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Board of Finance Cuts Tax Rate Slightly After Paring Down Spending, Education Cuts Debated

Author : David Gurliacci

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With about 700 Darienites unemployed after losing their jobs in Connecticut on top of an unknown number of town residents who lost jobs in New York state, the Board of Finance decided to cut budget proposals from the Boards of Education and Selectmen, resulting in a slightly lower tax rate.

The new mill rate will be no more than \$16.36 (for every \$1,000 of assessed value), down slightly from the current fiscal year's \$16.47, an 11-cent difference. The Finance Board's goal was to keep the next town tax levy essentially the same as this one.

The Finance Board's cuts of about half a percent to the schools budget (on top of earlier cuts that the Board of Education agreed to make) came in the face of strong objections from members of not only the Board of

Education, but also schools Superintendent Alan Addley and the Council of Darien School Parents.

They said further cuts would hurt the educational experience of students. Finance Board members unanimously rejected that idea.

The Finance Board's votes on the tax rate and various parts of the town budget were all unanimous. The budget now goes for a final decision to the Representative Town Meeting, which can cut — but not raise — spending, so the Finance Board's cuts to the education budget won't be reduced and the RTM can't raise the tax rate. The RTM vote is scheduled for June 8.

- Editor's note: This article almost exclusively covers the Board of Finance decisions and debates regarding the education budget. First Selectman Jayme Stevenson also spoke at Thursday's meeting and the Board of Selectmen made significant cuts to its budget, which will be the subject of a separate article.

That doesn't have to be the final decision on spending, however, according to the Board of Finance: Chairman Jon Zagrodzky repeatedly said that his board has agreed that if the Board of Education, as it reviews its budget further in coming weeks, can't find ways to cut spending that don't hurt student's education, they can make a supplemental budget request to the Board of Finance this summer, and that board will listen.

"Our sense is that there are plenty of items that can be cut," Zagrodzky said.

The Finance Board can then vote to approve additional spending, subject to the Representative Town Meeting's final approval, he said.

The Board of Finance Final Budget Proposal to the RTM

Budget resolutions passed unanimously, 7-0, by the board:

Education operating budget: \$102,496,370

Town operating budget: \$45,365,691

Capital and non-recurring expenditures: \$2,291,845

Subtotal of the above: \$147,862,069

Sewer budgets and parking lot budgets, which receive their own revenues, were also approved.

Grand List (as of Oct. 1, 2019): \$8,568,308,532

Tax levy: \$16.36 per \$1,000 of assessed value (16.36 mills)

In April, the board asked selectmen and the school board to propose budget reductions from their earlier proposals. The Finance Board set goals of enough cuts to either keep the town tax rate the same or, with more ambition, to keep the total amount of taxes levied the same.

The board wanted to provide relief to taxpayers now that the economy is reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic. About that, Zagrodzky said at the beginning of Tuesday's Board of Finance meeting:

"We're seeing employment rates that we have not seen since the Great Depression. [...] I think it's been masked to a degree by [state and federal] government action that was not available during the Depression, but still, nonetheless, it's shocking to contemplate the many tens of millions of people who are without work.

"In Darien, things are not good [...] There's nearly 700 jobless claims from mid-March through the end of April, a significant portion of our residents, and by the way, this [...] has missed those who are employed in New York City [...] because they have to file in New York state. [...] Stores, restaurants, other businesses, all still closed in our town. [...] There's lots of hurt in this town. So this is why the Board of Finance undertook this effort to take a closer look at our budget."

Zagrodzky and members of the board have said repeatedly that their goal was to cut education spending enough that it wouldn't hurt students' educational experience, and they believed that the amounts of cuts they were requesting wouldn't do that.

The Board of Selectmen came up with more than enough new cuts from its original proposed budget to accomplish either goal and then some. The cuts came from a combination of postponing some initiatives, including the long-planned addition of more civilian dispatchers for the Police Department, postponing other spending and paying for some projects, like repairing and replacing sidewalks (\$503,000), with bonding, reducing money needed from the coming year's tax levy.

