



Town of Groton, Connecticut

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Meeting Minutes

Town Council

Mayor Bruce S. Flax, Councilor Dean G. Antipas, Councilor Diane Barber, Councilor Greg Grim, Councilor Rich Moravsik, Councilor Karen F. Morton, Councilor Bonnie Nault, Councilor Deb Peruzzotti, and Councilor Harry A. Watson

Wednesday, March 29, 2017

7:00 PM

Groton Senior Center

FYE 2018 BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING SPECIAL MEETING

Mayor Flax called the meeting to order at 7:02 p.m.

I. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Flax, Councilor Antipas, Councilor Barber, Councilor Grim, Councilor Morton, Councilor Nault, Councilor Peruzzotti, Councilor Watson and Councilor Moravsik

Also present were Town Manager Mark Oefinger, Finance Director Cindy Landry, Town Clerk Betsy Moukawsher, Groton Town Police Chief L.J. Fusaro, Deputy Police Chief Paul Gately, Superintendent of Schools Dr. Michael Graner, and Assistant Superintendent of Schools Susan Austin

II. SALUTE TO THE FLAG

The Salute to the Flag was observed.

III. INTRODUCTION OF ELECTED OFFICIALS

Mayor Flax recognized Board of Education Chair Kim Shepardson Watson, Board of Education members Andrea Ackerman, Gary Baker, Jay Weitlauf, and Lee White; RTM members Lian Obrey 2nd District, Juliette Parker 2nd District, Susan Deane-Shinbrot 5th District, Gary Welles 5th District, and Jim Nault 6th District; City of Groton Mayor Marian Galbraith, Deputy Mayor Keith Hedrick, City Councilor Jill Rusk, and City Councilor Lawrence Gerrish.

IV. READING OF PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE

Town Clerk Betsy Moukawsher read the Public Hearing notice as posted in The Day newspaper on March 17, 2017.

V. BUDGET PRESENTATIONS

a. Town Manager

Town Manager Mark Oefinger presented an outline of the proposed FYE 2018 budget. He distributed a summary of the proposed FYE 2018 budget.

b. Superintendent of Schools

Board of Education Chair Kim Shepardson Watson made a brief presentation on the proposed FYE 2018 Board of Education Budget, as did Superintendent of Schools Dr. Michael Graner.

VI. OPENING OF PUBLIC HEARING

Mayor Flax opened the Public Hearing to hear comments from citizens at 7:50 p.m. He gave instructions to the speakers, including limiting their comments to a period of three minutes. He stated that he had received written correspondences from Richard Fitzgerald and from Anna Barber, which were distributed to all Town Councilors and the Town Clerk.

Richard Fitzgerald, 8 Benjamin Road, Mystic, announced that he is a member of the Planning Commission, but that he was addressing the Town Council as a Town resident. He urged the Town Council to support the Coastal Access Trail, the Blue Trail, and the Harbor Management Plan included in the Planning Department requested budget. Mr. Fitzgerald's statement is on file in the

Town Clerk's office.

Jim Nault, 41 Pearl Street, Mystic, disclosed that he is the Chair of the RTM Finance Committee. He emphasized the difficulty of the current budget situation in the town. He stated that high taxes are destructive to Groton. He stated that high taxes drive out businesses and the elderly community on fixed incomes. He stated that younger residents will leave because they can't afford to purchase a home for their young families. He stated that high taxes drive up rents and drive down property values. The Town Manager has proposed a 9.1 - 25.6% tax increase in this budget. Mr. Nault stated that he considers this action to be a non-starter. He stated that last year, the Town Manager proposed an 8.3% tax increase. He stated that at the first RTM Finance Committee meeting, the Town Manager was asked why he thought this was a good thing. In response, the Town Manager stated that he didn't think that this would be it at the end of the day, after the RTM cuts. Mr. Nault stated that the Town Manager expects the Town Council and the RTM to do the hard work in deciding what has to be cut. Mr. Nault stated that the Manager has asked his Department Heads to give him a budget that included a 5% cut, not just a level service budget. He stated that they gave it to him, but that the RTM doesn't have this information. He stated that last year when the RTM made cuts to various accounts, the Town Manager complained by saying that the RTM didn't take into consideration what he wanted. Mr. Nault stated that the Town Manager didn't provide any direction to the RTM. Mr. Nault stated that the Town Manager hasn't provided any direction this year either. He stated that last year the RTM was vilified as being Osama bin Laden like for the cuts that were made. He stated that as far as he knows, not a single Parks and Recreation program was cut or a single employee was laid off as a result of the cuts. Mr. Nault stated that this budget needs to be seriously reviewed in every account and savings must be found wherever possible. He stated that if it is not required by a State Statute, then we need to look at cutting it. He stated that he is not as confident as the Town Manager that the Governor's ECS cuts and proposed teacher pension liability will get changed in Hartford. He stated that the budget must not be balanced on the Town's back.

