

SPECIAL TOWN COUNCIL MEETING - SATURDAY MORNING - JANUARY 26, 2008

PRESENT: Marshall, Cordeiro, Parella, and Barboza

ABSENT: Herreshoff

ALSO PRESENT: Diane C. Mederos, Town Administrator
Sen. David Bates, District 32
Sen. Walter Felag, District 10
Sen. Charles Levesque, District 11
Rep. Douglas Gablinske, District 68
Rep. Jan P. Malik, District 67
Michael J. Abbruzzi, Warren Town Manager
Hon. Frank Alfano, Warren Council President
Hon. Joseph A. DePasquale, Warren Town Council
Hon. John W. Hanley, Warren Town Council
Hon. Louis A. Rego, Warren Town Council
Dr. Edward P. Mara, B-W Regional Supt. of Schools
Jane Correia, B-W Regional Schools Director of
Administration and Finance
Marjorie J. McBride, B-W Regional School
Committee
John P. Saviano, B-W Regional School Committee

The Council met in special session on Saturday morning, January 26, 2008 in the Town Hall Council Chambers beginning at 9:10 o'clock AM, Council Chairman Marshall presiding:

Council Chairman Marshall welcomed all and presented the planned agenda. He also invited those present to offer additional agenda items.

Budget Concerns

Council Chairman Marshall noted that this year was not unusual, and every year offers its own set of challenges. He commented that the relationship between the Council and members of General Assembly was amicable and also noted that the Town and Regional School Committee had worked together to complete capital projects to improve the Hugh Cole, Colt, Andrews, and Rockwell schools. He further commented that it is the Council's intention to continue to work together with those present in order to solve future problems.

Warren Council President Alfano thanked the Council for extending its invitation to this meeting. He explained that this year posed a particularly difficult budget challenge since the towns will not likely receive much financial help from the State of Rhode Island.

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Town Administrator Mederos extended her welcome and expressed surprise that the television media was present to cover this meeting since there did not appear to be any particular controversy at hand.

Council Chairman Marshall expressed his appreciation for the recent assistance offered by the members of the General Assembly concerning the Silver Creek outlet flooding problem and other difficulties facing the Town.

Sen. Levesque commented on the governor's State of State message and the supplemental budget. He noted that the proposal does not appear to add up. He also explained that the Governor will submit his budget next week and further explained that the Historic Tax Credit proved too successful and may need to be changed.

Sen. Felag expressed concern that the difficulty with the State's finances is partly attributable to the fact that people are collecting pensions for longer periods of time. He also noted that increases in salaries have caused higher pensions and a corresponding budget shortfall.

Councilman Barboza expressed concern that the Governor's plan to not increase taxes may result in the raising of local property taxes to support increases in education costs. He noted that the problem was complex and expressed further concern that a single solution may not fit all communities.

Rep. Malik noted that the Federal government has provided less revenue to the State and that the Governor's philosophy is to give less to the cities and towns. The result is that the property taxpayers ultimately provide a larger share. Rep. Malik suggested that an analyst should look at the State's budget and make recommendations regarding same. He also expressed concern that the State's budget is not balanced.

Council Chairman Marshall expressed thanks for legislators' help with the LNG project with Rep. Gallison commenting that there is continued concern since the issue is not completely resolved.

Rep. Gallison stated that Bristol and Warren is the model for regionalization and regionalization should have more applications throughout the State. He also noted that towns are sometimes penalized for being fiscally sound and it is held

against the town and school communities should they have a surplus.

Rep. Gallison suggested that the State's fiscal problems might be somewhat alleviated through the development of wind power. He further suggested that the new-planned Veterans Home might be a good place to install a wind-turbine and save with energy costs.

Rep. Gablinske believes the Governor-proposed cell phone bill is "ludicrous." He also suggested that health insurance contributions might be raised for state employees but town employees are already paying a fair amount.

Sen. Levesque noted that when co-pays became popular, the amount of uninsured persons has risen dramatically.

Rep. Gallison explained that the House leadership agrees not to raise State taxes. He further explained that some education mandates are only partially funded or not funded at all.

