

**TOWN OF SALEM  
BOARD OF FINANCE  
PUBLIC HEARING MEETING MINUTES  
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 12, 2023 – 7:00 P.M.  
SALEM SCHOOL – MULTIPUPOSE ROOM**

**PRESENT**

William “Skip” Dickson, Chairman  
Marshall Collins, Clerk  
Corinne (Cory) Bourgeois  
Deborah Cadwell  
Janet Griggs  
Kate Belleville, Alternate  
John Bernier, Alternate

**ABSENT**

Matt Rucci  
Maryann Casciano, Alternate

**ALSO PRESENT**

First Selectman Ed Chmielewski

**CALL TO ORDER**

Chairman Dickson called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m.

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

**AGENDA:**

**1. MEETING – PUBLIC HEARING FOR FY2023/24 BUDGET**

Chairman Dickson welcomed everyone and provided a brief overview of the Public Hearing, which included brief presentations of the budget process; the Capital, General Government, and Board of Education (BOE) budgets, and; the public’s comments. The Public Hearing will be followed by the following events:

April 13, 2023, 7:00 p.m.

Board of Finance Regular Meeting  
*The Board will consider the comments heard during the Public Hearing and make adjustments, as necessary. The proposed FY2023/24 Budget will then be presented at the Annual Town Meeting where the residents will vote to send it to a Referendum.*

May 3, 2022, 7:00 p.m.

Annual Town Meeting  
*Residents will vote to send the proposed FY2023/24 Budget to Referendum; Proposed budget amounts may only be approved, as presented, or reduced.*

May 10, 2021, 6:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m.

Referendum

Chairman Dickson explained that the budget process began with a presentation by the Town's boards, commissions, and departments of their proposed Capital Plan requests and operating budgets to the Board. Following extensive reviews and discussions, the Board made adjustments, as necessary. A history of the Town's mil rate, dating back to FY2015/16, was reviewed. The mil rate has remained, relatively, steady at 32.2 over the years. To balance the growth in the Grand List due to the revaluation of properties, the mil rate was decreased to 28.8 for FY2022/23. The town must prepare for the state's reinstitution of the incremental reductions of Education Cost Sharing (ECS) Funding. Following the passage of the Referendum for the proposed budget, the Board will set the mil rate. Should the Referendum for the proposed budget fail, the Board will re-review the budget and the process will be repeated.

### REVENUES

The town's revenue sources include state funding, including the aforementioned ECS Funding, federal funding, ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) Funds, taxes, and fees received for licenses, permits, library fines, and fees.

The ARPA Funds were received in two allotments and approximately \$400,000.00 has not yet been allocated. The Board has recommended certain Capital items to the ARPA Committee for consideration. Once approved by the ARPA Committee, a Special Town Meeting will be scheduled, allowing the townspeople to approve the expenditures. The BOE has also received an allotment(s) of ARPA Funds.

The Mil Rate is determined by dividing the town's budget by the Net Grand List of taxable property in the town. One mil is equal to \$1.00 of tax for each \$1,000 of the assessment. To determine the property tax rate, 70% of the assessed value of the property is multiplied by the mil rate and divided by 1,000.

The budget is divided into three main parts:

### CAPITAL EXPENDITURES

The FY2023/24 Capital Plan Budget includes the town's Principal and Interest for the bonds and Capital items for the BOE, Library, Recreation, Public Works, and Public Safety Departments (Fire Companies, Ambulance). For planning purposes, the Board maintains a Ten-Year Capital Plan with the goal of maintaining a steady, balanced amount from year to year; the items for future years may or may not remain on the Capital Plan for the designated fiscal year. The items on the FY2023/24 Capital Plan, totaling \$1,086,302.00, were reviewed.

### GENERAL GOVERNMENT BUDGET

The General Government Budget includes the Selectmen's Operating Budget, the budget for the 18 boards, commissions, and departments, and the town's revenues. The budget,

which totals \$4,824,791.00, for each of the departments was reviewed and the increases and/or decreases were explained.

