these projects short and long term, he hopes the BOF supports that initiative and essentially freezes any action on these fire department requests until that committee is established, funded and figures this all out. Secondly, he looks forward to the presentation from the BOE. He stated that a number of people at the BOF meetings previously commented that this is the year where operational budgets need to be held steady because of inflation and he is hoping that is the case tonight. He thanked everyone for their hard work.

Jim Marshall, 46 Fisher Hill Rd thanked everyone for the opportunity to speak. He shares his appreciation for the BOE and the Superintendent for their work on crafting this year's budget. He has been paying attention to their budget discussions over the past month, and there were truly thoughtful and measured discussions along the way, and some of the best conversations he has seen recently. He hopes the BOF can support their budget as he thinks it is as tight as it can be, and it was a very rough year for them. He stated that he wants to acknowledge the BOE's acknowledgement that a facilities manager is a critical addition to help the Board move along and to manage the very severe CIP needs that are forthcoming at both the schools. He hopes the BOF discusses the facilities manager at length



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and supports this request as well. He hopes it is a need that shows up in the Board of Selectman (BOS) budget next week as well. He doesn't know if it is being considered, because the BOS hasn't discussed their budget much at all publicly beyond one meeting, but he hopes it does come on the table for discussion next week and he hopes the BOF and BOS will have a lively debate there. He seconded Peter Latincsics comments, urging the BOF and the BOS to pay attention to the very involved CIP discussions to get a full understanding of the depth and need and what CIP and the Town is looking at over the next 5, 10, 15 years. He echoed Peter Latincsics comments about deep discussions surrounding how to best address the fire station projects last night. He stated that it would be very beneficial to get this board's insight, opinion and support of this fire department building committee being a public oversight committee; it can't be another (as originally proposed) strictly a fire department committee with a couple of townspeople managing how this town publicly funds very significant fire department building requests. He stated that it needs oversight, it hasn't had any to date and a lot of the work for moving these projects along and how this is addressed as a town, the only way there will be viable path forward on the fire departments is to have the public oversight method for us. He stated that CIP also suggested providing funding in year one last night for that fire department building committee under those expectations, but there should be some discussion here, and it would be helpful in advance of next week if the BOF considered what that means for the open request (\$110,000) that has not been allocated yet in this year's budget for the WHFD and even unspent funds at the WHFD. He stated that it would be good to see what this board's take is on it and whether those funds should really be spent as they are not publicly managed. He thanked the BOF, and he appreciates their hard work thus far and the budget discussions to come.

## **NEW BUSINESS:**

### **1) Board of Education (BOE) Presentation – Superintendent Phil Stevens**

Super. Stevens stated that he has BOE chair Briana Ross with him tonight. He thanked the BOF for listening to them tonight. He stated that this budget has been a long process for the BOE, as they start their budget process in October with the teachers and administrators. He stated that a lot of work goes into the document he is presenting today. He stated that the BOE spends about six weeks with the document going through each program. Tonight, he is going to highlight the items that are very expensive or having savings. He is not going to go through every detail of the budget, he but is glad to answer questions on any item.

Super. Stevens stated that he first wanted to speak about the district framework. He stated that a big part of budgeting is making sure they have their goals and beliefs, and all their budgetary decisions are tied to the district framework. He stated that there is nothing in the budget that isn't directly tied to a student's growth and success, a culture environment goal or a sustainable and strategic investment in the schools.

Super. Stevens stated that the BOE budget approved for the current year is \$9,151,473. He stated that they are currently in a budget freeze and have been for months. He shares that as a kickoff, because it is important to know that there are going to be some big drivers in this budget which is why there is a significantly larger number that is being requested. He will highlight the reasons why as he goes through the budget. He stated that the BOE approved budget for fiscal year 24-25 is \$9,770,084. There is an over \$600,000 increase which is a 6.76% increase. He stated that this is by far the biggest budget he has ever presented. He stated that this is a needs-based budget, and if they could save a dollar somewhere they did, and he will show that as he goes through the budget. He stated that for all the districts budgets in the State, the average is over a 5% increase with districts with 8-11% increases right now. He



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stated that Willington is in that same high percentage. He stated that about 97% of the budget is contracts and legal items that they can't control. When contracts are locked in, they budget for what they use. He stated that they had a 5% cut (about \$50,000 savings) in their insurance premiums this year after discussing it with the insurance company as they don't make very many high use claims.

Super. Stevens stated that the biggest challenge in the budget is centered around Special Education. He stated that some districts budget funds (emergency funds) for outplacement tuition for Special Education. Typical outplacement tuition costs \$150,000 per student, which means they try everything they can to keep the student in their district, but when they can't keep the student in the district they go to outplacement facilities. The facilities and transportation are very expensive. They have budgeted in for two in the current fiscal year and they currently have four. The BOE did not come back to the BOF for help. Next fiscal year they are budgeted for four (over \$300,000 for that), and that's why they are in a freeze right now because they are trying to cover that without having to come back to the BOE. He stated that all the contractual items in their budget typically go up 3-5% and those are built into the budget as well.