School Committeewoman McBride expressed concern that legislators should support public education. She also stated that new legislation should be introduced eliminating the requirement that school nurses must have a teaching degree.

Sen. Bates stated that when nurse legislation was brought up he was "nearly crucified." He suggested that the General Assembly should eliminate all mandates.

Councilman Rego agreed that all mandates should be eliminated.

Council President Alfano stated that Warren's budget is a bare minimum. He also observed that there are no opportunities to cut the budget since Warren has a volunteer fire service, minimum employees. He further noted that Warren may have to cut back on services or raise taxes beyond the spending cap.

Collaboration/Regionalization

Mr. Abbruzzi suggested regionalizing more services such as harbormasters and also creating a County police department. He also suggested that the three towns might consider investigating the possibility of county wide services.

Councilwoman Parella suggested regionalizing bucket trucks, and other heavy equipment. She noted a collaboration report from

1992 that was completed by a group of planning students from the University of Rhode Island. She asked that a copy of this report should be made available to the Council members of Barrington, Warren and Bristol and also sent to the members of the General Assembly representing the three towns. Councilwoman Parella also agreed with Rep. Gablinske about regionalization of education. She further noted that former Governor Sundlun promoted regionalization of schools as a cost saving measure.

Sen. Levesque stated that there has been a lot of collaboration in Portsmouth.

Councilwoman Parella suggested that the State income tax is more equitable than the local property tax. She explained that Bristol is efficient with employees and its volunteer fire services.

Animal Shelter

Council Chairman Marshall explained the Council's plan to have the Town's bond counsel prepare legislation that will be put before the voters as a ballot question this year concerning bonds for a new animal shelter.

Rep. Gallison is a board member of the Friends of Foley Committee and may be able to help with a possible tri-town bond referendum since Barrington does not have an animal shelter and Warren is in need of a new shelter also. Council Chairman Marshall speculated that the bond may not be necessary since the funds may be available within normal capital spending.

Rep. Gablinske offered to work on Bristol's behalf to pass the bond referendum.

Town Administrator Mederos suggested that a resolution might be needed in this case. Council Chairman Marshall agreed to bring this matter to the Barrington Town Council so as to determine their interest.

Wood-Fired Outdoor Furnaces

The Council considered the matter of the wood burning furnaces with Mr. Sebastian Wordell, Barbara Barlow, and Elisa Gilroy, Unions Street property owners, providing input to the discussion.

Mr. Wordell is the owner of one of these furnaces and explained that he is experimenting with the device so as to fully learn its operation. He noted his plan to use a more clean-burning fuel, raised the smoke stack, and install an air reducer to improve the exhaust.

Ms. Barlow and Ms. Gilroy explained that Bristol is too densely populated to accommodate wood burning furnaces; noting the exhaust pollutants. Ms. Barlow agreed to provide copies of manufacturers' literature and information compiled by Ms. Barlow to the legislators.

Rep. Gablinske and Rep. Malik agree to meet with Ms. Barlow and later with Department of Environmental Management Director Sullivan concerning this matter.

Sidewalk Repairs/ Coastal Flooding

Council Chairman Marshall stated that Bristol will be repairing sidewalks on Hope Street as the town can no longer wait for the State to do much-needed repairs. He further noted that the repair of storm drains in the area is also an issue.

Council Chairman Marshall further stated that Town is taking it upon itself to make repairs but would like the State to be aware of same with the express desire that the State may assist with the cost if possible.

Council Chairman Marshall noted that legislators were very instrumental toward the improvements to the Silver Creek outfall. He noted that the Tanyard Brook has a partially collapsed outfall and the Town is awaiting approval from the State DEM and CRMC. He explained that these emergency repairs are critical so as to release the outflow of storm water into Bristol Harbor. These situations need the assistance of the legislators. He further explained that he is cognizant of the State's financial problems but the Town cannot leave these much-needed repairs unattended.

Sen. Levesque suggested that the State may be able to compensate the Town from available TIPS funds. Rep. Malik and Sen. Felag informed those present that the Town and not the State is responsible for sidewalk repairs.

