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Stevenson Presents Selectmen's Budget with New Proposals, New Cost Savings

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Categories : [Government & Politics](#)

Tagged as : [Board of Finance 2016](#), [Budget 2016-2017](#), [Education Budget 2016-2017](#), [Jon Zagrotsky](#), [Town Budget 2016-2017](#)

Date : March 4, 2016

A readjustment in retirement and retirement health-insurance payments helped lower this year's Board of Selectmen's proposed budget by 4.49 percent, according to the proposal presented by First Selectman Jayme Stevenson this week.

Lower costs for heating fuel also made room for a bit more spending on other programs, Stevenson told the Board of Finance on Tuesday, when she presented the selectmen's proposed 2016-2017 budget, which proposes \$44,943,031 in town spending (a drop of \$2,111,996 from this year).

Here is Stevenson's presentation (word for word, but with a bit removed), including many of the slides she

used to illustrate it. To see and hear the full presentation, see the 39-minute Darien TV79 video (below) and [the full set of slides here](#).

Stevenson's 2016-2017 budget presentation

[...] This year's Board of Selectmen budget proposal follows on the Board of Selectmen's theme over my administration of budgeting restraint and limiting requests to what we need to run our local government services and respond to the requests of taxpayers.

This budget is able to continue to provide the high level of services our residents expect at cost-effective levels, and it begins to address emerging community needs.

Every year is different. As you know, we're faced each year with responding to challenges, new ways of doing business and taking advantage of opportunities while balancing government-service delivery against our taxpayers' ability and willingness to pay for these services.

This year's budget presented opportunities for spending reductions in operating areas like pension contributions, health care and utilities, allowing us to reprogram funding to satisfy our other town needs.

In talking to folks outside our organization, what I hear is that Darien is beautiful and vibrant and people are generally very happy with the services that we provide. While I'm here tonight to advocate for the Board of Selectmen's budget, I'd also like to share that continuing to invest wisely in our excellent schools is critical to help maintain the economic stability of our residential and commercial tax base.

Great schools, a vibrant and emerging downtown commuter rail system, proximity to New York and Boston and the Long Island Sound are the key drivers in Darien's success as a family-centered community.

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Seizing the opportunities that are arising to develop our commercial areas will pay big dividends in the future. Let's let optimism and opportunity guide our community decision-making over the next few years.

State aid

The mounting challenges of our state economy are reflected in this year's budget, through changes in state aid. PILOT [payment in lieu of taxes] funding has been reduced to zero and, although we received \$246,000 in municipal revenue sharing funds — that's the funds that now come from half a percent of the sales tax revenue — it's simply an offset to the \$243,000 reduction in ECS [Education Cost Sharing] funding.

LOTICIP [Local Transportation Capital Improvement Program of the Connecticut Department of Transportation] and town aid for roads are stable for now.

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We must be mindful of the new state law that will penalize municipalities beginning in the Fiscal Year 2018 for expenditures that exceed the greater of the inflation rate or 2.5 percent. I fully anticipate that there will be https://darienite.com at either reduces funding to cities and towns or that imposes new, unfunded mandates.

So let's get to the budget. [She describes some changes in this year's budget document from previous years.]

Personnel and other budget changes

The bulk of the paving expenses have been added to the Reserve Capital Nonrecurring [account] [a change from previous years].

The proposed increase in the Board of Selectmen operating [budget] is very moderate this year — 0.7 percent.

The proposed budget includes some personnel changes — we're asking for two new full-time positions. Asking for new personnel is not something that we recommend lightly. These requests go through a great deal of scrutiny and to pass the test, these added positions must either increase efficiency or reduce costs over time, or respond to an emerging need of our taxpayers.

So this year we're looking to add a new planner in the Planning & Zoning Department. That's in direct relation to the booming workload of the Planning & Zoning Department and us wanting them to be able to handle the work flow of the applications that will be coming to them over the next two or three years from the downtown, Noroton Heights and other commercial redevelopments.

We're also asking to add a recreation supervisor. As you know already, our Parks & Recreation Department is a shining star in the government structure, and our programs continue to be very well supported by the community. Most of them are self-supporting, and now that we have a new director of Parks & Recreation in place, we're looking to add to our programming component, and a recreation supervisor will allow us to do that.

Proposed Board of Selectmen budget:

- \$44,943,031 for 2016-2017 (versus \$47,055,027 initially appropriated for this year's budget)
 - An decrease of 4.49 percent
-

We'd like to increase two existing part-time positions to full-time. One is an assistant to the tax assessor, and that's to help ramp up for the next revaluation, and the case manager in the Human Services Department, that's taking an existing case manager from part-time to full-time, and that's really helping us to do some personnel planning over the years.

And we're looking to eliminate two part-time positions: A part-time clerk in the assessor's office and the assistant to the human services director.

Some lower costs

Cost savings have been realized as a result of moving all of our employees to the high-deductible [health insurance] plan.

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Energy costs are reduced through the addition of natural gas to several town facilities and continuing efforts on the part of the town — and I know the Board of Education, too — on energy-saving measures. And there'll be more to come on that.

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Pension and retiree medical costs have been reduced. Additionally in this budget [...] we've been able to make some modest investments this year in beautification, giving a couple of dollars to the Darien Historical Society for the preservation of historical documents important to the town of Darien.

More money wanted

Also, we requested some funding to begin to respond to [the recommendations](#) of the Pedestrian Infrastructure Advisory Committee and the parking study report, and to begin the permitting process to dredge the sedimentation of basins below Upper Gorham's Pond, in front of Town Hall and at Tilley Pond Park.

We feel strongly that continued maintenance of these sedimentation basins is critical to our town waterways and drainage in those areas.