Super. Stevens went over the shared contracts in Town and stated that NOVUS (information technology services) is their biggest one. They have not had to pay ransom when they have been attacked (which they have) because of NOVUS. He stated that other districts have had to pay millions of dollars in ransom. Other items that are shared are heating oil, electricity, diesel fuel, mowing, etc.

Super. Stevens then discussed the unfunded mandates. He stated that there are a lot of them, but one he was looking at today was regarding teacher certification. There is a requirement that they must provide 18 hours a year of professional development, which means that students can't be in schools on those days. It is a requirement by the State that they must follow, which means they must pay staff. He stated that there are tons of mandates that they have to follow, and the legislators just keep pushing out more and more mandates and the dollars don't follow.

Super. Stevens explained their budget process stating that they write every single grant that they can get their hands on to apply to the budget. He stated that they have offset the budget by \$485,000 in grants. He stated that some of them are entitlement grants, so they just need to write them, and some are grants they must apply for and make sure they can use them towards certain things. He stated that the COVID grants are drying up, so there are no COVID grants in their budget. He stated that a lot of districts wrote their COVID grants to try and keep things going. The BOE didn't do that, and that is why there is 10-11% increase in some districts because their COVID grant is dry, and they are trying to keep things going. He stated that Willington did one-time purchases and that the COVID funds dry up on September 30, 2024, that is why the COVID grants aren't in this budget. He stated that there are some positions that they did not continue where other districts are trying to.

Super. Stevens explained the enrollment stating that Prowda (who does the enrollment studies) is projecting 413 students for next year. The BOE is projecting 384 students for next year as there is a big 8<sup>th</sup> grade class this year that will be moving on to high school and they don't have the Kindergarten enrollment yet.

Super. Stevens stated that they have 10 programs in their budget, which are broken up so everyone can see how much it costs to run each program. Program 1 is Center Elementary School (CES). He stated that one change in that program that the BOE pushed for in this budget was to add a staff support



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specialist. They had one last year at CES and have asked to add a second one. The reason for this is not being able to get substitute teachers like they used to. The staff support specialist is guaranteed to cover the classrooms. If the second person is added, they would be a district person and would float between CES and Hall Memorial School (HMS) when needed. He stated that the salaries in this budget are contractual. He stated that the teacher contractual budget went down some this year and the reason for that is sometimes when they hire a teacher, they may have less years of experience and cost less than a teacher they are replacing. He stated that all the purchased services listed in the budget are needed services and are also contractual items as well and dollars can't be cut there. He stated that educational supplies went up as the cost of items have gone up significantly. He stated those supplies average out to about \$270 per student for the entire year or \$1.50-\$1.75 per day. He stated that the textbook part of the budget is really books for the media center and periodicals. He stated that the equipment part of the budget is IT related items (chrome books, iPads, replacements and replacement parts). The building maintenance is lumped into one set which includes contracts for fire alarm inspections, pest control, EMCOR maintenance contract, etc., items needed to maintain the building. He explained the non-lapsing fund that money goes into the budget each year, and it is being drained to pay for the Special Education Outplacements that they currently have today that were unbudgeted. He stated that account will probably not have any money in it at the start of next year and technically it should. He stated that the BOE put \$10,000 into each program in the maintenance line to pay for items that may break, so they can pay for them. Normally they would use the non-lapsing fund for these items. He stated that the budget item listed as other is for conferences, travel, dues, memberships, principal supplies, printing, etc. He stated that he put percentage increases in each program this year and this program has a 3.09% increase. There is a detailed overview of HMS, CES and Special Education writeups in the back of the document he is presenting.

Super. Stevens stated that Program 2 is HMS and a lot of the budget items are the same items and cost as the CES budget. He stated that the salaries are higher in the HMS budget because they added more grant funding to this budget, and it is based upon hiring. Purchased services are the same as CES except for the climbing wall inspection. Supplies again like the CES program are higher than last year. He stated that the library books went up a little. Computer equipment and building maintenance again are all under contract. He stated that they do have sports and activities at HMS, so stipends are in there and are contractual. They were able to drop the official budget line some. He stated that the clubs at HMS are rocking. A huge percentage of kids are participating, so they are offering more clubs than they have ever offered with transportation and some of this is offset by a grant. He stated that there was a small increase in sports equipment and sports memberships. They took out the afterschool program snacks because they had to offset that through a non-lapsing fund. The conference travel is contractual. Principal supplies were a minor increase as well as dues, fees and memberships.

Super. Stevens stated that the grant offsets are listed at the end of each program where applicable, and they are put in there because he believes in transparency, which other superintendents from other districts do not do. He listed the grants for HMS and how they bring the budget down. He stated that every single grant dollar that the BOE has is an offset in the budget, except for REAP. He stated that they get about \$30,000 from REAP and they have offset about \$12,000 which is his buffer. He needs that when he has a year like this year with no funds, he is buying some supplies with the REAP grant fund as it allows you to do those things. He stated that this program has a 4.62% increase. Vice Chairman Prusak asked about the decrease in the administrator salary, to which Super. Stevens responded that was a good question and explained that when they wrote their ESSER grants, one thing that they were struggling with in this district was writing curriculum. They hired a curriculum director



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for a 3-year contract, he was very transparent about that, and the grant is drying up. That person will not continue after this year. He would love to keep that person on, but to do that with benefits is over \$150,000. It was a hard decision for him not to put it in front of the Board but it is a lot of money.

