

**Preston Board of Finance
Public Hearing
Thursday, April 27, 2023
Preston Veterans Memorial School Gymnasium and Library**

1. **Call to Order** - John Moulson called the meeting to order at 7:38 P.M.

2. **Roll Call**

Members

John Moulson - Chairman
Robert Congdon - V. Chairman
Kayla Thompson - Clerk
Stacey Becker
Denise Beale
Zachary Maurice

Alternates

Robert Castronova
Andrew Sawyer

Also Present

Sandra Allyn-Gauthier - First Selectwoman
Cindy Varricchio - Finance Director
Dr. Seitsinger - Superintendent of Schools
Kimberly Lang - Recording Secretary

Members of the Public - 53

3. Public Hearing

Board of Education Presentation

Dr. Roy Seitsinger reviewed the process to formulate the Board of Education's Budget. He stated that while there is a 1.3 million dollar increase, the Town of Preston is proud of its school system. He then stated that significant influences on the budget:

- Staffing - which includes teachers, custodial staff, food prep staff, bus drivers, and other staff in various supporting roles.
- There are over 265 State mandates that the school must comply with
- Substitute teacher fees have gone from \$85 to \$150 to \$180 per day over the last 3 years; significant, quick changes in a very short time.
- Almost 4 million just in high school tuitions

While these increases are out of our control, the Board of Education has taken steps to help curb the cost of maintaining our school system. Those steps are:

- ➔ Partnering with the Town and having already locked in lower fuel costs for next year.

- Partnering with the Town for Health Care coverage that has significantly reduced costs for both the Town and the school system.
- Aggressively applying for grants that reimburse for necessary upgrades or to cover costs to help reduce the need for Capital Funds.
- The school has received a \$55,000 grant that reimbursed HVAC upgrades
- Received , a 3-year grant of \$226,000 grant to cover the cost of a Social Worker
- Just applied for 3 more grants to address school safety and wellness.
- The grants are all funds that must be used in addition to local funding that has to be provided.

It was shared that 85% of the Budget is made up of 4 items:

- ❖ Salaries 47%
- ❖ Health Care 12%
- ❖ Special Education 11%
- ❖ High School tuition 15%

Dr. Seitsinger shared that while statewide schools are seeing a decrease in school population, Preston is seeing an increase. Also it needs to be reiterated that schools are being asked to take on many more roles than in years past. Schools are dealing with students experiencing hunger, violence, depression, and a host of other situations that in years past were not required for school teachers and staff to deal with, but now they are and we need to be prepared for the sake of our students, their families, and our community.

General Government Presentation

Sandra Allyn-Gauthier shared that the Town has made great strides in the past year to keep costs down by partnering with the school for services, applying for grants, and everyday measures that haven't negatively impacted the services and programs to the community. She went on to state that several factors have made the recent past financially difficult, such as:

- High Inflation
- Supply change and demand issues
- War between Ukraine and Russia

Looking at a brighter aspect, the Covid Pandemic, will officially be over May 11th.

The Budget parameters were then reviewed as follows:

- ★ **Staff** - a 4% increase, there's a need to keep employees, and cross train staff to meet the challenges of meeting the needs of the Town.
- ★ **To keep staffing costs down** - the Town has partnered with SCCOG for building officials, the Building Inspector and Zoning Enforcement Officer. Preston has partnered with Ledyard to cover the Assessor's position. A full time Firefighter has been added to cover

shifts to meet safety guidelines and ensure the department can meet the needs of the public in an emergency. The Town will be applying for a Safer Grant that will provide more firefighters that are needed with ever fewer volunteers.

- ★ **Public Works** - There is a 14% increase in that department to continue the preventive maintenance and road repairs for the safety of all who use them. Inflation has been factored into this. Also hauling and tipping fees have increased. The town is looking into ways to decrease funds needed for trash removal.
- ★ **Grant Writer** - A \$25,000 Grant Writer has been added to keep up with the very time consuming and fast turnaround time that grants require. To date the Town has applied for over 12 million in grants and currently over 11 million in grants are preapproved, recommended, or approved. Every grant received means that work and improvements are being done at a significant savings to the citizens of Preston.
- ★ **Technology** - We need software upgrades and servers. We have a plan to replace desktops and laptops on a 5-year rotation so that cost isn't dealt with all at once.

Selectwoman Sandra Allyn-Gauthier concluded by stating that the Town is maximizing resources and that the budget is a reflection of the Town's values.