Katherine Brightly, 68 Brookshaven Road, announced that she is a current member of the Groton Library Board. She mentioned many of the benefits that the town receives as a result of the library services. Ms. Brightly's statement is on file in the Town Clerk's office.

Sandi Scott, 191 Pequot Avenue, Mystic, encouraged the Town Council to support the Mystic and Noank Library's 2018 budget request. Mrs. Scott's statement is on file in the Town Clerk's office.

Nancy Baill, 301 Buddington Road, stated that she is a member of the Groton Senior Center 55 Club. She listed a number of programs offered and benefits from the activities at the Senior Center. She encouraged the Town Council to support the requested 2018 budget.

Barbara Pantalone, 155 Judson Avenue, spoke in favor of the Senior Center and requested that the Town Council not cut any of the programs.

Jill Rusk, 85 Baker Avenue, announced that she is a Groton City Councilor. She asked for the continued support and funding for the City of Groton Police Department. Ms. Rusk's statement is on file in the Town Clerk's Office.

Clare Rogers, 138 Payer Lane, Mystic, spoke in favor of the school budget. Mr. Rogers's statement is on file in the Town Clerk's office.

Rod Desmarais, 81 High Street, Mystic, spoke in favor of the Office of Planning and Development. He urged the Town Council to support its efforts and to fund its entire budget.

Ralph Batty, 42 Ramsdell Street, disclosed that he is employed with the Town of Groton Parks and Recreation Department. He described the Karate program and the benefits gained from

participation in it. He asked the Town Council to keep the Parks and Recreation programs fully funded.

Larry Croxton, 35 Knoll Drive, disclosed that he is a Groton teacher and a life long resident. He stated that he called for unity among all of Groton's many departments and governing bodies. He stated that one common thread is our schools and that he hopes that the Town Council would continue to support the programs. Mr. Croxton's statement is on file in the Town Clerk's office.

Paul Bates, 47 Church Street, Noank, urged the Town Council to support funding the completion of the Harbor Management Plan.

Rebecca Beyus, 93 Charlton Lane, announced that she works for the Groton Public Schools and she urged the Town Council to support the Board of Education budget.

Patricia Hickey, 22 Overlook Avenue, stated that she is an advocate for the Groton Senior Center. She stated that she encourages the Town Council to keep the budget intact so that the services can continue for the seniors in Groton.

Catherine Young, 14 Bushnell Street, announced that she has been a member of the Groton Economic Development Commission for three years. She stated that the Office of Planning and Development has been very busy and had accomplished 26 projects this past year. She urged the Town Council to continue supporting its efforts by approving its requested budget.

Marian Galbraith, 771 Shennecossett Road, announced that she is the Mayor of the City of Groton. She stated that the Town of Groton has not returned the arbitrated funds to the City of Groton for the FYE2016 and FYE2017 Highway Budgets. She stated that this has caused increases to the City residents both years, 22% in 2016 and 17% in 2017. She requested that the Town work with the City in order to develop a plan to reduce costs. Mayor Galbraith's statement is on file in the Town Clerk's office.

Xiaudong Ai, 251 Hunting Ridge Drive, Mystic, stated that taxpayers cannot afford another property tax increase. He stated that the town has too much duplication in services and too many governments. He suggested that they change the structure of government in order to streamline services.

Heather Frost, 251 Shewville Road, Mystic, stated that she is a Pfizer employee. She urged the Town Council to fully fund the Parks and Recreation and the Board of Education budgets. She stated that when new employees are looking to locate to a town, they look for good schools and good parks programs.

Susan Dowling, 22 Leward Lane, Noank, announced that she is a member of the Economic Development Commission. She stated that the Office of Planning and Development has been very busy this year and that they had accomplished many development projects. She urged the Town Council to fully fund the Office of Planning and Development Services.