The same strategy was also followed with some Board of Education spending. For instance, a \$302,000 expense to design a new heating-ventilating-air-conditioning (HVAC) system for Holmes School is now on hold for another year.

Selectmen cut so much of their budget (which is roughly a quarter of all town spending) that fewer cuts were needed in the education budget in order to meet the Finance Board's goal.

The Board of Education submitted a cut of \$691,851 (from the operating and capital budgets) and warned the Finance Board that it would lower the quality of education Darien students received. That amount was \$575,000 short of what was requested by the Finance Board for the flat-levy scenario (and \$940,000 short of the flat-tax-rate scenario). With the extra cuts from the Board of Selectmen, the flat-tax-levy scenario could be achieved with \$557,500 more cuts from the education budget.

Last week, the Council of Darien School Parents, sent a letter to the editor of the Darien Times, published May 9, and asked parents to tell the Finance Board that its proposal to reduce the proposed education budget

would hurt students' education. This week, the two boards debated with each other over whether students' education would be hurt by the cuts.

On Thursday, at the Finance Board's final meeting on the 2020-2021 budget, Zagrodzky offered three main arguments in debating the education spending amounts:

First, that the additional cuts in spending are a mere half percent of the proposed education budget.

"I would invite the Board [of Education] to consider the context of what we've asked," Zagrodzky said. "The overall budget, after the cuts you, yourselves were OK with, totals \$104,385,184. From this, we have asked for an additional cut of \$557,500. This may seem like a lot, but it is not a 10% cut. It is not a 1% cut. It is a cut of one half of 1% beyond the items that you identified [in the initial round of cuts]. In my opinion, there is no government budget, no corporate budget, no family budget, no school budget, no budget anywhere that cannot handle a 0.5% reduction without [avoiding] damaging fundamental, core responsibilities."

Second, that several members of the Board of Finance, including Paul Hendrickson, who recently retired as business manager for the Ridgefield Public Schools district, had come up with a list of possible budget cuts that the Board of Education could adopt that wouldn't hurt education.

Some Board of Education members and Addley, who only received the list two days previously, said they didn't think cuts could be made.

Although the Board of Finance drew up the list, referred to it in its discussions of the budget and passed it on to the Board of Education, Zagrodzky repeatedly said this week that the list wasn't any kind of proposal suggesting what the school board should do — just a demonstration showing that there must be areas in the education budget that could be cut without hurting students' educational experiences.

"It is true that we looked at some specific operating expenses [...] the list of which has been widely circulated," Zagrodzky said in prepared remarks he read at the beginning of Thursday's meeting. "The reason was to confirm in our minds that this addition could be made without materially impacting the education of students. [...]"

During that meeting he later told the school board members: "I don't think it would be productive to get into a discussion about these line items. We did not rely on them in making our decision, and we're not asking that they be cut, but having done our work, we think a reasonable person can comfortably conclude that this \$557,500 cut does not need to materially damage Darien schools."

Here's "Paul's List":

Third, that the Finance Board and RTM could always reconsider spending if more information came to light. The town has a large reserve fund that could be used.

About that, Zagrodzky said:

"Can a reasonable person [say] [...] In this huge education budget of \$104 million that there is simply no opportunity not just to reduce things but maybe approach things a little bit differently. Is there some different thing that can be done that might be able to create the savings to do that. So that's the challenge.

"And I think all we're asking here is that we would set a budget that would put this cut in place and we would pitch this challenge to you that says, for the next 30, 60 days, could you please take that fresh look, and get back to us and say, 'Yes we did find a few things,' or 'No, in all honesty, these are the list of things we did [look at]. It does not work.'

"I will be the first person to convene a Board of Finance meeting. [...] If you cannot do this, there is \$23 million in the fund balance [...] \$5 million in excess of what we have set as our floor [the maximum amount that the board thinks it needs in the fund balance], that we can bring to bear to solve these problems.