### **BOARD OF EDUCATION (BOE) BUDGET**

BOE Vice Chairperson Sue Spang presented the proposed FY2023/24 BOE Budget in lieu of BOE Chairman Sean Reith. The BOE's budget process begins in December following the receipt of the Superintendent's proposed budget. The BOE's Budget Committee is, then, tasked with reviewing the budget, which is presented to and approved by the BOE to send the proposed budget to the Board of Finance. This year's FY2023/24 Proposed Budget included a 0.58% or \$65,343.00 increase from the previous year. The Board of Finance reviewed and discussed their proposed budget and voted to decrease it by 0.02% or \$88,000.000. The Budget Committee subsequently met to discuss and determine where the cuts would be made and decided to await the results of a LEARN Study before making any final decisions. As such, the Budget Booklet includes a note stating that it does not reflect the 0.02% budget decrease. A brief overview of the BOE Budget Booklet, which provides explanations regarding select line items, was provided. The proposed FY2023/24 BOE Budget is \$11,304,501.00.

Superintendent Brian Hendrickson introduced Business Manager Kim Gadaree and expressed his appreciation to the Board of Education, the staff, the Board of Finance, and the community for their continued support. He stated the importance of the process and their conscious efforts to not only provide a "top-notch" education for the students, but also to ensure their fiscal responsibility to the town and its residents. He provided a brief history of the BOE Budget, stating that, over the past 15 years, the BOE has received an annual increase of approximately 1.1%. While the school has been experiencing a decline in enrollment over the years, it is projected to considerably increase over the next ten years due to the predicted regional growth and development. A comparison of the budget with those of neighboring and/or comparable towns reflects that their budget is considerably lower. Part of the reasoning behind those towns' increased budgets is the use of their ARPA ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) Funds for recurring expenses, including the addition of positions. This year, the BOE created a Draft Strategic Plan, which focuses on providing high-quality teaching and learning (including class size considerations and talented and gifted programs), providing a safe and supportive school climate, and efficient operations. He referred to a chart included in Ted Dintersmith's book "What School Could Be" that captures the amount of spending on public education in relation to student performance nationwide. The chart, which shows that, from 1970 to 2010, spending significantly increased while student performance remained flat, indicates the need for BOEs to shift their resources to receive a better product and ensure their efficiency by restructuring where and whenever possible and necessary. The budget is comprised of several puzzle pieces that must join and work together. Items that were favorable to the BOE and led to a minimal proposed budget

increase included lower-than-expected Unanticipated Special Education Costs, a favorable East Lyme High School Reconciliation Amount, and the Early Retirement Notification Incentive Program. He commended the programs, staff, and families and encouraged everyone to visit their website for additional information regarding the school and follow them on their social media pages.

On behalf of the Board of Finance, Board of Finance Chairman Dickson expressed their appreciation for the BOE's hard work and efforts.

## **SUMMARY**

The proposed amounts for each of the budgets are as follows:

General Government	\$ 4,824,791.00
Board of Education	\$ 11,304,501.00
<u>Capital Expenditures</u>	<u>\$ 1,086,302.00</u>
	<b>\$ 17,215,594.00</b>

## **2. COMMENTS**

Cheryl Philopena, Rattlesnake Ledge Road, questioned whether the proposed increase for the EMT/Maintenance (Department 105, Salaries, Line Item 5-105-121) includes funding for additional staffing.

*First Selectman Ed Chmielewski stated that the budget was reduced, per the Board of Finance. The Department will review its budget once it is finalized and determine the best way to expend those funds.*

Sue Spang, Hartford Road, requested an explanation regarding the restructuring of and the proposed increase for the Administrative FT/PT Financial & Human Resources (Department 105, Salaries, Line Item 5-105-114). She also questioned whether the town has considered utilizing the Former Public Works/Fire Marshal's vehicle as a town vehicle.

*Finance Specialist Lisa Jablonski stated that the individual's duties were consolidated from three (3) separate line items. The Finance/HR Department currently consists of the Finance Specialist and Finance Assistant. First Selectman Chmielewski expressed his willingness to meet with Ms. Spang to discuss the matter regarding the vehicle.*

Diane Robillard, 178 Old Colchester Road, Chairperson, Library Board of Directors. Ms. Robillard expressed her appreciation to the Board for their past support of the Library – a positive asset to the Towns of Salem and Bozrah. She commended their new Library Director, Shannon Henson, and her knowledgeable staff whose efforts have led to an explosion of new and exciting ideas, programs, and improvements, creating a warm and welcoming environment for the community. In the past, the Library has experienced cuts to its operating hours due to staffing constraints due to decreased funding. The proposed budget includes minimum wage increases for their current staff. She strongly encouraged the Board and the town's residents to approve the budget, as presented, with the proposed

salary increases and operational budget so that they could maintain and ensure the future of one of the town's most valuable assets.

