

**CITY OF BRIDGEPORT
BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS
COMMITTEE
SPECIAL MEETING
APRIL 19, 2022**

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

OTHERS: Council Member(s): Maria Valle & Maria Pereira; OPM Director Nestor Nkwo; Finance Director Ken Flatto; School Superintendent Mike Testani; BOE Finance Director Marlene Siegel; City Librarian, Bridgeport Libraries, Elaine Braithwaite; Library Board member Tom Errichetti.

CALL TO ORDER

Co-chair Burns called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m. A quorum was present.

Board of Education/Library

Superintendent Michael Testani was asked to review his budget and requests for the committee for the fiscal year 2023. Superintendent Testani spoke to many issues regarding the Bridgeport Public Schools. He asked for an additional \$8.5 million dollars for pending salary increases and other citywide school-related expenses. He noted that Bridgeport provides 27% of the district's budget with only New Haven paying a lower percentage.

Superintendent Testani addressed a drop-off in student enrolment and its potential impact on revenue from the state according to the ECS (Educational Cost Sharing) formula. He referred to past position cuts, including the loss of kindergarten paraprofessionals. Superintendent Testani also explained how the board uses stipends to pay teachers and other building officials to coordinate athletic events and schedules.

Superintendent Testani also commented that the Council approved the contract with the operators of the Amphitheater and how the police department publicly noted that overtime for the coming season would exceed \$500,000 while the schools pay over \$5 million a year in school security.

OPM Director Nkwo addressed the revenues for the schools and submitted a document showing recent history of the city providing cash support for the BOE.

**** COUNCIL MEMBER NEWTON MOVED TO ENTER THE DOCUMENT SHOWING RECENT HISTORY OF THE CITY PROVIDING CASH SUPPORT FOR THE BOE AS EXHIBIT 04-19-2022-A.**

**** COUNCIL MEMBER HERRON SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Mr. Nkwo reviewed some of the document details. He also noted that the Alliance Grant from the state to the city was projected about \$1.5 million higher for fiscal year 2023.

Co-chair Burns asked about the inclusion for State Fiscal Stabilization Fund on the BOE budget page when the funds are intended for the general fund. Mr. Nkwo noted these funds come from the MRSA account, which is based on state sales tax revenue, and agreed the revenue line could be moved to a more appropriate page. Co-chair Burns also noted that for several years the state had flat-funded the Bridgeport schools.

Council Member McBride-Lee asked about the Aid to Non-public Schools revenue line. Mr. Nkwo explained that the state reimburses the city for busing for non-public school students in the city.

Co-chair Newton asked about ‘rainy day’ funds of about \$6 million that the BOE set aside at the end of fiscal year 2021. Finance Director Flatto explained that the BOE had put \$3-6 million a year into the fund the last few years after a few years of losses. He also explained that the fund is co-monitored with BOE Finance Director Siegel and is used to pay for health care and similar expenses.

Council Member McBride-Lee also asked about substitute teachers and whether there were funds for them based on what she has seen where she teaches. Superintendent Testani responded that there were funds, but that it has also been hard to hire substitutes.

Co-chair Burns asked about the bi-monthly Financial Reports were to be sent to the Budget and Appropriations committee and that the reports on the BOE website were password locked. Superintendent Testani responded that he would look into it.

Council Member Herron noted that certain BOE members had asked for \$8.5 million, but she wanted to know what the superintendent really needed to keep the district functioning. Superintendent Testani responded that he really needed \$5 million. Council Member Herron expressed her appreciation for his honesty.

Co-chair Burns asked about how ESSER funds from the federal government were being used in the school system. Superintendent Testani explained that the BOE’s ESSER plan was on its website. He went on discuss how social workers, support staff, and restorative practices were among the uses. He also expressed concerns about what will happen when the ESSER monies run out.

Council Member Pereira asked about whether the funds could be used for asbestos treatment of the school buildings. Superintendent Testani affirmed that these funds could be used for this kind of work and other air quality projects in the schools.

Council Member McCarthy asked about Special Education costs, reminding the superintendent that he asked about this area a year ago as well. Superintendent Testani explained that he and Ms. Siegel had looked closely at out-of-town placements to ensure that they were happening and had found some significant savings. He also noted that the BOE was planning to bid out a

review of Special Education practices in the near future and that the impact should be seen in fiscal year 2024. He also noted that the district has 37 buildings and over 5,000 English Language Learners.

Council Member Valle referred to a building the BOE rents on Connecticut Ave and asked if savings could be found in a review of buildings that the BOE rents.

With no further questions, the committee thanked Superintendent Testani for speaking on the district's needs.

The discussion shifted to the Bridgeport Public Library. Co-chair Burns welcomed Librarian Braithwaite to review her department.

OPM Director Nkwo explained that on the revenue side, the BOE receives revenue equivalent to 1.3 mills based on the grand list. That total for FY2023 would be \$9,716,613. Director Errichetti further explained that the library receives some funding from the library endowment of approximately \$60,000 this year. The endowment is about \$400,000 and is invested in US Treasuries.

Ms. Braithwaite discussed some of the changes the library has experienced as a result of COVID. She noted both staff and the public have shifted to using more mobile devices and fewer devices. She also explained the availability of 'hot spots' for patrons to use to access WiFi.

Co-chair Newton raised concerns about a recent report about a dispute between the library and Ashlar Construction, the company involved in restoring the Newfield Library. Director Errichetti explained that they hoped to resolve the issue.

Co-chair Burns asked about cyber security for the library and what role the city ITS department provided. Ms. Braithwaite explained that the library belongs to a consortium of libraries for security and that ITS also provides firewalls for the library.

Council Member Pereira questioned how the 1.3 mill determination was based, whether on the full grand list or the modified grand list. Director Errichetti said the Board agreed to disagree with the city as to the determination. Finance Director Flatto explained that it is the practice of municipalities to use the modified grand list for determining mill rate values.

Co-chair Burns asked about employment levels and vacancies at the library as only one new and one vacant position were listed in the budget book. Ms. Braithwaite said the one vacancy was a Librarian III, which is a branch manager position. She also noted that 22 PRFs (personnel request forms) had been filed recently to fill new and vacant positions. Co-chair Burns asked further about specifics as to vacancies as they did not seem to fit with the positions noted. Ms. Braithwaite explained that the library was looking to fill these positions.

Ms. Braithwaite reviewed the current and future library building projects. The Newfield Library is up and running. Newton complimented the completion of the library. The Lower East Side branch library will be renovated with new technology, including contactless lockers for patrons to access materials.

Ms. Braithwaite noted that the Reservoir Avenue Library is also a long-term goal. Council Member McBride-Lee noted that she was glad to finally see this project in the budget but would like to see it started sooner. Director Errichetti explained that the library can only use two construction grants from the state at a time, and that Newfield and the Upper East Side projects are the current ones. Ms. Braithwaite noted that the Upper East Side project should start in the fall of 2022.

ADJOURNMENT

**** COUNCIL MEMBER MCCARTHY MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** COUNCIL MEMBER HERRON SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 8:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted

Telesco Secretarial Services