

**TOLLAND TOWN COUNCIL
COMMUNITY FORUM MINUTES
SEPTEMBER 18, 2007, 7:00 P.M.
FIRE TRAINING CENTER**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Kathy Bach, Chairperson, Dale Clayton, Vice-Chair, Frederick Daniels, April Teveris, MaryAnn Delaney Tuttle, Francis Kennedy, Kevin Juber.

OTHERS PRESENT: Steven Werbner, Town Manager, Michael Wilkinson, Director of Administrative Services, Christine Hutton, Finance Director, Beverly Bellody, Human Services Director, Walter Lawrence, Assessor, Margaret DeVito, Town Clerk, Linda Farmer, Director of Planning & Community Development, Barbara Butler, Library Director, John Littell, Public Safety Supervisor, David Smith, Public Works Director, Tom Ainsworth, Recreation Director, John Bock, Highway Superintendent, Marlene Bryant, Collector of Revenue, William Sevcik, Public Works Coordinator.

Meeting was called to commence at 7:00 p.m. by Kathy Bach.

Kathy Bach introduced herself and Town Council members, and gave a brief explanation of work done by them over the past two years. Kathy Bach described the meeting tonight as Government 101, set for the primary purpose of future budget planning. Kathy Bach discussed the sale of bonds and asked the group: "Where do you want to be?"

Steve Werbner introduced himself and thanked attendees for coming. He went on to describe how he would explain basic governmental functions in order to bring a better understanding of services provided. Steve Werbner explained that he had started the first government academy in the state and while programs such as that may not be possible in Tolland, we can in other ways help anyone interested to learn more about local government. He asked for volunteers to learn more about government. Steve Werbner recognized the Town's department heads as very talented people and expressed how lucky Tolland is to have them working for it. He noted that all were salaried employees and went above and beyond without any additional compensation.

Steve Werbner introduced the Municipal Quiz. Steve Werbner highlighted several questions and answers including #1-5. A question was raised from the residents asking if this discussion included the Board of Education and Steve Werbner replied no. Even though the BOE comprises 70% of the total budget they will have a separate forum session at some date in the future. #9; Fieldstone Commons has been a topic of much discussion, Planning and Zoning works to plan but cannot dictate who rents out the building spaces. A question arose from the residents inquiring if taxes were collected from that complex; to which Steve Werbner replied-yes, even the vacant commercial properties pay full taxes. #11, why we vote every two weeks? Because it has been mandated in the Charter. Item #12 was reviewed. A question from the residents asking about item #5; what constitutes a "non-union employee"? Steve Werbner explained that it was an employee who does not belong to a union, but is employed by the Town. #19; Steve Werbner noted that many didn't understand road maintenance is a huge undertaking, and a large responsibility coupled with a large cost, requiring a large commitment from the community. #23 was noted by Steve Werbner that the Grand List has historically had a 3% growth rate, last year 44 homes were constructed in town, this year 12. #26; Steve Werbner

stated that this town gets rave reviews from external governmental agencies and advisors, and that managers and Councils of the past were responsible.

Steve Werbner went over the General Government Departments responsibilities by going through a series of organization charts. Planning and Community Development's chart was explained by Steve Werbner and responsibilities of such were noted. Steve Werbner explained that as activities change and grow over time, there is increased workload on the staff and we are operating in the same capacity with the same staff numbers. Very few towns have as few staff as Tolland with the many services provided. Steve Werbner invited the residents to check with the neighboring towns. Community Service Department Heads' responsibilities were noted. Parks and Facilities employees maintain many Town and school properties with only nine employees. As roads are added, additional responsibilities are being assumed by the current number of employees. The Finance and Records Department was reviewed and noted that many of the functions are state mandated. Public Safety is complicated but running with six Fire Department employees and we are contracted with the Resident State Troopers who utilize four Troopers and one Sergeant. Education comprises approximately 70% of the overall Town expenditures. There is not much you can do to decrease cost in the top three largest expenditures in the budget said Steve Werbner, which are Education, Debt Services and Public Works. People feel that Public Safety which costs 1.3 million and Public Works which costs 4 million should not be reduced to preserve level of current service. The Library cost \$376 thousand and the decrease in hours of operation has caused discomfort in the public. Recreation is 70-75% self funded in fees. Steve Werbner asked how we reduce the cost of Government. He plans to use this meeting as a platform to stimulate thoughts on this with some basic information. Steve Werbner pointed out that there is a 2.3 million dollar gap for the next fiscal year that needs to be covered in one of two ways; increase taxes or decrease services.

A question was raised by a town resident asking which route Steve Werbner was taking regarding either increased taxes or decreased services. He replied that he was giving out this information so that the townspeople could make that decision. A resident asked how many employees were currently on the municipal side; Steve Werbner replied – 90. The same resident asked how many employees were on the Board of Education side to which Steve Werbner replied 300. A resident asked how we are going to manage OPEB. Steve Werbner replied that it would require a \$500,000 plus expenditure by the BOE on an annual basis.