Mitch Shinbrot, 116 Dartmouth Drive, Mystic, stated that he has been a resident of the town for thirty-three years and an employee of Electric Boat for thirty-four years. He stated that taxpayers and businesses can not afford any more property tax increases; people and businesses will leave the area if taxes continue to increase.

Jody Katz, 57 Murphys Drive, stated that she is an advocate for the Groton Public Library. She stated that the Library offers services for everyone and that it is a central community center for many people. She urged the Town Council to refrain from cutting service from the Groton Public Library budget.

State Representative Joe de la Cruz, 98 Corey Road, stated that Representative Christine Conley could not attend this evening because she is in the hospital with a broken leg. He stated that State Senator Somers is still working in Hartford this evening. He stated that he served on both the Town Council and the RTM and that he hopes that the Town Council isn't trying to figure out how to absorb a thirteen million dollar reduction from the state. He stated that it is not fair to our town and our town taxpayers. He stated that the entire delegation from Southeastern Connecticut is working together to find a solution to the State budget crisis and to relieve the proposed cuts to Groton.

Patricia Griffith, 949 River Road, Mystic, stated that she had been in and around this area since 1956 when her grandmother bought a house on River Road. She thanked the members of the Town Council and the RTM. She requested that the Library services remain intact and that the hours of service remain the same or greater. She stated that salaries will need to be cut, but do not cut any portion of the Library services. Ms. Griffiths' statement is on file in the Town Clerk's office.

Gretchen Chipperini, 87 Phoenix Drive, stated that businesses in the community cannot afford a fifteen percent property tax hike. She stated that property taxes have been steadily going up with a greater percentage increase. She stated that Navy housing has been privatized and that the town cannot tax the property. She stated that the Odd Fellow's should be denied their non-profit tax status. She stated that the City and the Town need to be combined in order to reduce the redundancies. She stated that the Town holds the purse strings and that it can force the issue. She stated that Groton Long Point Police are used by private citizens for house checks. She stated that economic development, diversification, and a vision of the future are needed. She stated that the town does not market itself very well and that she will be meeting with the Town Council next week to discuss these issues. The Mayor informed Ms. Chipperini that her time was up and that she was welcome to speak again after everyone else has had an opportunity to do so.

Richard Semeraro, 202 High Street, Mystic, stated that he was there to speak in favor of the Libraries, but that it has all had been said by the previous speakers. He stated that there are hundreds of Groton residents and non-residents that contribute a substantial amount of money and volunteer services to the libraries. He stated that they should be encouraged to do so by the continued support of the Town of Groton.

Keith Hedrick, 156 Shennecossett Parkway, announced that he is the Deputy Mayor of the City of Groton. He stated that the Town is faced with a large deficit due to a 1.9% decrease in the Grand List and an addition \$14.8 million decrease due to cuts to the State Education Cost Share grant. He suggested that the Town could increase revenues by selling properties that they own. He stated that his concern is that the Town will again cut the City of Groton Roads and Highways budget and try to cut the City of Groton Police budget. He stated that the City of Groton prevailed in an arbitration case, but the Town has not paid the \$725,000. This caused the City to raise taxes last year by 17% in order to keep valuable services. He stated that cutting the City Police budget would leave the City residents at risk without proper coverage. Mr. Hedrick stated that the City provides over 30% of the tax base to the Town and only asks for approximately 4% in order to fund Roads and Highway and half of the City Police budget. He asked the Town Council not to balance the Town budget on the backs of the City of Groton tax payers.

Kathleen Jones, 12 Rhonda Drive, Mystic, stated that she and her husband grew up in and around Groton and that she is employed with Argia Cruises. She spoke as the parent of two children, one of which is a student with special needs. She stated that she joined the delegation from Groton to give testimony in Hartford supporting the restoration of funds to the Education Cost Share grant. Ms. Jones stated that with the potential changes in federal education policies, it is important to continue with the special needs programs that are ethically and fiscally responsible.