Revenue Budget

Board of Finance Chairman John Moulson then reviewed the Proposed Revenue Budget for the audience. He shared the Estimated Revenues Summary as follows:

- ❖ Property Taxes 414,484,114
- ❖ State Revenues \$4,263,273
- ❖ Local Revenues \$544,636
- ❖ Unassigned Fund Balance \$1,200,000

He stated that the total proposed Revenue Budget is \$20,492,023 a \$1,708,904 increase over last year, which is a 9.1% increase. Mr. Moulson also shared how even though the Unassigned Fund Balance has been used over the past 10 years, it has continued to grow. He then reviewed the Property Tax Calculation Summary. By looking at the total expenses of the Board of Education and the General Government of \$20,492,023 and subtracting the State Revenue of \$4,263,273, Local Revenues of \$544,636, and the \$1,200,000 from the Unassigned Fund Balance; the \$14,484,114 remaining is what will need to be collected through property taxes. This is the amount that sets the mil rate.

Next the Chair reviewed the Tax Collection rate. He explained that because the Tax Collection Rate has been high over the last 9 years, the Board of Finance has decided to calculate the rate at 99% rather than the traditional 98.5%.

Finally, the calculations to arrive at a 23.90 mil rate were reviewed.

That concluded the presentation, and John Moulson opened the Public Hearing to comments from the public.

Stacey Becker read an email into the record. The email was from Patricia Biggins, 102 Watson Road who stated her concerns about the increases in the budget. She said the increased value of her home with the reevaluation has created a hardship on her household budget.

Trish Smith, 225 Old Jewett City Road, stated that she is newly retired and on a fixed income and the increases will be a hardship and hopes that the Board of Finance reconsidered their decision.

Pat Covino, 3 Downing Drive, stated that the combined increases in the house value with the recent reevaluation and the increase in the Town's budget have created a hardship for many older homeowners and hopes that the Board of Finance reconsidered their decision.

Susan Strader, 463 Route 164, stated that she appreciated the indepth work that's been done to create the budget. She feels that the use of the Fund Balance is key, and supports the budget moving forward intact to a Town Meeting.

Krystine Kelly, 24 Tanglewood Drive, asked questions about Eversource's use of the Hospital property and where the revenue from their use is reported in the budget.

Mike Clancy, 53 McClimon Road, appreciated the hard work that has been done to create the budget. It also stated that he hasn't seen a lot of effort from the Town and school sharing services with other towns to help curb the cost of things. He stated that he feels this budget has a slim chance of passing.

Bill Legler, 55 McClimon Road, stated that the school wants increases yet their test scores have dropped to the second lowest in the area. People can't afford these increases.

Andy Depta, 6 Young Court, stated that inflation in items is the same for homeowners as it is for the Town and Board of Education. He then suggested a variety of areas that could be cut in the General Government Budget.

Kayla Thompson, read an email received from Beth Bonosconi, 5 Tyler Drive, who stated she is in full support of the Education Budget as it stands.

Rich Vidot, 331 Route 2, Stated that he was new to Town and moved here because Preston had the lowest taxes in the area, however with the proposed increases he is rethinking his decision. He also feels that the Town needs to be more forthcoming in information concerning the Hospital property.

Jill Keith, 26 Tanglewood Drive, stated she has attended as many meetings and has read minutes of various boards to learn as much about the budget process as possible. She stated that she is against the use of the 1.2 million dollars from the Unassigned Fund Balance. She feels that this is short sighted and a folly with no Policy and Procedure Manual for the Board of Finance to follow. She stated that she supports the General Government Budget, but does not support the Board of Education Budget.

Victoria Spicer, 20 Mattern Road, stated that many of the State's mandates are done without additional funding, yet the schools are required to implement them. She stated that she is in favor of the budgets moving forward intact.

John Marino, 61 McClimon Road, stated he appreciates the time and effort of everyone, but feels the increases for people on fixed incomes will be a hardship for many of Preston's residences.

Andy Biblideo, 99 Lakeview Drive, stated that he agreed that people on fixed incomes will have difficulties with this budget. He also stated that the Town has no evaluation system in place to justify raises for its employees. He stated that 10% increases are not sustainable for the townspeople.

Susan Strader, 463 Route 164, stated that there was misinformation being shared and that, particularly when it comes to salaries. She went on to explain the teacher's salary pay scale.

John Marino, 61 McClimon Road, stated that the Town can't afford the teacher's salaries as they are not that they don't deserve it, we can't afford it.

With no others requesting to speak, the Board of Finance Chairman, John Moulson closed the Public Hearing at 9:25 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,

Kimberly Lang

Recording Secretary

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Jim Keith
PRESTON TOWN CLERK