"Despite the fact that those funds exist today, I think we owe it to taxpayers to say that an honest effort over a period of time, not in a quick reaction to a Board of Finance meeting two hours before — right? — that a careful effort was taken, over a discrete period to answer that question completely to the confidence of those taxpayers. If you cannot do that, this board will convene and we will submit an appropriation request to the RTM and solve that problem.

"We're not leaving students in the lurch. We're not going to permit the destruction of education in this town. [...] I think it's fair to ask you to please take one more look at this budget."

Addley responded, in part: "I appreciate your comment that you don't want to materially impact education, [...] but in all honesty, that's in the eye of the beholder."

Zagrodzky's response, in part: "We're simply asking that you take a fresh look at this budget. That's it."

Ochman said: "We [the Board of Education] heard that there was a confidence that these cuts wouldn't materially affect education. Our superintendent felt different, and so the idea was to get those ideas on the table."

At another point, Addley said: "Just because we keep saying that it has no impact doesn't mean it's so. It does. Operationally it does and practically it does. Programmatically it's going to. Now, again, the Board [of Education] will revisit its priorities.

The list of possible cuts that the Board of Finance came up with, referred to as "Paul's list" (although Hendrickson said other board members were just as involved in assembling it) was sent to members of the Board of Education and Addley only on Tuesday and just before the Board of Education began meeting that day.

Zagrodzky noted that the Board of Finance does not have a formal role in deciding on any specific cuts to the education budget. Neither that board nor the RTM can cut specific parts of the education budget. Those two groups can only cut overall education spending, and then the Board of Education decides where in its budget the cuts will be made.

But Zagrodzky said the list demonstrates that cuts could be made to the education budget without hurting students' education.

On Tuesday, Addley presented the Board of Education with a list of spending areas that he proposed to cut if the Board of Finance did reduce the schools budget (which it did on Thursday).

Among the things that Addley said he would cut (although he repeatedly said he didn't want to make cuts and pointed out that the Board of Education would have the final say): clubs and councils (extracurricular activities), Darien High School freshman sports "and/or more cuts throughout the sports program, moving third-grade strings to fourth grade, changes to the Middlesex Middle School team model.

Addley told Zagrodzky: "I don't budget, Rich [Rudl, the director of finance and operations] and I [...] haven't budgeted any cushion in this budget, so if people will point out stuff, I certainly would be happy to engage in that discussion about where flexibility is or is not. So the budget isn't built under that structure or framework. So I can't sit here and say I can find that particular amount. [...] So it is going to impact, as communicated to the Board of Finance, it will impact [...]"

He added that the Board of Education hasn't started the process of combing through the budget as closely as Zagrodzky and the Board of Finance is suggesting, and when they do, under the new pressures from the COVID-19 pandemic, the board may change priorities.

Some of the items on Paul's List indicate that the Board of Education increased spending in some areas involving sports that Addley had not proposed in the budget he put before the school board, and Addley may have been referring to those items.

Nobody at the meeting said so, and it isn't indicated in Paul's List, but if schools don't reopen in the fall, the need for additional sports spending would evaporate.

But as for the present, Addley said, "I have nothing to change [in the budget] right now, until we get into the discussion with the Board [of Education] [...] in terms of how they feel about certain line items, certain priorities, risk factors [...]"

Heating Up Then Cooling Down the Debate

Heating Up

Last week, when a letter was published by the Council of Darien School Parents calling on the public to tell the Board of Finance it didn't want the cuts in the education spending proposal, it resulted in about 250

emails to Board of Finance members.

"This is a call to action for all Darien parents and taxpayers. Our nationally recognized school system is at risk of major budget cuts, and we need your help," the letter said.

"In a memo dated May 4, 2020, the Administration of the Darien Public Schools presented various financial scenarios to achieve this goal but warned that if more cuts are required, the balance would likely come from a "combination of items...including athletics and extra-curriculars, programs and staffing [...] which could potentially change the landscape of the Darien Public Schools.' [...]"