Super. Stevens next discussed Program 3, Special Education. He stated that this is a big program and one that is legal for him. Superintendent Stevens then gave a crash course in Special Education and how a student is qualified for special education services through testing (behavioral, academic, etc.). He stated that when a student qualifies for special education, the district legally must provide the services for the student. He stated that every item in this program, they legally must do. Nothing can be cut out of this program. He stated that they have an administrator that just does special education, as an administrator is required at every single PPT as required by the State. They have about 80 students identified in the district. He stated that they get significant funded grants for special education, and they use as much as possible as offsets in the budget. He then explained how the secretarial job for this program is one full time secretary and then a secretary at CES and a secretary at HMS do a small portion of the job for this program and that goes for transportation as well. He stated again that salaries are all contractual. He stated that they have saved tons of money by hiring their own paraprofessionals instead of going through EASTCONN, and there is only one paraprofessional that is contracted out now. Walter Parsell asked if there is in fact four students that are on outplacement and will that continue next year? Super. Stevens stated yes, they do have four students that will be outplaced next year and the district owns their costs. He stated that they only budget for the number of students that are outplaced while other districts may budget for more than they have. He then explained that the Behavioral Consultant has gone up, and the Behavioral Consultant tries to keep the students in the district, so they don't get outplaced, and the district doesn't have to pay the high tuition for outplacement. He stated that there are minor supplies for special education, and they are specific for them. He stated that the copier maintenance in all three buildings in special education is going up and they are at the end of their lease and expect an increase which is budgeted in. Super. Stevens then mentioned the grants that they have for special education and the special education budget before the grants is \$2.6 million and with the grants it comes down to \$2.2 million. He then explained how it works getting the grant money from the State. He stated that this program has a 17.02% increase. He stated that he has never experienced anything like this with the number of outplacements. He stated that this is the most volatile program that they have. He stated that they do a good job of moving students in and out of special education and providing services, but it is the outplacement costs that are really driving the increase.

Super. Stevens went on to Program 4 Transportation. He stated that a portion of the secretary, including his assistant is the staffing in that budget (a secretary at HMS and a secretary at CES part of their job is transportation) which is why the secretary portion of the budget is .35. He stated that the bus contract has a slight increase over the current year. He stated that musical events needed more money because of where they were traveling, so they increased the dollar amount. He stated that sporting events was less. He stated that there is a lower price for diesel so there is savings there. He stated that this program has a little over a 2% increase which is decent for transportation. Stef Summers asked if the Town is also benefiting from the diesel price, and Super. Stevens stated that it is the same price for the Town and the BOE for diesel and heating fuel. They negotiate those items together.

Super. Stevens stated that Program 5 Health Services is the nurses offices (1 in each building). He stated that after everything that happened with COVID and everything that they must deal with through reporting, the nurses have been outstanding. They are required to have a Medical Advisor (it is a



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mandate). There was a slight increase in substitute nurses. The supplies did not increase and the overall budget for this program is a slight increase of over 2%.

Super. Stevens stated that Program 6 Curriculum and Staff Development is all the training for all the curriculum, everything that they are required to do for teachers and reading programs. He stated that there are also some contractual things in there that are team leader stipends, that part of the contract is outside conferences, and they are required to pay so much money for conferences. He stated that when they do this budget, they look at use and base the amount of money for the conferences on that. He stated that there is a drop in the teacher workshops in-house. They have done a lot of special development; they used a lot of COVID funds for special development and felt comfortable bringing that number down because of what they have done in the past three years in particular. He stated that this program has over an 11% decrease.

Super. Stevens stated that Program 7 Utilities is straight forward as again these are contracted rates. He stated that they looked at what they were using for these programs and took that average. He stated that utilities are slightly under a 3% increase.

Super. Stevens stated that Program 8 Operations/Maintenance has a big change. He stated with the vote not to build a new school the BOE is left with trying to determine what that vote meant. They know it meant the townspeople didn't want a new school. The BOE has a drive here to make sure they fix the buildings and there are a lot of projects. He believes they presented 80 projects to CIP. He stated to manage all the projects that need to be done, the BOE thought it was critical to put a Facilities Director in this budget. He states building maintenance eats up a ton of his time and he feels that is what he does right now, and it would be nice to try and focus some time on actual academics. He stated that when you talk about HVAC projects and writing grants and overseeing all the projects for both buildings, the BOE felt it was very important to have the Facilities Director in the budget, so there is a salary and benefits in this budget which is new. He stated that the discussion was that this is not a forever position. If the BOF and CIP have the ability over the next five years to get all these projects that everyone is asking for on track and we get into a position where there is not all of these major items each year and it comes down to small items (1 boiler, 1 oil tank, etc.) Super. Stevens can handle these. It's the numerous heavy-duty projects that are meetings with the State because they are grant funded, that is a significant amount of time. The Board believes it could be a 5-7 year position, and that it would not be a union position and it would be very clear when the person is hired that they are on their own contract with the expectation to get the projects done in 5-7 years, the same drive they did with their previous director. He stated that the Facilities Director position is the big increase salary-wise in this budget. He stated that the going rate for a Facilities Director is \$80,000+. He stated that this is not a fix it person. This person would help develop the CIP plan, make sure all the projects were followed through on, talk to contractors and review bids, write RFP's, hold interviews for contractors, etc. Walter Parsell asked if \$80,000 is enough for that position as in his experience a position like that would be considerably more. Super. Stevens stated that he doesn't feel they will get a seasoned person, but someone who is starting out. Walter Parsell asked if it would make sense to have this Facilities Director take care of all the Town buildings and not just the schools. Superintendent Stevens stated that they sent a communication to the Selectman's Office regarding that, and the BOS do not have anything in their budget. He stated he thinks that the BOE feels that there is enough work for just the schools. He stated that the BOE would probably go along with a "full scope" Facilities Director for the Town, but they wanted to put something in their budget with a dollar amount. He has not heard back if the BOS has anything in a dollar amount for their side of the budget, but he does not believe they do. He stated



