

(Note: These Minutes are draft until approved at the next regularly scheduled meeting of the Town Council)

**NEW MILFORD TOWN COUNCIL
BUDGET DELIBERATION
MINUTES
March 4, 2025**

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NEW MILFORD, CT

Present: Mayor Peter Bass
Sal Rynkiewicz
MaryJane Lundgren
Paul Murphy
Doug Skelly
Bob Gambino
Katy Francis
Alex Thomas
Chris Cosgrove (by phone)
Tom Esposito (by phone)

Also Present: Olga Melnikov, Director of Finance
Walter O'Connor, Chair, Finance
Diane Klaif, Finance
Roland Castro, Finance
Brian Lastra, Tax Assessor
Nancy McGavic, Tax Collector
Dan Calhoun, Parks & Recreation
Graham Musson, Parks & Recreation
Greg Bollaro, Personnel Director
Marchin Stankevich, Personnel/Building
Chuck Ballard, Town Engineer
Wendy Faulenbach, Board of Education
Jason O'Connor, Youth Agency
Tyler Bergemann, Gaylordsville Fire Dept
Leslie Sarich, Board of Education
Donna Hespe, Ambulance
Maria Leo, Youth Agency
Tom Williams, Senior Center
Ivana Butera, Social Services
Dave Watson, IT
Alan Wilcoxson, Police Department
Earl Wheeler, Police Department
Dr. Janet Parlato, Superintendent of Schools
Sean Delaney, Water Witch Hose Co.
Laura Regan, Zoning

Mayor Bass called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm followed by the Pledge of Allegiance and moment of silence.

1. **Public Comment** (Note: These meetings are presentations, not deliberations on the budget. Public comment will be available at the beginning of the meeting for 15 minutes with each speaker limited to 3 minutes. Sign up is required prior to the scheduled start of the meeting. Additional time will be provided at the end of the meeting to address the council if more than 15 minutes in total is necessary. In addition, public comment will be available when the Council deliberates and at the Town Meeting.)

Joseph Failla, a New Milford resident, said he would support more money for the Senior Center as the population continues to age. He said the budget in general, though, needs to be reduced on both the Board of Education side and Town side. He said there was some discussion about eliminating fees on the outside users of the turf fields but said the Board is responsible for maintaining the fields and the money goes for that. He also asked that the Town not use the Waste Management money for anything other than community projects.

Hilary Ram, a New Milford resident, said a 5% increase is too high especially when there have been big surpluses and money injected into the Town through ARPA. She said it is time for the taxpayers to get some relief. She said any surplus should be used to bring down the next year's budget. She also said capital should be in the budget. She is concerned that the debt for the Town is \$70 million with \$7 million payments per year which is unsustainable.

2. Town Council Budget Deliberations

Mayor Bass said the Town has a revenue problem due in part to some decisions made at the State of Connecticut Legislative level. The State has changed the way the Town can tax motor vehicles which will cost the town \$1.4 million in tax revenues. The State also allowed the Town to give disabled Veterans 100% tax abatements and would reimburse the Town – the State has not done that which will cost the Town \$150,000. The Mayor noted that the City of Hartford lost so much revenue they asked the State to change the formula and the Governor signed an emergency order to allow towns to change the 85% appraisal to 90%. This will help offset half of the lost revenue. Mayor Bass asked Mr. Lastra how many cars there are in New Milford and he answered 28,000. Mayor Bass asked Ms. Melnikov what the increase in the budget would be if the car tax decrease was not happening and she answered 3.27%. Mayor Bass said the country is in an inflationary period and costs of goods are rising. He said the question people need to ask is what services does New Milford want and at what level. Major drivers in this budget include ambulance personnel, police department, debt service and Public Works. The Town has a AAA bond rating due in large part to how it has budgeted expenses and capital expenses.

Ms. Francis moved to approve the Town budget at \$48,005,755.00, seconded by Mr. Murphy and passed unanimously.

Ms. Francis moved to amend the Town budget by removing the Facilities Tech 1 position from Building and Maintenance at \$62,753.60, removing the Community Information Administrator position from the Mayor's office at \$26,000, and reducing the library Materials and Supplies line down to \$66,000 making the budget number \$47,905.001, seconded by Mr. Esposito and passed unanimously.

Mr. Cosgrove moved to approve the Board of Education budget at \$76,332,587, seconded by Mr. Gambino and passed unanimously.

Mr. Cosgrove moved to amend the Board of Education budget by reducing \$295,000.

He said the Council does not have line item authority but his thought was to reduce the Assistant Principal at Hill and Plain, reduce the .5 psychologist at Hill and Plain and Sarah Noble, remove the 1.0 Department of Instruction secretary, remove the 1.0 Interventionist for the Department of Instruction and reduce property services by \$50,000.

He said the student population has dropped over the years and staffing has not. He said he looked at the administrative positions increasing to \$2.7 million. He said the Board needs to hold down its spending.

Mr. Esposito seconded the motion.

Ms. Thomas said she was not in favor of any reduction having toured the schools she has seen that the staff requires specific certifications. She said the assistant principals have to have proper qualifications to fill in for the principal. The schools are still working on coming out of Covid and the schools have to pay for social workers and psychologists right now.

Ms. Lundgren said she also is opposed to any cut to the Board of Education. She said the State legislature was bipartisan in its support to add an additional \$40 million to Special Education funding. She said she is opposed to cutting the psychologists given the number of students on free or reduced lunch programs and any potential Medicaid cuts at the federal level.

Mr. Skelly said the cost to maintain the turf fields is far less than what the BOE was spending prior since they don't have to paint the lines anymore, they don't have to mow and the LED lighting has saved money. Youth programs should not have to pay for a custodian if the custodian is there for another event already. He said the youth in this town deserve to play on those turf fields.

Mr. Murphy said the children in this town are the town's greatest asset. He said he had been hearing from people in town that they were going to vote down the budget, specifically the BOE side, because of the increase. He said he hoped the public would now support the budgets as both sides took a cut from these votes. He said the BOE has the same number of teachers from 10 years ago and these proposed cuts are not cutting any teachers. He said he knows it takes time to turn the numbers around in education and the town needs to put out a better product.

The motion passed 6-3.

Aye: Rynkiewicz, Murphy, Francis, Skelly, Cosgrove, Esposito

No: Lundgren, Gambino, Thomas

Ms. Melnikov said the increase in the mill rate if the Council accepts the 90% motor vehicle appraisal will be 3.61%. The new Board of Education budget is \$76,037,587 or 3.51% increase and the Town is \$47,905,000 or 3.14% increase. The total proposed budget to be sent to the Board of Finance is \$123,942,588.

Ms. Thomas said the community has spent a lot of money purchasing new equipment and new vehicles which will need maintenance and replacement in the future. She felt with the multimillion dollar surpluses the Town has experienced a freeze on any town expenditures for the remaining three months of the fiscal year could be used to provide tax relief to the residents.

Mayor Bass said the ARPA money and capital reserve dollars spent were spent on first responders needs, ambulance personnel, social services and the youth agency. The Board of Education also received a

couple of million dollars. The capital expenditures were for equipment that replaced trucks that were 15-20 years old and required more and more maintenance. He said new equipment is more fuel efficient. He said the police department is one of three in the State with a de-escalation simulator. He said the Town also needs to keep its unassigned fund balance healthy.

Mr. Murphy said if the Town had waited to purchase some of the equipment it would be more costly now due to inflation.

Mr. Gambino moved to adjourn the Town Council budget deliberation meeting at 7:57 pm, seconded by Mr. Skelly and passed unanimously.

Minutes recorded by:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Stephen R. Badd".

Recording Secretary