Jamal Beckford, 74 Pleasant Street, stated that he is a candidate for Groton City Council and is employed with Electric Boat. He asked the Town Council to reconsider cutting the City Highway and Police budgets. He stated that Pfizer employs just over 3000 employees and Electric Boat employs 14,000, which most are located in Groton. He stated that employment at Electric Boat is scheduled to grow during the next ten years to about 18,000. He stated that this traffic puts a considerable amount of wear and tear on the roads. Mr. Beckford implored the Council to support the large employers by funding the City of Groton Highway budget.

Brian Neman, 76 Allen Street, stated that a lot has been said about unity and collaboration. He stated that a more detailed presentation has been made by the Mayor of the City and the Deputy Mayor. He stated that he has watched the Town Council's budget deliberations over the past several years. He stated that the more difficult the budget is, the more the attitude toward the City changes, as if it was not a part of the town. He stated that the City is treated as if it was a charity, as if resources were being diverted away from the Town and given to the City. He stated that everyone in the Town: Groton Long Point, Noank, Mystic, Poquonnock, Center Groton, North end, all pay the same tax. He stated that everyone in the City pays the same mill rate as everyone else to the Town. He stated that if the Town Council cuts services from the City without a plan to provide these services, they are telling the citizens of the City that they are second class citizens. He stated that the City is a part of the Town.

Rob Zuliani, 23 Cushman Street, stated that this is a very difficult year and that the Town Council has a very difficult job. He stated that he appreciates everything that they do, and the Board of Education. He thanked Town Manager Mark Oefinger for his many years of service to our community. He stated that he supports the Board of Education, the Planning Department, the Senior Center, all three libraries, the Town Recreation Department, the Police Department, the Highway Department, Social Services, all the Departments in the Town of Groton, the City of Groton, and Groton Long Point. He stated that he support the entire Town of Groton, completely. He stated that if the Town Council has to cut the budget, cut fairly and equally. He stated that he knows that the Town Council will do their best to protect the community.

Susan Dean-Shinbrot, 116 Dartmouth Drive, stated that she is a Para Professional at Cutler Middle School, co-President of the Para Professional Union, a fifth district RTM representative, Chair of the RTM Public Works Committee, and a lifelong resident of Groton. She stated that she is having difficulty knowing what to do about the Education budget. She stated that in her conversation with the Director of Public Works Gary Schneider, he stated that we can't keep kicking the can down the road. She stated that she hopes the road is a long one because she plans to keep kicking the can. She mentioned a few Capital Improvement Projects that may be in jeopardy of losing funding. She stated that she hoped that the Town Council will make the difficult cuts and decisions needed. She wished the Town Council well.

Portia Borderline, 159 Shennecossett Parkway, stated that she is an alumni of Fitch High School, and that she support the Board of Education budget. She suggested that the Board of Education review the Central Office staffing to reduce redundancy in services. She supported the approved new combined middle school. She stated that teachers and para professional positions should not be cut.

Dan Stevenson, 33 Elderkin Avenue, stated that he has lived in Groton for four years. He stated that he is an engineer for Electric Boat and that he doesn't own a house, but that he rents in Groton. He stated that spending in education and recreation are very important. He stated that there are studies that show that for every dollar invested in education, we get seven dollars back. He stated that he agrees with the statement that if you continue to cut budgets to the bone, we will fosters a culture of only funding what is necessary.

Chris Regan, resident of Stonington, stated that his family has owned businesses in Groton for

sixty-five years. He stated that he has been advocating for many years for the Town and City to come together. He stated that until the two governments take these issues seriously, we will continue to have these budget crises. He stated that they cannot put the burden on the back of the business community or the resident tax payers. He stated that if they tax the business community twenty percent more, then development will stop. He stated that businesses will move out of Groton and into neighboring communities. He stated that we have big government in the town. He stated that we need to combine forces and become lean and mean just like the private sector. He stated that Groton is the largest community in New London County, the biggest employer, with the most departments. He stated that we should be the driving force in New London County.

Megan McDonald, 195 Charter Oak Drive, stated that she is a military spouse and they live in military housing. She stated that she felt compelled to speak in support of the budgets for Board of Education, Groton Public Library, and Parks and Recreation.

Gretchen Chipperini, 87 Phoenix Drive, continued to give the Town Council suggestions for addressing the budget. Ms. Chipperini's statement is on file in the Town Clerk's office.

VII. ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Flax adjourned the meeting at 9:45 p.m.

Attest:

Betsy Moukawsher
Groton Town Clerk
Clerk of the Council