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that the BOE needs to get going on some of these projects because they are time sensitive. He then discussed the HVAC grant, the fact that he can't do all of this himself and answered questions about the position and the person qualified to do the job. Superintendent Stevens stated that the insurance piece of this budget is CIRMA, and it is property and cyber insurance. He thinks that they will have cyber insurance very soon through NOVUS, but cyber insurance is part of this program. They had budgeted \$15,000 for this year and they are paying just over \$6,000, so they are using the funds from this year to offset the special ed cost because of the freeze that they have, and they were able to bring down this budgetary item by about \$8,000. They did raise custodial supplies. The increase in this program is 24% because of the Facilities Director position.

Super. Stevens stated that Program 9 is System-wide Support, and it is a catchall which includes him, his assistant and districtwide substitute caller. It includes purchased services to run the district (legal fees, copiers, IT, school messenger, PowerSchool hosting school assessment, academically based districtwide subscriptions, security screener, etc.). All the items on this budget are exactly at the dollar amount they need. He stated that the supplies in this budget are minor, and the dues are for himself, the BOE, Donna's office. There is some conference money in there for the BOE and some conference money for him which is minimal because he doesn't ask for a lot and doesn't travel a lot. He stated that this budget is under a 3% increase, which considering NOVUS is in this budget is pretty good. He reminded everyone that NOVUS is shared with the Town.

Super. Stevens stated that Program 10 is Fringe Benefits. He stated that they looked at their usage for substitutes and they did not use all the funds, so they brought that number down to \$40,000. They do have a fund in there for long term substitutes, as every year someone has to be out for a period of time, and if it is over 40 days, they have to pay the individual bachelor's pay. The medical insurance is down even with the addition of the Facilities Manager and Staff Support Specialist positions. He stated that dental was pretty much flat and life insurance was flat. They must keep unemployment insurance in there and they felt comfortable with the numbers as well as worker's compensation. He stated that the Social Security Medicare is calculated based upon the total amount of money the staff is making and it is a percentage and something that they must pay (\$23,000 increase). He stated that this program has a 1.68% increase.

Super. Stevens stated that the BOF can read on their own time the other items in the document he is presenting tonight which include an instructional summary for CES, and an instructional summary for HMS and a program for Special Education. There are also explanations of the grants in there, which he felt is important for the BOF to see. There is a staffing list in there and although Food Services isn't part of their budget, they are listed in the staff as they are part of their schools and are considered part of their staff. He stated that the Business Office is entirely paid for out of the Selectman's budget, but you need a Business Office to run a school district and are included in his staff list. He stated for IT he put one person because it is one person per day that is shared with the Town, and he considers that part of their staff even though it is contracted. He stated that what they spend on their IT contract, other districts have 8 or 9 employees because you must have someone who is an expert in Wi-Fi, an expert on servers and an expert on security. He stated that they pay a shared contract for about \$250,000 for NOVUS for an army. He stated that would be 3 people for them and they would never get the expertise that they have with that army. When they have an issue, NOVUS is there to have their back. He stated that transportation is a contractor, but they are considered part of the staff because you can't run a district without them. He stated that the CIP requests are in there and the highlights are in yellow. He stated that the last page has to do with transparency and is regarding the end of year turnback of



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money every year. If there is money left over at the end of the year the BOE turns it back to the Town and the BOF has done a good business practice to put these funds back into the non-lapsing fund and this year is a prime example of that. If the BOF had not done that, the BOE would be asking the BOF for a half a million dollars this year because that is their shortfall in special education this year. Christina Mailhos asked how much was in the non-lapsing fund at the start of the fiscal year? Super. Stevens stated that it was about \$260,000 with the remainder of the balance. He stated with that money in there the BOE voted to pay for the chimney issues, but they can't do the work until the summer, so he is holding off because the chimney is not leaking. He is hoping it stays that way and they will use the million dollars that is in the CIP to pay for the chimney and then every dollar that is in non-lapsing will be an offset. He stated that they are covering their special ed costs today as the Board just transferred \$50,000 because of health insurance savings. He had some money in the ARP ESSER account under salaries that was not going to be used and they transferred \$45,000 into salaries. He is hoping at the next board meeting he can say that he is going to unfreeze the budget, but he can't guarantee that, however, they have knocked off \$95,000. They are also waiting for their excess cost payment which should be within the next few days, and they will know what their first payment looks like and guarantee what percentage they are going to get. He stated without those non-lapsing funds they would have to come back to the Board. He stated that they only put exactly what they need for special ed and don't put placeholders. If they needed an outplacement, they would come back to the Board or use the non-lapsing fund.

