

**CITY OF BRIDGEPORT
BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS
COMMITTEE
SPECIAL MEETING
APRIL 20, 2021**

ATTENDANCE: Scott Burns, Co-chair; Ernest Newton Co-chair; Jorge Cruz, Jeanette Herron, Matthew McCarthy, Mary McBride-Lee, AmyMarie Vizzo-Paniccia

OTHERS: Council President Aidee Nieves; Council Member(s): M. Valle, M. Pereira, & S. Suliman; K. Flatto, Finance Director; Nestor Nkwo, OPM Director; Elaine Braithwaite, City Librarian; T. Errichetti, Library Board; Albert Benejan Grajales; John Weldon, Joseph Sokolovic, Marlene Siegel, Superintendent Michael Testani; John Soltis, Barbara; Tom; Call in User 1; iPhone; 203-209-1058; 203-275-6420; 203-877-0211; 203-860-5666; 617-803-0917; 203-543-8878; 929-436-2866

CALL TO ORDER

Co-chair Burns called the meeting to order at 6:08 p.m. A quorum was present.

Co-chair Newton reminded everyone that they need to be respectful to the staff and Department heads.

BRIDGEPORT LIBRARY

Ms. Braithwaite then greeted everyone. She said that the Library receives 1.3 mills of the property taxes. They are opening a new branch and will need more staff. They are looking to fill in some positions that they have lost in the past, such as the IT staff. She mentioned that they were looking for refreshing and replacing their computers, the oldest unit is from 2016. She said that they wished to bond for those items.

Mr. Nkwo said that he was not recommending that they bond for those items.

Mr. Errichetti indicated he wished to comment.

Council Member Newton said that he was not in favor of allowing anyone but the Department Directors to speak. Council Member McCarthy and Council Member Herron both agreed.

**** COUNCIL MEMBER HERRON MOVED TO NOT ALLOW ANY ONE TO SPEAK OTHER THAN THE DEPARTMENT HEADS.**

**** COUNCIL MEMBER VIZZO-PANICCIA SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Ms. Braithwaite said that she would speak with Mr. Nkwo about the Capital requests.

Council Member Newton asked if they were planning on opening any other buildings. Ms. Braithwaite said that they were opening up a branch on the Eastside and they were working on opening up a location in the North End.

Council Member McCarthy asked about their relationship with the State Library and about their funding for internet service. Ms. Braithwaite said that they have a good relationship with the State Library and were able to receive some funding last fall. There is another round of funding and Bridgeport will be receiving a smaller amount of funding. She said that there was a program to receive low band Internet service and they will be looking into that along with other programs.

Mr. Flatto said that the American Rescue Act had allocations for Internet Services and he would send the Library some information on that aspect. Council Member Herron thanked Mr. Flatto about that and encouraged the City staff to help the Library staff apply for that funding.

Council Member McBride-Lee said that she was the one pushing for a library branch in the North End. There are five schools in her area and the closest library is on Madison Avenue. She encouraged Ms. Braithwaite to continue working towards having a library branch. Having a library would help because children would have a place to do their homework.

Ms. Braithwaite said that having a library in the North End was a priority of the Board. They are working on a potential site near the community garden. The East Side renovation will be starting soon and work on the Upper East Side is also on the horizon. Once one or two of the construction projects that are currently underway are completed, they will move forward on the North End.

Council Member McBride-Lee said that she felt that the Community Garden site has enough room for the library and the garden to exist together. The Community Garden's lease will expire soon, and Council Member McBride-Lee would like to share the space with them on the City property.

Council Member Pereira said that it was disrespectful that the elected School Board members and Library Board members were not being allowed to speak. It is not appropriate.

Council Member Pereira said that the Library referendum was that the full mill rate allocation should be given to the library, not the collected amount.

Council Member Burns said that the Commission had already decided that only the Department heads would be speaking at the meeting.

Mr. Nkwo said that the City Attorneys and the Library Board attorneys have met and they have come to an agreement that the City cannot give the Library what they do not have. The mill rate calculation has been in existence for 20 years. The allocation of the mill rate changed from 1 mill to 1.3 mill.

Mr. Flatto noted that there were adjustments to the Grand List after the budget was compiled.

Mr. Nkwo repeated his earlier statement that the City Attorneys and the Library Board lawyers have discussed this along with the Judge who is on the Board and they all have come to an agreement.

Council Member Burns asked for the Special Services line item. Mr. Nkwo said that there was not enough information to project what the Grand List was, so he created a place holder.

Council Member Newton asked the Committee to give the source of their numbers or calculations so that everyone will know where they are coming from.

Council Member Burns asked if the staff for the new library were included in the budget or whether they would have to add more staff. Ms. Braithwaite said that they had budgeted part of the staff. However, they are opening Newfield and they will be opening the East End.

Council Member Pereira asked about the Library in the 138th District. She asked what the status was for the Upper East Side. There is a lot of dumping going on at the site.