Len Giambra, Stonewall Road, Former Library Board of Directors Chairman, thanked the current Library Board of Directors Chairperson Robillard for her comments. He stated that the town has historically short-changed the Library and noted that the salary increases for the majority of the employees include the cost-of-living increases with the exception of the Head Librarian (Line Item 5-10-124), which appears to be an additional slight to the Library. He questioned whether the proposed increased wages for the assistants were due to an increase in hours or salary.

*Library Director Shannon Henson stated that the best-case scenario is to increase the Library's hours as they seek to provide additional outreach to the community.*

*First Selectman Chmielewski stated that based on the Board of Finance's recommendations, a survey study of wages was conducted. Some of these findings are reflected in the proposed budget. The Library Director was provided an increase after being appointed as the Interim Library Director and, again, when she was officially appointed to the position and is now at the top of the scale.*

Alan Benkert, 230 West Road, who has worked in libraries for approximately 35 years, commented on the importance of the Library to the towns they serve and the important role they play in supporting the school and its education program. The Library also serves as a meeting place for several community organizations as well as an office space for those who are unable to afford the necessary equipment to conduct their business. He expressed his support for the salary increases for the Library staff, which, if not granted, would result in reduced operating hours.

Tony Griggs, 122 New London Road, questioned the BOE's inclusion of \$60,000.00 for Computers in their Operations Budget (Page 4a, Equipment – New and Replace) rather than the Capital Budget. Conversely, he questioned the inclusion of \$442,243.00 for PW (Public Works) Road Improvement (Line Item 16) to *maintain* the existing roads and not *construct* new roads in the Capital Budget rather than the Operational Budget.

*Chairman Dickson stated that the Public Works Road Improvement is included in the town's Capital Plan due to its cost.*

*BOE Business Manager Gadaree stated that the line item for computers includes the purchasing of Chromebooks, laptops, and printers, individually, do not meet the minimum dollar amount required to be considered a Capital expense.*

Leo Wells, 703 Hartford Road, proposed the possibility of eliminating the green trash bags, stating that the Transfer Station stickers should provide enough proof that they are Salem residents. He also proposed the possibility of installing cell towers on town property as a way to improve their cell service and increase the town's revenue.

*Chairman Dickson informed Mr. Wells that the fees for the green trash bags help offset the tipping and hauling fees. The installation of cell towers is, he felt, not a bad idea.*

Tom Phillips, Round Hill Road, questioned where the security costs for the school are included in their proposed budget.

*Chairman Dickson stated that those costs, if included, would be in the BOE Budget. Security improvements are included in the Capital Plan and costs for security cameras, scanners, and alarms are included in the BOE budget. To date, there is no line item for a School Resource Officer (SRO) in the BOE's proposed budget.*

*Selectman Kevin Lyden stated that the decision to hire an SRO is under the guise of the BOE and expressed his support should they propose to do so. He noted that the town's Resident State Troopers are often at the School to provide any necessary support.*

*First Selectman Chmielewski added that the town and the school are working closely together and have developed an Emergency Management Plan and conducted emergency drills, reflecting their ongoing partnership. While they are unable to provide any details, he ensured the public that they are doing all they can to keep their children, teachers, staff, and residents safe. They will continue to enhance the public safety of the town and the school as stated in a recently issued joint letter, signed by himself, Superintendent Hendrickson, and BOE Chairman Reith.*

*Superintendent Hendrickson concurred and thanked the First Selectman for their ongoing collaboration. In response to Mr. Wells, he stated that School Safety is first and foremost. They have made several safety enhancements and are consistently working towards improving the school climate by maintaining the relationships between the students, teachers, staff, and community. They continue to train their teachers and staff to recognize the signals and/or signs, make enhancements and adjustments, and solidify the physical security of the building. They have also partnered with Western Connecticut State University's Center for School Safety and Crisis Preparation and the Connecticut Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security to review and assess school and its safety protocols. He expressed his appreciation to the town's Resident State Troopers who continue to support the school.*

*On behalf of the Board of Selectman, First Selectman Chmielewski added that the Board of Selectmen would fully support the hiring of a School Resource Officer should the BOE propose to do so.*

## **ADJOURNMENT**

**The Public Hearing was closed and the Meeting was adjourned at 8:23 p.m.**

Respectfully Submitted by: Agnes T. Miyuki, Recording Secretary for the Town of Salem