Super. Stevens stated that they know their budget is a big increase, but it is a needs-based budget. He stated that there is nothing in there that if they were going to cut something where they could easily pull from. There would be some very challenging decisions and when you talk about crunching some big numbers, it isn't supplies it is people. They would be eliminating positions.

Super. Stevens stated that this was the end of his presentation and asked if there were any questions. Stef Summers asked if the \$50,000 transfer was over and above the 5% insurance savings or part of it? Super. Stevens stated that it was different, that savings is July 1 going forward. Super. Stevens explained with the insurance, they budget on their current staff and work within that number. He stated that they just happened to hire people last summer that waived benefits and when that happens there are savings. They are hoping to have more than \$50,000 in the current budget. Stef then stated that next year with this budget and because there are four kids there, the non-lapsing would be down to nothing. Super. Stevens agreed that there is no buffer for next year. He stated that is why they put the extra \$10,000 in each school for maintenance because there isn't going to be any money there. He stated that if there is money in the non-lapsing fund it will be a miracle. He stated that you don't cover a half a million-dollar shortfall without some real creative stuff and that is what they have been trying to do without a freeze. He stated that if he didn't take another dollar out of the budget right now they would be at zero with the non-lapsing fund and that is not possible.

Chairman Lawler stated that he has been looking at the number of students over the years and it has continued to drop. He stated that since the beginning of COVID both schools have lost students in each school, but the staffing stays constant, and they aren't getting rid of teachers through attrition or anything, especially when they are losing students. Super. Stevens stated that this is what is challenging about small districts. When there are 36 kids in this district, people will look at that and say they want small classrooms. He stated that when you talk about class size in this district, people come out in public. If you want to fill a room, start talking about class size, they come out of the woodwork because they want small classrooms. He stated that their wiggle room is so small that if they added 8 kids in one



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grade, they wouldn't have to add a teacher. They look at the numbers and the budget is based upon what they know. That is for elementary school. For the middle school, it is done on a middle school model so they rotate classes, which is what the state would like to see. There is a teacher for every subject. He stated that where they have saved money is they share a science and social studies teacher (they do both 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades and the same for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades). He stated that they could add 100 kids in this district and not add another teacher. Chairman Lawler stated that in the BOE's second workshop Super. Stevens stated they could add 200 kids and not have to add a teacher. Super. Stevens agreed with that because looking at all the grades if you added 15 students per grade, they would just filter them into those classrooms. Chairman Lawler asked about a nontraditional approach to the classes with the blending of grades? Super. Stevens stated that they have not had that conversation about blending grades because of the numbers. He stated with smaller numbers (8 or so) you could blend grades together like kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade, but when they have 36 kids it doesn't make sense to blend grades together. He stated that if you had an elementary school class with 19 kids, you would see parents start asking questions about small class size. Chairman Lawler stated that by the end of the third workshop that he watched he was encouraged because they were talking about the increase being about 5% or slightly under 5%. He stated that it would have been optimum to have a 4.5% increase, then the BOE decided to add more things which really brought that figure up, which he finds really discouraging. Super. Stevens stated that he feels he has to bring balance, so every year he asks what do they not have in the budget that they would need and he agreed that yes at that workshop it was down to about 4.36%. However, they still had some really big things to talk about and one of the Board members that couldn't be at one of the workshops, and that last workshop was needed to discuss many things (special education, Facilities Director and the Staff Support Specialist). He stated that the Staff Support Specialist was needed because they could spend just about as much money on subs, and they would have that person every single day. They went round and round about special education and looking at the best usage of how to do that and he thinks they came up with a good solution. He stated that they would be willing to share the Facilities Director if that were an option, and it would bring the budget down. He stated that the BOE put those things in, and it is their job to come up with the most critical things to put in their budget. Chairman Lawler asked if they would still be able to function if those other items weren't in the picture. Super. Stevens stated that they are making do with what they have and then he quoted one of the BOE members who stated "I don't want you to make do, I want you to educate our kids as best we can but within reason". Super. Stevens thinks what the Facilities Director in this district needs to do is present CIP all the projects, the order, how to lay them out over the years, sit down with Donna and figure out how they are going to lay out the next 10 years funding wise, etc. This Town needs that position, and the BOE is the one that is going to step up and put it in their budget right now. Super. Stevens feels this is the way to go rather than him trying to plug in needed upgrades on his own.

