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Stevenson to RTM: Here's What Led to Town Budget's (Slight) Spending Increase

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First Selectman Jayme Stevenson delivered these brief comments Monday night to the Representative Town Meeting before the RTM voted on the 2017-1018 town budget.

Here is her statement in full, as she released it on Tuesday:

Good evening Mr. Moderator, RTM members, fellow elected officials and taxpayers watching Channel 79. I would like to respectfully ask that you approve the Board of Selectmen's operating and capital requests as recommended by the Board of Finance.

The diligence with which this budget has been crafted has resulted in a budget that restrains spending to accommodate expected services and needed infrastructure investment.

There are four primary drivers of the Board of Selectmen's budget:

- 1. Anticipated Town Growth** — This budget makes the needed investment in part time personnel to assist the Palmer, Federal Realty, Baywater Properties, Old Town Hall Homes, Atria and various other redevelopment projects precede smoothly. Annual evaluations will be made to justify the ongoing need for these new part time positions. Our town will benefit greatly from the growth in our commercial tax base once these projects are completed but investments must be made upfront to insure their success. Two additional civilian dispatchers are being requested to allow for higher cost, sworn officers to be redeployed to enforcement activities.
- 2. Debt Service** — The Board Selectmen and Board of Finance continue to make wise decisions in infrastructure investment during this period of low interest rates. Bonds have been refinanced, strategic land investments including the acquisition of a portion of the Ox Ridge Hunt Club have been made and plans are moving forward to renovate the Town Garage. These and other long term investments are the drivers of the \$991,000 in additional debt service for the coming year.
- 3. Personnel** — Government service is a people intensive business and the number of employees is a direct result of the level of service our taxpayers demand. We continue to bargain meaningful modifications to employee contracts that allow for sustainable expenditures and fair compensation. The high quality of our employees is central to the success of the services we provide.
- 4. State Mandates and Municipal Aid Impacts** — State aid to cities and towns is largely unknown at this point in the state budget process. There are 60 days left in the current fiscal year. Legislators have the incomprehensible task of closing a roughly \$400 million current year deficit caused by well-below projected income tax revenues and setting biennium budget policy to address a looming \$5 billion deficit projected for the next two years. Leadership in Hartford has stated that all solutions are still on the table at this point including the potential for a hike in income tax on the wealthy, an increase in the sales tax, non-profits (including hospitals) to pay property tax, tolls, teacher pension sharing, labor concessions and state employee layoffs.

The budget before you takes into consideration the dire state budget situation and does not budget for the receipt of the traditional Education Cost Sharing Grant. It does, however, include reimbursements for special education.

We debated the idea of taxing for the possibility of sharing in the cost of our teacher's pension, as recommended by Governor Malloy, but given the tremendous uncertainty of the state's budget deliberations, we didn't feel this was a wise budget maneuver and could likely result in over taxing our residents and businesses. Should this come to pass, we have the opportunity to address this in next year's budget or in a supplemental tax levy.

While the idea of consolidating local health departments into Regional Health Districts, which was proposed to cost Darien nearly \$2 million, is off the table for this year, there are other state mandates still pending in

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Hartford: Workers' compensation coverage for PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] resulting from employees witnessing a death (extraordinary and unquantifiable financial impact) and not allowing property improvements to be assessed until Certificates of Occupancy are issued (\$100K reduction in annual revenue).

Before I conclude, I want to publicly acknowledge the generosity of public/private partnerships with our three volunteer fire departments, Post 53, the Darien Athletic Foundation (DHS fields and lights), the Darien Land Trust ([for the land purchase off of] Hecker [Avenue]), Friends of Gorham's Pond ([for work in dredging the] Upper Pond), Friends of the Darien Library, our non-profit human service providers and volunteers with the Beautification Commission and Cemetery Committee.

Without the expertise and generosity of these organizations, taxpayers would bear significantly higher tax burden to cover service costs. Not only do these wonderful organizations save us money but they are foundational to making our community one of the best towns in Connecticut to live and raise a family. Thank you for your generosity.

I also want to thank the members of the RTM for their commitment to participating in the budget process from the start. Your early involvement has been very constructive.

Thank you for your consideration and support of the Board of Selectmen's operation and capital budgets for fiscal year 2017-18.

Editor's note: Stevenson made very minor changes to the text after delivering her speech to the RTM. Darienite.com made minor editorial changes for our in-house editorial style and the added a few explanatory phrases within brackets ("[]").

Special thanks to Jim Cameron for making available to Darienite.com some of the photos he used for Darien TV79 tweets on Monday night.