

**CITY OF BRIDGEPORT
BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS
COMMITTEE
PUBLIC HEARING
APRIL 27, 2022**

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

OTHERS: Council Member A. Boyd

CALL TO ORDER

Co-chair Newton called the meeting to order at 6:04 p.m. A quorum was present. He asked everyone to limit their comments to 3 minutes each.

Co-chair Burns then introduced the Council Members present.

Ms. Emily Rodriguez of Beach Street came forward and said that she was present from Barnum with others holding signs in Spanish. Ms. Rodriguez read a statement that was muffled through a mask. She urged the Committee to invest in education.

Ms. Tracey Garcia of Hallett Street came forward and read a statement to the Committee through her mask. She said that Bridgeport allocates a lower amount of funding for their schools than neighboring towns. She supports the budget request for \$8.5 million by the BOE.

Ms. Camilla Mercado of Ocean Avenue – Ms. Rodriguez came forward to speak on behalf of Ms. Mercado who is at Bassick. She said that the students need to have the same resources as the other nearby towns.

Ms. Yedni Ocott of King Street came forward and addressed the Committee in Spanish. Another student came forward and read the statement in English about how Ms. Ocott had lived in Bridgeport five years. The schools need to be fully funded because she has seen how the lack of resources have impacted the students. The Children deserve better.

Ms. Karen Paredes of Porter Street came forward and addressed the Committee in Spanish. A translator said that she has two daughters, age 5 and 9. She said that she was present to ask for the \$8.5 million that the schools need for the education for the staff and for the children.

Ms. Glorivet Mateo of Seaview Avenue came forward and addressed the Committee members in Spanish. A translator then then read the statement which said that Ms. Mateo had been living in Bridgeport for six months. She said that she had encountered the scarcity in schools in her native country. She said that she was present to ask that the Committee give the schools the money they need.

Mr. Jason Bollesero of Stillman Street and who is an elementary student came forward and said that he has been living in Bridgeport for five years. He asked that they give more money to the schools.

Mr. Michael Testani, Superintendent of Schools came forward and greeted the Committee members. Several members of the BOE also come forward.

Mr. Testani said that he was present to ask the Council to continue working with the BOE and the District. He noted that in the past week, two Connecticut students had been caught in the schools with loaded guns. The students have been struggling. Since 2016, the BOE has lost over 200 positions. It is important to invest in the children now. He added that Stratford had asked for over \$5 million and the Board will be allocating over \$2 million. Surely Bridgeport can do better.

Mr. John Weldon, BOE Chairman came forward and said that he was speaking on behalf of his fellow Board Members. He said that it was a misnomer that the ARPA funds would help, but those funds will be gone and the District will crash and burn. They are asking for \$8 million dollars for the children.

Mr. Joe Sokolovic, a BOE member, came forward and said that he was Chairman of the Finance Committee. He said that he had been before the Council before. He went on to list a number of facts about the financing and how the BOE needs the money they are requesting.

Mr. Albert Benejan, a BOE member, came forward and said that his son graduated from Bassick. He asked why they have to keep coming to the Committee to ask for more money. The Board knows that the school wants and they shouldn't have to keep coming to ask for it. He then repeated his remarks in Spanish for those present who were not fluent in English

Ms. Bobbi Brown, BOE Vice Chair came forward and said that she was with the Board Members to request more funding. She has been doing this for years. Every dollar that is shorted adds to the burden. Money is running out, and every time they decrease the budget, it cuts the ground out from underneath the students. As the world has shifted this year with the pandemic, she is calling on community partners to help to do what they can't so she is asking for \$8.5 million.

Ms. Christine Perez, a BOE member, came forward to speak to the Committee. She said that since 2014, the BOE has not kept up with inflation. She asked how far behind that they have to fall behind before the Committee allocates the funding. The \$8.5 million will barely make the deficit. The \$2 million will not cut it. Bridgeport 2014 had more teachers and more resources.

Ms. Ana Batista, of Main Street came forward and said she was President of the Bridgeport Teachers Union. She was present in support of the funding for the Bridgeport Public Schools. The social emotional well-being of the students is critical. Bridgeport has one of the lowest per student spending and also below the DRG Average. The Students need more and deserve better.