Stef Summers asked Super. Stevens to point out where the new special education teacher is. He stated that if you look at the number of special ed teachers, it shows as .4. He stated that they tried to put together a budget that is going to be palatable and something that will pass and still meet student needs. The board asked him specifically if there were any other things if it was not going to be a 1.0 which was the original request (a 1.0 is \$100,000) and he stated that they talked about several things to keep students in district and he explained those options. He stated that the other part in the special ed budget was the request piece of it and not go to a 1.0 was around reading and getting an expert without getting sued and providing the best education you can. He then discussed that there are certain programs when you are presenting a case or what you provide your students, there are certain programs that have high value one of which is Wilson with a Wilson certified person. He stated that



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program is a dire need for students that have dyslexia (they have that need) to put that in the budget without adding loads of dollars. It is something they have talked about putting in the budget without adding lots of dollars, so what they did was see if they could get someone that is 2 days a week (.4 that worth of hours) for that amount of money. He has someone in mind for this that is retiring and has the needed skills in this area (though he is not even sure that this person would take the position) and if that person doesn't want to do it, he doesn't think he can get someone else for \$35,000 unless he gets someone fresh out of college that wants to do some training. That is how they settled at the .4 vs. 1.0 (.4 does not have benefits they would just pay the salary part of it). The \$35,000 (.4) was put in specifically for dyslexia for special education services. Part of their job would be training the other staff members on how to implement that program, so if that person does retire/leaves you have other people that can do it and that is what they are trying to accomplish.

Stef Summers then asked if they are seeing a catching up that may hit the special ed arena quite heavily after COVID in terms of what kids have gone through developmentally and being "caged". Super. Stevens stated that they watch their percentage all the time because they must report to the State, and they also have students that go in and see if they qualify for special education, and they do not. Their numbers are very accurate. He stated that they have students that leave each year. They see mandates that are rolled out and they have to make sure these mandates happen, and they are seeing more kids qualify for special ed because of the roll out they did for intervention, and they are set on a timeline that does not always make sense. The child may just not be ready to learn that yet, but they must keep providing services and when the timeline is up if the child didn't meet the goal they qualify for special education. He stated it doesn't work. He stated that special education is a unique thing in that you must provide services, have the right people and have people with a broad background in special ed, which they do.

Brianna Ross, Chairman of the BOE stated that in some districts there are students that require multiple interventions and have been seen in the past. She stated that what Stef was alluding to about children being stuck at home, the little toddlers did not go to the grocery stores with their families and interact with other people and other things and those little ones who were 1 and 2 at the time are now in kindergarten and it is a whole new experience for them to be in a room with a lot of other children and try to work as their own little culture in society and still deal with things that are very demanding. She stated that kindergarten isn't what it used to be, it is still play based, but there are also a lot of expectations for reading, writing and in-depth math concepts, so because of those demands and what the children have all been through, there are more kids ending up in intervention. The teachers and staff are doing what they need to do to touch all children and help catch them up where they need it and help extend where they need to also but sometimes they do need the extra help and sometimes they are referred to special ed because they are catching up. She stated if you have a higher percentage of kids getting intervention, you will have a higher number of kids being referred to special ed. She stated that there are rules involved and you really must prove that they qualify for special ed and if they don't then you must go back to your intervention plans and find out other ways to assist them. Super. Stevens mentioned the audit that they did a few years ago was about paraprofessionals, but it was also about their identification process to find out if they were overidentifying, because if they were they would have to let a paraprofessional go, so now they have changed their scheduling around to make sure they are using the correct number of paraprofessionals, and they were not over identifying. Brianna stated that they did ask Marcia McGinley, the Special Ed Director if she has use for another additional staff member just for her special ed department and she declined because they couldn't justify it, but she was very interested in this additional person to help with their reading because that is