[...]

As always, protective services and public works are really some of the key drivers of our operating expenses on the town side [of the budget, as opposed to the education side of the budget], necessarily so.

What's driving costs

Budget cost drivers:

Some of the main drivers:

Collective bargaining units. [Contracts with all town unions]

Workers compensation and package insurance rates are stable, but insured values have increased, resulting in higher insurance costs.

This budget [regarding insurance] is based on estimates. Our formal numbers are not yet available.

Dariente News for Darien

The pension and retiree medical [budget] is based on actuarial recommended contributions, and we definitely <https://dariente.com> adjustment in that regard, based on some policy changes that you are all aware of.

Labor counsel budget was increased in Fiscal Year '16, anticipating a need for outside [legal] counsel to assist with contract negotiations, but this year we have no open contracts, so we reduced the budget for this year.

We really benefited from the lower cost of utilities and will continue to benefit as we turn over more buildings in the next fiscal year to natural gas.

Not in the budget

What's not in this year's budget: We did not move forward with police body cameras [as proposed by Police Chief Duane Lovello, the Trench Rescue [proposal] for the fire commission and the Pear Tree Beach Master Plan, not because we don't believe in these initiatives.

But the **body cameras** — that protocol is just beginning to be rolled out through the state of Connecticut and we understand that there's some significant costs associated with the digital storage of the footage from the body cameras.

I know we're going to get here one day; we just didn't feel like this was the year to do it. We want to see the experience of a few other municipalities. We have no incidents or call within our community pushing us in this direction this year, but I anticipate that we might see this come back again next year.

Trench Rescue: The way this was proposed to us [was that] it was to allow for the collaboration between the three fire departments to form a [...] unit specializing in trench rescue [rescuing people when trenches collapse on them]. We definitely encourage the three fire departments to work together and to build areas of expertise.

We just didn't see the widespread need for trench rescue at this point in time, although we did have some discussion about supporting training for this, and waiting on any kind of capital investment, thinking that we might be able to utilize some equipment that might exist in surrounding communities if we had trained staff.

And the **Pear Tree Beach Master Plan** — Parks & Recreation is really busy right now. They're trying to program Weed Beach and they have a few other projects going on, so we felt that funding the Weed Beach Master Plan this year was just a bit aggressive for the commission and staff to be able to handle.

But we did recommend that there might be one or two things that they should begin to take a look at in this fiscal year, namely, the boat ramp has some needs, so they should begin to look at that and, then, I'm sure that we'll see the master plan again next year.

[...]

Five-year budget perspective. Operating expenses against non-tax revenue and state grants. Non-tax revenue is ever so slightly increasing, and our state grants, no surprise, are on the way down.

Some capital projects of note

In our Capital Highlights [slide] some of the items of note:

- We've now tried two or three times to seek grant funding to fund a generator for this building [Town Hall], unsuccessfully. I don't believe that we can any longer have thi building not supported by a generator that can run every aspect of this facility, so \$250,000 is in our budget for the Town Hall generator.
- \$105,000 to replace the phone systems here and at the Police Department — software is no longer supported on those, and
- The Cherry Lawn basketball court needs to be resurfaced. If anybody's a basketball player and has been over there lately, I think you'll agree.
- It also includes money for the important implementation of the Town Plan of Conservation and Development.

Other capital projects

<https://darienite.com> putting money into our fire apparatus replacement reserve.

- This year, they're asking for three police vehicles.
- We're doing our standard sidewalk rehabilitation and \$845,000 for paving. Some of that is offset by some of those state grants.
- We're going to continue to digitize our documents in Planning & Zoning [Department] and our Building Department.
- And what we're recommending for your consideration to bond this year will be the work on the Public Works Garage and \$210,000 that we would like to invest in building some new sidewalks in town.

[...]

Possible spending proposals for later in the year

A few final comments [...]

What's on the horizon? We're hoping this year to move forward with [acquisition of the street lights](#) in the town of Darien, to acquire these from Eversource and convert them to LED technology, which will result in a substantial long-term cost savings to the town of Darien and provide a better quality of light and a more sustainable lighting system that doesn't need replacement with the same frequency that the current technology requires.

We might also need to come to you to help fund some recommendations from the EMS [Emergency Medical Services] study. We anticipate receiving a final draft of that study any day, and I just want to be able to respond to what the critical recommendations are in there and make sure that the town of Darien has the best possible EMS response system available.

And of course other land acquisition opportunities as they become available to the town.

The board of Selectmen and staff believe we've presented to you a responsible budget reflecting what we need to run a restrained local government and respond to the needs and wishes of our taxpayers. We respectfully ask you to support our budget as proposed and for the RTM to do the same.

Additional slides from the presentation

For more information

- *Full budget document: **Board of Selectmen's** [proposed 2016-2017 budget](#)*
- *First Selectman's Feb. 29 [slide presentation](#) to the Board of Finance*

DARIENITE COVERAGE:

- [Darien's Grand List Up 1%, But Assessments on Businesses Down](#) (Feb. 8)

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- [Selectmen Propose Budget with 4.49% Lower Spending Than This Year](#) (*Feb. 10*)
- [2016-17 Budget Proposals Presented to Darien Board of Finance](#) (*March 4*)

STATE OF THE TOWN SPEECHES from Dec. 7, 2015: Full texts and descriptions on Darienite.com:

- [Finance Board Chairman Expects a Higher Tax Rate Increase Than Last Year's 2.3%](#)
- [Expect to Get More Housing, Retail Options, Says Stevenson in 'State of Town' Address](#)

See the 39-minute video

[Board of Finance 3-1-16](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).