Steve Werbner explained that staff are trying to look at breaking down each department to examine in detail and assign a dollar value to services provided to determine where costs can be saved or find a better more cost effective way to run these services.

A question was raised by a resident regarding commercial property use and taxation. Steve Werbner explained that commercial development was more of a long-term item and this was a discussion about current issues that need immediate attention if we are to not experience the budget conflict again next fiscal year. Steve Werbner told the residents that he would give out his email for direct suggestions or comments. Steve Werbner explained that as a professional

manager he would like to know before the fact, how much money he has to work with going into budget planning.

A question was raised by a resident as to why Council couldn't start with a zero budget and add as they go along? Kathy Bach told him that they went into the budget discussions with the same scope of services that were approved in the past year's budget.

Steve Werbner asked the town to consider reviewing the services provided and decide what services are desirable. A question was asked, what percentage was the town of the overall budget? 30% was answered.

Steve Werbner opened the floor to discussion.

A resident asked if the next tax bill will be the same amount, Steve Werbner replied yes.

A resident was interested in how to get a message across to Council; Kathy Bach asked him to send an email, and thanked all for their attendance.

A resident asked if Board of Education was going to make a similar presentation, to which Kathy Bach replied yes, that was the original idea.

A resident asked if we could change the way we vote on budgets. Kathy Bach replied that would involve a change in the Charter.

Kathy Bach noted that there will be a meeting held on Wednesday, October 3, 2007 of the Route 195 Corridor Study Committee talking about Economic Development along the corridor. Tolland needs smarter growth in retail areas, noted Kathy Bach.

A resident asked if we were putting the library hours back on, Steve Werbner replied that this was being looked into for next fiscal year.

A resident commented that he had moved here from Hamden, CT and that he had more land and more house here in Tolland for fewer taxes and more services.

Dale Clayton noted that getting information out to the public has always been an issue and this would be a good opportunity to look at mediums for this.

Steve Werbner commented that information was presented in the Tolland Monthly publication, Quarterly newsletter, flyers and the Town of Tolland web page; any suggestions were welcomed as to improvement.

A resident asked if the town had looked into alternative fuel costs. Steve Werbner replied that the up-front costs were too expensive to convert and were not done with recent new construction.

Kathy Bach commented that residents were invited to attend budget meetings; much information is given out to obtain a better understanding of what money is used for.

Fred Daniels said that the Council does have obligations they have committed to and voters overwhelmingly approved of. He said that government and Council are sensitive to peoples' wants and their hope for this meeting is to have future conversations on how we can come together as a community to see where we want to go.

April Teveris noted that there were a number of costs in the budget that were state mandated and many aren't funded.

A suggestion was made by a resident that the town be audited by an outside agency annually. Steve Werbner explained that they were audited annually.

A resident commented that Connecticut residents pay the highest taxes in the country and that the taxpayer's ability to pay does not figure into the equation. People are not getting the raises in their pay to match the raises in the budgeted taxes. He pointed out that the taxation system is a 300 year old, antiquated system that is no longer functional in our society today. He stated that he fears government on all levels. Steve Werbner stated that it was not just a Connecticut problem, but a problem nationwide that needs to be examined at length.

Kathy Bach suggested that residents write to their Congressmen and Senators to fight for legislation.

Kathy Bach suggested that the next step after this meeting is to engage in study circles to work on specific topics. Kathy Bach invited those of interest to come back to meet for conversations on topics in order to open communication lines. She asked that residents leave names and contact information before leaving.

Steve Werbner explained that we may or may not need a facilitator to identify 3, 4 or 5 questions we want addressed regarding finance/services. Groups need to be organized and then go off for a period to become versed in the assigned topics, and reconvene as a community group to try to get a consensus. It is a commitment that requires much thought and will have an impact on the future budget. Steve Werbner asked that if anyone was interested, to contact him.

A resident commented that Tolland has a very humble library and any future cuts in budget would greatly impact their programs.

A resident thanked Council for setting this meeting up.

MaryAnn Delaney Tuttle commented that, even with many years of experience, she still learns more about the budget all the time. The numbers presented tonight only comprise 30% of the total budget. Board of Education is the larger portion of the equation. MaryAnn Delaney Tuttle

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said we need to ask more questions on the Board of Educations side regarding changes. We have a responsibility to educate Americans and the more we hear these presentations, the more we learn.

Kathy Bach commented that democracy, our town and our budget; continue to work together.

Kathy Bach reported that we were awaiting the Board of Educations date(s) for their meeting.

Meeting was closed at 9:00 p.m.

At 9:15 p.m. Fran Kennedy motioned and Fred Daniels seconded to adjourn into Executive Session. At 10:55 p.m. it was motioned by April Teveris and seconded by MaryAnn Delaney Tuttle to adjourn from Executive Session. The Council's vote was unanimous (7-0).

Respectfully submitted,

Mary Mosher
Town Council Clerk

Kathy Bach, Town Council Chair