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someplace she could really use someone especially with Wilson expertise. It would help loosen the load a bit for the other paraprofessionals, they can help other children or do other things during that time to prepare for what the child needs next. When they mentioned the paraprofessional to her, she jumped on it right away and said yes that would be wonderful. She stated with more children being sent to intervention, then being sent over to special ed and then comes the reading and some of it is dyslexia and some of it is other reading disabilities but having that special ed person there, that was one of the four things that they requested Tuesday night and that is why it is there. She stated that Chairman Lawler asked if they could live without those four things, and she hopes that in their meetings he has seen and heard he knows Super. Stevens well enough to know that they are making the best with what they have, but this budget is bare bones. She stated that the public is asking for higher test scores, they are worried about the mental health of the students, and they are doing the best they can with what they have but that is not good enough. There is a lot more they would add to the budget to help all the children if they could. She stated that she has been teaching for 22 years and she has seen a lot of budgets. She stated that there is no fluff in the budget but wishes they could add some fluff. She stated regarding the other key pieces, the Support Specialist, Super. Stevens has had a lot of success with the one they have had on board. She stated that it is nearly impossible to find substitutes, even after putting in a pay raise for those positions and making them more competitive with the towns around Willington, it is difficult. She stated that it is hard for the students as sometimes they are covering the classes with teachers from other classes, i.e. PE, etc. and several different ones throughout the day. She stated that can have a longtime impact on the children when it is happening to them all the time, not to mention that the paraprofessionals and staff get really burnt out. She knows how important the Support Specialist is and that is why the board has stood behind the Support Specialist. Chair Ross then discussed the maintenance repair funds and the work that needs to be done at both schools which are both very old (ceilings falling down, the chimney is falling down). She pleaded with the BOF to show the children respect and that they are cared for and taking care of their buildings, education, character and their community it is really important. She stated regarding the Facilities Director, she was on the school building committee, and they spent years studying the current state of those two school buildings. In the end, the committee recommended building a new school because that seemed like a wiser financial decision and one that made more sense to a lot of them. She stated with the decision made at the referendum not to fund a new school, the only thing left to do is take care of the current buildings, and that cannot be done on their own. Chairman Lawler stated that he thinks they are all in agreement that the buildings need to be taken care of, it is just going through the way to do it. Chairman Lawler stated that in the BOE meetings he feels like the CIP and BOF are somewhat of a hindrance in their moving forward as far as getting the schools into the shape they need to be in. He stated that it's not that the CIP and the BOF are so much the problem, the 380 mandates that the BOE must follow and spend money on is the problem. He and a couple of other people feel the BOE adding more after the original 5% increase was an activist move. He stated that an activist move should be taken to Hartford because they are the ones passing the mandates and making it difficult for these communities to do what they must do. Brianna stated that was never their intention to sound like activists. She stated that she thinks they all had Facilities Director in the back of their minds and they went through what they already had, what they have done in previous years and knew it needed to be added. Super. Stevens pointed out that this budget would be a 3.5% increase without the special ed budget. It just happened to be the year special ed is hit hard and if it was a year that there wasn't that increase in special ed, the BOF would say that 3.5% was good and they are going to get an extra staff Support Specialist and a Facilities Director. It is the balance of the two together that is a challenge. Chairman Lawler stated that he thinks that the Facilities Director would be better in a different budget other than the BOE budget with all the work that needs to be done to other Town buildings. Walter



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Parsell feels it should be a Town job and they aren't going to find anyone with experience for what they are offering to pay. Jason Ross stated that he feels everyone agrees that it should be a Town position, and it is only in the BOE budget because they are the only ones with the forethought that this position was needed for the Town and that is why it is in their budget. He stated that they aren't the only ones that need it, they are the only ones that had the gumption to say they need it. Super. Stevens stated that it would be a dollar amount in the Town budget wherever it was put. He stated that if you don't have it in there you can't talk about it. He stated that maybe the position should be put in the Town budget, but the BOE can't control that, they can only control their own budget, and not hearing or seeing it in another budget is the reason they put it in theirs. Stef Summers asked if a school facilities position went forward, and in the next budget year the Selectmen were ready to then have that position as a Town wide position, would the BOE be able to pivot at that point? Super. Stevens stated that he thinks so as they share services all the time and they do them well. He mentioned that right now there is a greater need on the school side and that is why it is important. He stated when CIP sits down, they aren't just looking at BOE, they are looking at everything. He stated that the only thing that they probably wouldn't look at in CIP is the trucks, but anything to do with any facility or Town building they could easily blend together and that would be manageable for him as well. Christina Mailhos stated that \$80,000 sounds a little light, and her concern is if it is someone inexperienced, they need someone who can stand up in front of the Town and explain in a very clear way with some legitimacy about what is needed, and if they don't have the experience, it can be argued what is needed. Walter Parsell agreed that they need to put the bids together, walk the jobs with these people, etc. Stef Summers mentioned that originally the BOE was talking about \$110,000 and Super. Stevens clarified that the \$110,000 was with benefits. He stated that he believes the BOE would be glad to have a shared position and drop some of that money on the BOS budget. Christina stated that it could be split up between all the agencies in Town. Melissa Miller also agreed that she thought the salary for the Facilities Director was low. She commends the BOE for at least bringing up the discussion. Christina stated that the position has been talked about at CIP, but it must come out of an operating budget not CIP. Super. Stevens stated that the BOE looked at a couple of options like shared services with another town, but he thinks this town has enough maintenance items right now and it makes sense to have it here. The other option they were discussing was looking at a block of hours (a consultant), however, they can charge a lot for those fees and when their block of hours is up, they are done, but if you have someone on salary, they'll be back the next day. Super. Stevens was thanked for his thorough presentation.

**CORRESPONDENCE:** Christina Mailhos mentioned an email that Chairman Lawler shared with the BOF from a resident in town and stated that he should also share his response to any emails he gets with the Board.

**PRESENT TO SPEAK:** Mike Makuch, 52 Clover Springs Dr. thanked Super. Stevens and the BOE. He stated that having sat across the table from these presentations for five years, he understands how complicated that budget is and how important it is for people to understand it because it is the biggest ask in town. He thinks good work was done there and the presentation as always was done well. He stated that with the permission of the WHFD Fire Chief and President he is going to make a couple of comments. He clarified from the present to speak earlier in the meeting, the fire departments (he is speaking for WHFD specifically) are completely open to public input, public oversight and the comments that were made earlier hinting to things wanting to be done without public input are frustrating to the WHFD. WHFD members are dedicated to the town, and they work mostly for free, and the members process every single public dollar through the public budgeting process. The BOF knows very well that every public dollar is seen through this process and the same thing would happen with any CIP dollars.