"If you do not support cuts that will materially affect our children's education, we ask you to let the Board of Finance know. Since parents will not have the opportunity to speak publicly, it is imperative to contact the Board of Finance [...]"

Zagrodzky responded to the CDSP's statement at length at the beginning of Tuesday's Finance Board meeting, saying , "I don't normally do this, but I'm going to have to level some criticism at the CDSP [...]"

"Let me be clear: No one on the Board of Finance has suggested that we should be inflicting this kind of damage, and I have confirmed this repeatedly and publicly." Zagrodzky pointed out that in a letter to the editor published before the CDSP letter, he had said the same thing. "The CDSP letter was needlessly inflammatory, in my judgment. They've upset a lot of parents for no reason, made this process more difficult, and, I think, wasted a lot of time. I would've been happy to explain our thinking and objectives at any time, but no one from the CDSP leadership — not one — bothered to pick up the phone and give me a call about any of this. Frankly, I don't think parents were well-served by the CDSP in this process."

At the end of Tuesday's meeting, Zagrodzky also said that in some of the comments he'd received from the public, "We had a lot of parents that said, 'Look, you can't touch these schools. We're willing to pay higher taxes to preserve everything for the students.' [...] We're just getting started with the pain that's associated with all this [the pandemic] and I think we all have to collectively step back and say, 'We need to take into account what those town residents and those town businesses [that are in trouble] are feeling and experiencing, and ask ourselves [...] what we can do to help those fellow resident and businesses in this town. [...]"

At the same meeting, Finance Board member Taylor Carter said, in another prepared statement addressed to parents who wrote to the board: "I'm sorry you were so misled and unnecessarily alarmed. No one here is suggesting that we are unwilling to spend more money on education next year.

When the Board of Education met later that day, its members said they had watched the Finance Board's meeting, broadcast on Darien TV79 cable channel and online.

Ochman, the board chairman, thanked members of the public who had sent officials emails about school spending (which were uniform or almost uniform in opposing the proposed spending cuts).

Ochman also pointed out, more than once, that she had only received Paul's List of possible spending cuts just before the Board of Education meeting. She said she had forwarded the email to other school board members.

Cooling Down

Addley, along with some school board members, said Tuesday they didn't doubt that the Board of Finance members were sincere in believing that cuts could be made in the education budget, but they believed the Finance Board members were wrong.

Board of Education members also said at that meeting that they didn't want to bring up specifics of Paul's List.

On Thursday, when Board of Education members were invited to talk at the Board of Finance's second meeting this week, both sides of the debate described their opposed positions, but no angry words were exchanged.

Zagrodzky asked that the specifics of Paul's List not be discussed, and Addley and the school board members didn't bring them up.

Addley and some school board members said that they disagreed with the Board of Finance on whether the spending cuts would hurt students' education, but they also believed Finance Board members were sincere in believing that wasn't the case.

Zagrodzky in turn, complimented Addley on submitting a tight budget. Zagrodzky said he and the Board of Finance thought the budget could be tighter still, although he said Addley and the Board of Education had made a sincere effort.

Ochman said, before the Finance Board voted: "I have taken the Board of Finance at its word and will continue to that you will make the best decision, based on the financial health of Darien as you go forward. [...] You have your expertise. I will respect the decision you make. The Board [of Education] will do the work it needs to do."

At another point, Zagrodzky told Ochman: "I would characterize our [Board of Finance] point of view, not to speak for my whole board [...] what we're doing is saying 'we'd like to put this cut in place now. We would challenge you [the Board of Education] to see if you can do this without impacting students.

"If, after that effort, which I would recommend spending some real time on, if after that effort, which we can then represent to the taxpayers as having been a serious effort, separate from when the budget was developed in, sort of, pre-pandemic times, we could represent to the taxpayers that in fact that effort was done.

"And if you conclude at the end of that that no cut can be made [...] that won't impact student experiences, we'll convene a discussion, we'll have an appropriation vote and we'll replace that funding. There is funding

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too do that. We're just saying, could you please undertake that exercise, and if it absolutely cannot work, come back to us. That's it."