Ms. Braithwaite said that they had just had a meeting with the construction company and were waiting for a revised construction plan. She said that they were working on the dumping problem and UI has been contacted about installing more lighting in the area. There is a staff member who is driving by the site several times a week to keep tracking on any dumping.

Council Member Burns said that he was pleased that Palaces for the People author was going to be part of an upcoming program. The libraries are the heartbeat of the community.

Council Member Roman-Christy thanked both Ms. Braithwaite and Mr. Soltis for their hard work and said she agreed with Council Member Burns about the Library being the heartbeat of the community.

BOE

Council Member Burns said that the budget started on page 427.

Superintendent Testani said that the pandemic would be having long term effects on the students. The Federal funding has strict guidelines and is not to supplant but to enhance the programs as the schools come out of the pandemic.

The gains do not come without a price tag and they have created an environment that they can't allow them to regress.

He then reviewed the figures shown on the Summary page with the Commissioners.

Mr. Nkwo said that the BOE would be receiving some funding from the Stimulus and while there are restrictions, there are other portions that are more flexible.

Council Member Newton said that the Council has always tried to increase the BOE's budget during the years he's been on the Council. While he would like to give even more money, the Council has to consider other aspects of the City.

When the BOE ends up with a surplus, he would like to see some of that go to the students rather than to benefits.

Council Member McCarthy said that he could not find the BOE budget posted online. Superintendent Testani said that it was.

Council Member McCarthy said he was looking for the increase in salaries from last year. Superintendent Testani directed the Committee's attention to the appropriate page.

Superintendent Testani pointed out that the BOE pays almost \$5 million for students that do not attend Bridgeport Public Schools. They have been underfunded for the last 10 years. The District is one of the lowest paying District, so they lose 100 teachers to other Districts. They pay \$6 million for security, and \$4 million for school nurses. A flat funded budget is unacceptable.

Council Member McCarthy said that just the contractual wage increases will create a deficit if flat funding is implemented.

Mr. Nkwo said that the school crossing guards were sent to the BOE, and later transferred back to the City, but the funding allocation for the guards remained with the BOE.

Council Member McBride-Lee said that there was a surplus that was transferred to benefits. If there is other surplus funding, it should go to the classroom.

Superintendent Testani said that it was their goal to increase the funding for the classroom. He said that there have been too many cuts that have driven classroom numbers up.

Council Member McBride-Lee asked who is setting the rules when a person is exposed to the virus. Some places shut down the entire classroom. Council Member Burns reminded everyone that they were focused on the Budget. Council Member McBride-Lee asked Superintendent Testani if she could contact him. He said that he would be happy to speak with her offline.

Council Member McCarthy asked if they had considered taking one of the older buildings and using it for Special Education.

Superintendent Testani said that many of the families look to outside facilities because the parents are attracted to an aesthetically pleasing building. They would also need to have a program. Over the last two years, they have done a better job in keeping the students in District because they feel they can do a better job in providing services for their students.

Superintendent Testani said that Special Education is not just a Bridgeport issue, it is statewide.

Council Member Pereira said that the BOE had tried a program in 2016 when they were trying to purchase a building from the Catholic Diocese. The Council did not approve that program.

Council Member Pereira said this is the Mayor's sixth budget and she believes that it would be less than a 1% increase. Superintendent Testani said that he believes it would be an average of .56% increase.

Council Member Pereira said that when she was on the Board, the majority of the students were black and Hispanic. She said that by not funding the schools, they are not funding the education of black and brown students.

Council Member Burns said that it was unfortunate that the Council did not approve the purchase of the building but that the presentation that was given lacked any documentation. He asked Superintendent Testani if he would give the Council an idea of what they were planning for the next few years.

Superintendent Testani said that the Governor had promised \$2.3 million but it appears that they are kicking that can down the road. A flat funding from the City would harm the schools even more. Contractual obligations along with what the BOE has to pay for students who are not in the Bridgeport Public Schools have become a major financial drain. He felt that the City should handle some of the cost of the students who are not in the public schools.

Council Member Burns asked about any outside grants. Superintendent Testani said that there were not many private grants available outside of State and Federal grants.

Council Member Newton said that it wasn't fair that numbers are thrown around when they don't take into account the services that the City provides such as garbage or crossing guards. There has always been confrontation with the BOE and the Council because they never factor in the in-kind services.

Council Member Lyons said there was a deep discussion about Special Education. She said that she had spoken to Superintendent Testani about using St. Michael's School for Special Education. She will send some other suggestions for savings to Superintendent Testani.

Superintendent Testani said that St. Michael's is being used by Bridgeport Adult Education. It is not an ADA accessible building and the City does not own the building. He said that they would need a more enticing building to hold the program.

Council Member Lyons said that she remembered speaking with Superintendent Testani about this but there were other suggestions she would like to discuss with him.

Mr. Nkwo said that Ms. Vickers just sent an email informing him there would be a \$1.6 million dollar increase from the State for education but the details have not been released.

Council Member Pereira said that the school nurses were paid for by the City and reimbursed by the State. The crossing guards were transferred to the BOE and they control traffic and right of way. That is a responsibility of the City and it was not accurate information.