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The WHFD also supports the idea that whatever committee ends up being potentially created, which still seems to be up in the air through the BOS, would have public involvement. The WHFD meetings are also open to the public for the portion where they deal with public money. The Finance Office in the TOB pays the WHFD bills with public money. It is completely above board and completely available to the public. The WHFD has been that way for decades. The WHFD is completely in support of doing that and does not want any aspersions cast that they are spending public money without oversight.

Peter Latincsics, 97 Trask Road said that he also appreciates the quality of the BOE's presentation and especially Super. Stevens transparency, having been part of the process when that wasn't the case, and it is very helpful to everyone. He stated that two things jump out at him the first is cost which is good is the per pupil cost is \$25,455 per student. The other number that jumps out at him is of the 384 students 80 of them are currently enrolled in special education, which is 21% of the student population, significantly higher than he recalls from the past. He is going to opine that these two metrics have to do with what Super. Stevens reported about mantics the higher per pupil cost have a lot to do with Hartford telling them how to run the school system, not how the Town wants to run the school system. He also understands that the Town gets a ton of educational cost sharing money from the same folks telling them what to do. He doesn't know that number, but he is guessing it is around \$4.5 million of the BOE's \$9.5 million budget, so he guesses that gives them the right to tell the town what to do, he isn't sure because that is Super. Stevens expertise. What he is wondering is if there is a tipping point the mandates how Hartford is telling the schools outweighs what the schools would do and the Town just says keep your money/revenue to the Town, Willington will run it's own school. His question is can the Town move forward in our own election doing what we do well. One of the things that occurs to him is Super. Stevens talking about it and he is on the school building committee which Peter is a part of with an enrollment expert, in small schools you can have an anomalies of class size, so if Ashford has a really low number in one area and we have a really high number in another area can't Willington just say we don't want to regionalize, were not interested in it, but can they just share a resource. Can Ashford and Willington share a resource and fill in the blanks. He is guessing the answer is no, so can the Town say goodbye to them goodbye to ECS revenue and can the Town run it's own schools more effectively with the tax dollars they raise.

**GOOD AND WELFARE:** Chairman Lawler stated that Karen Cote from Human Services sent him a flyer about a fundraiser they are having. It is a comedy show on Saturday, April 20, 2024 at the Rockville Elks Carriage House, \$25 per person. It will help raise funds for the Human Services Department.

Christina Mailhos reported on last night's CIP meeting. She stated that where they are at in the process, they saw their first draft of the big spread sheet that shows all the different projects that have been requested and which years, and Donna has attempted to put some funding sources towards each of those projects, whether it is grants, local funds or operating budget. It lays it all out. They try to get to a number that does not increase drastically what the local spending amount is, the amount that they need to collect from the taxpayers to make it all work. She stated that it was the very first run of it, and it was very encouraging that it isn't a huge number more than they spent last year. They have been trying to do 10% more than the year before because for years and years they have drastically underfunded the capital program so over the last 10 years they have been trying to make incremental increases to it and they are now at a point where it is okay. She stated that the biggest thing in it is the request for the BOE, which a year one ask of \$1.5 million dollars (the roof, HVAC and solar). She stated that they are going to need a little bit more money than that, but they have the money from last CIP year to use this CIP year. Walter Parsell asked what the priority on solar vs a roof is. Christina stated that the priority is



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driven by the timing of when the grants are available and the deadline to get the money. She stated that there is some thinking that because they are up on the roof and taking things apart anyway and putting things on it, there might be some savings because they are opening things anyway. She stated that it does make sense to do all of it together and it does look like they can make that funding work in year one. She stated that is the good news and the bad news is that they argued over almost every single thing. She stated that the other big thing is the fire departments, and their original request is for a joint project of building two fire stations for \$11.5 million. She stated that they can argue that is \$11.5 million the right number, is the year they are putting it in the right year, should they be building two fire stations, how do they decide which one is most important, there is one that is not functional right now, should they decide to just do something with that, but then there is the overlay that they need a committee to help figure out what they actually need built, where they need it built. She believes First Selectman Tanaka is committed to making it happen quickly and they did put some funding into the plan so that the committee will have the money to do the studies to make something happen quickly so everyone can move on and make a plan. Stef Summers stated that there was money in the plan already because it was catchup money for WHFD where WFD#1 already was with their planning because they started it years earlier, so they redirected that money to the committee. It seemed to make sense to use that money to come up with a more cohesive committee outlook on what they do with both and what is the order of things. Christina stated that what will happen is next week the BOS coming to the BOF with their budget which probably isn't approved because they aren't planning to meet before then and they do not have an approved budget right now so they will probably have a draft. She stated that a lot of the numbers in their budget correspond to CIP projects so that's why it gets a little bit muddy, but she thinks on the surface of it its okay. She stated that they are meeting with CIP on Wednesday of next week to try to lock in what year one looks like in the plan so that when the BOF hears the BOS budget on Thursday it will make a little more sense.

## ADJOURNMENT:

Vice President Prusak moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:16 pm.

Seconded by Walter Parsell.

Motion passed (6-0).

Respectfully submitted,

*Eileen Smith*

Eileen Smith

Recording Secretary

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2024 MAR -4 P 12:40

  
TOWN CLERK