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Taxes To Go Up by 2.47% with Passage of Tax Rate, Town Budget by Representative Town Meeting

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The town mill rate will rise to \$16.16 from \$15.77, a 2.47 percent increase, the Darien Representative Town Meeting decided Tuesday night after it passed a \$145,304,061 budget for the 2017-2018 fiscal year, starting July 1.

Spending increases in the upcoming budget are relatively small, despite some new hiring in both the town and school district parts of the budget.

"The overall mill rate increase, at just 2.47 percent, is the second lowest increase I've seen in my nearly nine years on the Board of Finance," Finance Board Chairman Jon Zadgrodzky told the RTM.

Several capital projects were also supported by the RTM, including the most controversial budget item —

a \$1.7 million expansion of the Darien High School Cafeteria, expected to take place in the summer of 2018.

A proposal to lower the amount spent on the cafeteria expansion, cutting \$1.4 million from the total cost of \$1.7 million, was rejected by the RTM in a 68-to-9 vote to cut off debate on the matter (with one abstention), then in an 18-to-57 vote (with one abstention) to reject it.

The Board of Education budget was then passed in a 63-to-7 vote, with seven abstentions. Other votes for the budget passed in similarly lopsided tallies.

RTM Member Jay Hardison suggested replacing the expansion plan with a plan to buy tables and chairs for the cafeteria that would more efficiently seat students.

The new seats and tables ("the same seating that New Canaan High School uses") would cost the town only about \$300,000, Hardison said. If it doesn't work out, the town still has time to change back to the proposed \$1.7 million plan and refurbish the Cafeteria in the summer of 2018, as the Board of Education now proposes, he said.

"If we can save \$1.4 million for the taxpayers, I don't know why we wouldn't try it," he said.

RTM Member David Martin said that with new housing projects planned in Darien, much larger numbers of high school students can be expected in future years, and the seating plan Hardison proposed, with students given 18 inches of bench space, was difficult to imagine.

"I personally find it difficult to imagine we're going to get 400 children sitting shoulder to shoulder and have things work," he said.

About 100 spectators attended the RTM meeting, and they clapped several times when they heard speakers defend the cafeteria expansion project. Almost all of them left after the education budget and capital budget that included the cafeteria project were passed by the RTM.

The Board of Education budget was passed without cuts from the RTM. That budget is \$95.9 million, up \$2.0 million or 2.16 percent from last year (unless the revenue from the state's \$2.2 million Excess Cost Reimbursement grant to the town is eliminated in upcoming weeks by the state Legislature.

"The recommended [education] budget for 2017-2018 is the lowest increase in recent memory," RTM Education Committee Chairman Dennis Maroney told the RTM. "In the last five years, the lowest budget was 2.93 percent, and an average of \$4.42 percent.

"The proposed budget is a 4.5 increase over last year's budget, but that number includes monies for the State of Connecticut proposed [grant] adjustments that may eliminate \$2.2 million of excess cost reimbursement," Maroney continued. "If that number would be removed from the proposed budget, the actual increase would

be 2.16 percent — the lowest amount in at least five years."

Hardison said he wasn't impressed by the 2.16 percent spending increase "because it comes after large increases in recent years.

"I really think that the taxpayers have to be kept in the forefront [...] going forward," he said.

Finance & Budget Committee Chairman Jack Davis made a point similar to Maroney's about the overall budget when he gave his committee's recommendation to the RTM. "Not only is the increase in terms of percentage smaller than in prior years but the total dollar increase is smaller as well," Davis said.

"This is the lowest budget increase in at least 15 years and it is being accomplished with the 3 percent teacher salary contract increase approved by the RTM earlier this year," he said.

The education budget includes plans for Fitch Academy, an alternative high school program to be run from the town library for students with emotional difficulties; a plan to hire academic department heads for the high school and others for the middle school; and additional funds to hire an athletic trainer and counselor in the high school.

"Also in this budget are increases to the technology plan [for teaching using computers] of \$624,575," Maroney said. "This includes monies for new smartBoards, wireless upgrades, professional development and software subscriptions to support instruction. The district is in Year Two of a planned four-year rollout plan, and as such Chromebooks for elementary [school students] and iPads for high school students are slated to be purchased. This will expand the 1:1 initiative for Grades 4 through 9 in [the] 2017-2018 [school year]."

The town budget includes the hiring of additional staff for the Fire Marshal's Office, two civilian dispatchers in the Police Department and two part-time employees for the Building Department.

"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," First Selectman Jayme Stevenson said. "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," Stevenson said. "Two additional civilian dispatchers are being requested to allow for higher-cost, sworn officers to be redeployed to enforcement activities."

If state funding for the town is cut further in upcoming weeks or the town is mandated to pay a large portion of teacher pension benefits that the state has been financing, the Board of Finance has the option of raising taxes further, said Jon Zagrodzky, chairman of the finance board.

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Some proposals from state officials to cut certain education grants and mandate that towns pay as much as a third of teacher pension costs would mean Darien would have to pay \$6 million more, Zagrodzky estimates.

If Darien were faced with a sudden loss of the entire \$2 million state Excess Cost Reimbursement education grant, the town could decide bond certain capital projects rather than pay for them out of the proposed budget, Davis pointed out.

"This gives the Board of Finance, with subsequent approval of the RTM, some added flexibility," he continued. "The proposed cost of three projects — DHS cafeteria (\$1.7 million), the DHS shed (\$250,000) and the Town Hall generator (\$260,000) – if bonded down the road equals \$2.2 million [...] Bonding of those projects would eliminate the need for supplemental taxes or additional drawdowns on our Fund balances [...]."

Even if the state permanently eliminates the Excess Cost Reimbursement grant — the last remaining large grant it regularly gives Darien, the town has long-term resources that it can use to minimize the impact on taxpayers, Zagrodzky said. That includes the decline in debt service payments by \$5 million a year, several years from now, he said.

[RTM Budget Vote 5-8-17](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).