Council Member Pereira said that the contractual increases would be \$4.85 million. Superintendent Testani reviewed the figures. She asked Superintendent Testani if it was correct that once the \$4.85 million was spent in two years, they would have a short fall.

Mr. Flatto said that the BOE received about \$10 million last year and another \$20 million. The American Rescue Act will provide funding until 2024. There are a whole series of non-supplanting activities such as technology. He said that it would be helpful to discuss the ARA with a subcommittee of the Council and the Board.

Mr. Nkwo said for the record, it has been more than 10 years that the State stopped reimbursing the funding for the nurses. He said that he did not know where these figures were coming from.

Mr. Nkwo said that with transportation, the State issued an unfunded mandate discontinuing the transportation funding.

Superintendent Testani said that he thanked the Council for restoring the \$1.2 million for the Fairchild Wheeler transportation. However, he was present to fight for the students. The incoming funding works out to just over \$3,000 per student but it barely touches the tip of the iceberg regarding the issues with the students over the last 13 months.

Council Member McCarthy said that he would like a Council subcommittee to observe how the BOE spends the ACA funding. He asked if they had a plan on how to spend the money.

Council Member McCarthy said that there had to be some savings in 2020-21.

Superintendent Testani said that they had some savings with transportation, but it was offset by the losses for the nutrition program.

However, there are 45 to 50% of the students that have not returned to the classroom, and that has reduced the revenue. The Governor required that the school staff continue to be paid and not laid off. The buildings were open and there were no savings in terms of utilities. They will have to collect social/emotional data. This is an opportunity to show the State that they can provide for their students for their social/emotional achievements.

Council Member McCarthy asked about the lost nutrition revenue. He thought there was Federal reimbursement. Ms. Siegel said that there had been reduced student participation which resulted in lower revenue. The participation has not been at the same level as prior years. There are some fixed costs such as utilities, the Nutrition Center, vehicles, and hourly employees. Currently, the expenses are exceeding the revenue which is due to the COVID pandemic.

Ms. Siegel said that the State updated its guidance on the ACA and allows school districts to compensate for losses in the nutrition if they are COVID related. She said that they had identified \$700,000 which they believe will be in the guidelines.

Council Member McCarthy asked if they were preparing the meals on the number of students expected or on the number of students they know will be there. Ms. Siegel said that they have to

keep the building open regardless of how many meals they prepare and they still have to maintain the trucks.

Council Member Roman-Christy asked about a line item on page 433 and wished to know how the money was used. Ms. Siegel said that it was the Talented and Gifted Teachers and two more positions in the Bi-lingual account. Discussion followed about the details in the various line item allocations.

Council Member Burns asked if there were any forecasts for how education may shift in the next four or five years.

Superintendent Testani said that he had been advocating for was the removal of the remote option. The students need to be in the classroom. Grades are not indicative of academic growth. The remote aspect has the teachers in front of a camera and in the class, students are not receiving the quality instruction they deserve. There will be remote learning, but not in the degree that it has been. The District does not have the technology to maintain the remote classrooms. The staff is worried about the social/emotional issues the returning students will have. There are Kindergarten students that never attended first grade in person and will be now entering second grade.

Council Member Burns asked if there would be less need for textbooks and other tangible supplies.

Superintendent Testani said that they have more access for information at their fingertips. Gone are the days of the worksheet. However, that comes with a cost and that is to replace and maintain them. Five to six years is the average life of the devices.

Council Member Pereira said that she had done some quick math and they made \$44 million dollar in cuts over a number of years. Superintendent Testani said that it was approximately correct.

Council Member Pereira asked for the number of certified staff vs. non-certified staff. Superintendent Testani said that he could send that figure to the Co-chairs.

Council Member Roman-Christy asked if the City was still obligated to pay for the out of district student and charter schools. Superintendent Testani said that the District was remote from Thanksgiving to the first of the year due to positive cases, but the bus company could not lay off the drivers for a few weeks.

Council Member Burns said that the Council does receive regular reports from the BOE. He said that they would like to know if they could continue to leverage the funding from the State and the Federal Government.

Mr. Sokolovic indicated that he would like to speak. Council Member Burns then polled the Committee to see if Mr. Sokolovic should be allowed to speak. The majority of the Committee decided to stand with their earlier decision because it would not be fair to others who were not allowed to speak earlier.

**** COUNCIL MEMBER HERRON MOVED TO NOT ALLOW ANY ONE TO SPEAK OTHER THAN THE DEPARTMENT HEADS.**
**** COUNCIL MEMBER MCCARTHY SECONDED.**
**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Council Member Herron thanked Superintendent Testani for getting the technology to the students. She said that the Smart Boards would be installed in all the schools and the cameras will allow the teachers to teach live.

Council Member Herron said that she was glad that Mr. Benahan was well.

ADJOURNMENT

**** COUNCIL MEMBER MCCARTHY MOVED TO ADJOURN.**
**** COUNCIL MEMBER HERRON SECONDED.**
**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 8:06 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Telesco Secretarial Services