Ms. Batista then read off a number of towns that were part of Bridgeport DURGs and noted that Bridgeport is in the 22% range each year. The emotional toll on the educators has been great. There have been many teachers that need time away from the classroom or leaving the profession completely. They routinely lose educators to neighboring communities, states and other professions that can pay more. The District needs more to meet its contractual obligations and to function. A great school district should not be forced to make do. Together they can make Bridgeport strong.

Ms. Gemeen Davis of Cottage Place came forward and said that over the past seven years, the budget tells a sad story. She spoke about how Bridgeport had kept the budget flat since 2014. This was due to poor leadership. year after year, Bridgeport now has been asking for more financial support.

Ms. Davis said that after George Floyd died, the community then stated that Black Lives Matters. The Committee then responded by allocating funding for social services. However, the administration has been working on the sale of the airport to fill the revenue hole. The lack of funding to the schools has resulted in the loss of several positions.

The City needs transformative leaders like the Committee so that everyone can enjoy a big \$8.5 million dollars increase.

Ms. Callie Heilmann of Grovers Avenue came forward. She said that she was a parent and also a member of Bridgeport Now. She said that she holds a Master's Degree. She thanked them for recognizing the additional education funding last year. The extra funding was used to provide needed resources for the students. She repeated that Bridgeport was the lowest funded District in the State. She said that she had been coming to these meeting since 2015. Since then, she said that since then, they had lost countless teachers and seen the resources become fewer and fewer. If they don't make Education the priority, they cannot be a moral and just community, Funding the Board with \$8.5 million dollars will show that they stand with the Bridgeport students.

Pastor McCullough came forward and greeted the Committee. He said that he was a local pastor and the founder of FaithActs. They represent many churches and are requesting the Committee fund the District with \$8.5 million. Pastor McCullough said that he went back to school to get his Masters. The Mayor's budget is allocating an additional \$2 million for the District but \$3 million for the Police Department. The City is assisting the school to prison pipeline by increasing the Police Department by 18% and just allocating \$2 million to the District. He then quoted Lips that speak knowledge are jewels. Charity starts at home. He urged the Committee to allocate the funding to the District.

Mr. James Mesaros of Gregory Street. He thanked the various individuals who spoke earlier who had not previously spoken anyone before. He spoke about how the right hand shows power and the politicians should be present to help these young men and women. He would like to ask the politicians to answer.

Ms. Shayna Taylor who works for the BOE came forward. She said that she was tired. She said that she gets offers from other school districts that know she is not appreciated here. She said that last week, one of the students took their life. The kids should not feel that they have nowhere to turn. The kids deserve the money. She then led a chant of "Give us that money."

A resident came forward and said that she remembers going to Dunbar and now was an adult. They are still having the same conversations. They are doing the same thing but expecting different results. She said that she had recently heard that the City was picking up a half million dollar tab for policing. the youngest citizens should not have to beg the adults in the room for an education. She asked the Committee to find it in their hearts for additional funding. Do the right thing. These are their constituents.

Mr. Rob Trager of Yale Terrace came forward and said that the first time he spoke about the need for more school funding was 25 years ago. Connecticut is a racist school. In this City, most of the students are black and brown. He said that if this was important, they will find out a way to do the job. He asked when they would decide to take control and make the decision to do the right thing.

Council Member Newton asked if there was anyone else who wished to speak.

An ESL teacher came forward and She said that she was passionate and stands with the BOE for more funding. She understands the struggle and sees the need There are 100 plus children and one counsellor. When it comes to the ELL learning and Special Education, there is a State mandate that they receive an equal Education. Teachers look for outside donors because they don't have the supplies like copy paper. She does not want her students to feel that they do not matter to her. She then translated her remarks into Spanish and led a chant about funding.

Mr. Jerry Sullivan came forward and said that the kids deserve a good education. He said that they should get as good of an education as possible.

Council Member Newton asked if there was anyone else who wished to speak. He repeated the question two more time. Hearing no response, Council Member Newton closed the public hearing at 7:20 p.m.

ADJOURNMENT

** Council Member McBride-Lee moved to adjourn.

** Council Member Herron seconded.

** The motion passed unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 7:21 p.m.

Respectfully submitted

Telesco Secretarial Services

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