Sen. Felag stated that any request for reimbursement with TIPS funds should be made in writing with Rep. Malik agreeing to meet with Director Williams concerning this matter.

Enterprise Zone Tax Issues

Council Chairman Marshall noted that Enterprise tax credits were curtailed a few years ago and expressed concern that these funds were very instrumental toward economic development in Bristol, Portsmouth and Warren. He expressed further concern that State officials talk about economic development but at the same time take-away the little incentives available to towns so as to attract business. He suggested that Enterprise Zone tax credits might be restructured and limited to corporations of 25 employees or more. Sen. Felag agreed to discuss EDC initiatives with State officials. Councilman Rego expressed concern that should the State provide too many incentives, existing business and citizens at large will have to bear the cost. He also stated that he is not anti-Enterprise Zone.

Regionalization/Collaborations/Financial Incentives

Council Chairman Marshall also explained that discussions were held with Barrington concerning collaboration relating to harbor patrol and the development of a harbor management plan.

Rep. Gablinske noted that any service such as police, fire, trash collection, animal shelter should be considered as potential for regionalization.

Councilwoman Parella inquired about incentives for communities who regionalize with Rep. Gablinske explaining that there should be no incentives. He explained that this is the reasoning behind Senate Bill 3050 which requires that regionalization options will be considered.

Council Chairman Marshall raised the issue of the DEM designation of compost versus solid waste so as to facilitate the sharing of compost processing facilities. Rep. Gallison agreed to investigate same.

Historic Tax Credits

Council Chairman Marshall informed those present that out of state investors are not considering Rhode Island any longer due to changes in policy this being most evident as it relates to the State changing its position concerning historic tax credits. Should this be allowed to transpire, investors will be turned disheartened and projects may be left half-complete.

Sen. Levesque does not believe the State would change its position overall but does advocate some kind of cap on historic tax credit.

Miscellaneous Discussions

Council Chairman Marshall inquired as to why fees are not being collected at the toll booths in Colt State Park. He suggested that everyone might pay a fee with non-residents fee perhaps doubled.

Council President Alfano noted that Child Street sidewalks are in poor condition. He asked that if the State not responsible for the sidewalks; it should notify Towns since they need clear info as how to proceed.

Council President Alfano explained that Warren has a pollution problem at its Town Beach it could use State help to resolve same. Sen. Levesque questioned price with Mr. Alfano stating that the price for mitigation was yet unknown and that testing is ongoing to determine the two possible sources of pollution.

Councilman Hanley suggested moving the fiscal year noting that at present the towns are "trying to hit a moving target" when setting budgets particularly since schools are unaware of their level of State funding. He offered a possible solution in a separate school tax. Councilwoman Parella suggested that the State may wish to research this matter since it is done in other states.

Councilman DePasquale stated that Warren is working with wind and energy committees. He noted that this would be positive and already a success elsewhere. He speculated that if Warren and Bristol would be partners and pool funds; equipment might be bulk-purchased and cost savings realized. He further suggested that the towns should look for solutions concerning energy consumption.

Rep. Gablinske suggested moving town budget to October since the state does not intend to move its budget.

Sen. Felag suggested a 13 month budget and moving the fiscal year over a 3 year period. He noted that East Providence has a 13 month budget and may be a model for consideration.

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Rep. Gablinske suggested that the regional school committee and towns should take contract negotiations very seriously and to get as much professional help as possible in their negotiations. School Committeewoman McBride stated that co-pays are now 15-20%, not 10%. She noted that the budget is fixed and there is little room for change.

Ms. Correia commentated that the various town agencies apparently work well with the East Bay members of the General Assembly.

The group agreed by consensus that this meeting was worthwhile and also agreed to meet again next year.

There being no further business, upon a motion by Councilman Barboza, seconded by Councilwoman Parella and unanimously voted the Chairman declared this meeting to be adjourned at 12:00 o'clock PM.

Louis P. Cirillo, CMC
Council Clerk (from notes provided by Jennifer Walsh, Deputy Clerk)