

Open Forum Minutes

Tuesday, February 7, 2023

6:00 pm

Loos Center for the Arts

A recording of this public forum can be found at:

Board of Selectmen present: First Selectmen Jay Swan, Chandler Paquette

Board of Finance present: Chairman Michael Dougherty, David Fortin, Fred Chmura, Michele Woz, Jeffrey Kelleher, Asa Scranton, Phil Parizeau

Board of Education present: Chairman Hans Frankhouser, Sonia Greene, Adam Keser, Emily Hayden, Alan Barker, Holly Dearborn,

Other Town Officials Present: Finance Director Karen Fitzpatrick, Superintendent of Schools Victor Toth, Woodstock Public Schools Business Manager Janice Thurlow, Highway Foreman John Navarro, Crystal Adams, Recording Secretary Amy Monahan

Moderator- Ed Higgins

First Selectman Jay Swan welcomed everyone at 6 pm and introduced Ed Higgins as Moderator. He asked that all people speaking use a microphone and state full name.

Ed Higgins noted that documents are available in the lobby for reference.

1. Megan Bard Morse asked to hear from board members if any follow up information is available from questions raised at the last meeting.
 - a. Victor Toth spoke of the BOE budget and noted the mandated increases do not allow for adequate budget. He also noted the test scores are reflecting the cuts already made in past year.
2. Katie O'Neil noted that we are 2nd lowest in cost per student spending. She asked how we expect our students to learn when so few dollars spent on educating our students.
 - a. Adam Keser noted that we cannot and do not spend adequately on our students. Our budget does not allow for spending needed to best educate our students. Students cannot learn adequately with the resources constrained as they are currently. Woodstock is no longer the gold standard in terms of education.
 - b. Hans Frankhouser noted that the "final hour fixes" that take place with Woodstock budgets are the result of hard work to make the system work. That does not mean that our services are being maintained in the way they should be.
3. John Dlugosz started with BOS quote from town website and then asked how is it that our schools have been left at the bottom of the state rankings and why was it not addressed earlier. He also noted that the Woodstock Fair

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should provide some type of stipend to benefit the town and that other types of income need to be pursued if Prop 46 is not addressed.

- a. Jay Swan noted that Mr. Dlugosz's concerns were read at the Board of Selectmen as requested. Jay also noted that this problem has been present in the town for over 30 years and it is not fair to target the current officials. He noted that the Town of Woodstock is looking into the taxing of Fair admission tickets.
4. Lindsay Paul thanked all involved for their work and the public forums. She likes that Mr. Dlugosz is focusing on solutions but she would like to be sure she better understand the problems at hand by having Mr. Toth recap the losses and concerns and share his opinion on the impact of those losses on the students.
 - a. Victor Toth seconded Jay Swan that these officials work hard to solve problems at hand.
 - b. He reviewed the following information that was presented at the last Open Forum
 - i. CT General Statute 10-34 states that "any Town in which a high school is not maintained shall pay the whole of the tuition fees of pupils attending such school or academy". This tuition cannot be restricted by local ordinance. The financial arrangement is for high school education in Woodstock is the only one of its kind in the State, if not the Nation and places tremendous limitations on both the educational and municipal budgets. He noted that providing for our youngest students and maintaining public safety are the two most important responsibilities of any community.
 - ii. Woodstock is ranked 87th of 169 median household income, 147th in equalized mill rate and 164th in per pupil expenditure. The ranking of median household income and equalized mill rate will result in \$901,000 in State Education Funding to be eliminated by 2030. All of this reduction in funding will have to come from the PreK-8 budget.
 - iii. The 2023-2024 Budget Projection includes the following:
 1. \$490,000 increase in contractual obligations
 2. \$66,000 increase in heating oil
 3. \$63,000 increase in transportation costs
 4. loss of \$128,000 in education state aid
 5. Woodstock Academy tuition increase of 5% resulting in total cost of \$18,845 per pupil
 - iv. Victor Toth reviewed losses in our schools since 2012 which include the following: 14 Classroom Teachers, 13 Regular Education Paraprofessionals, WMS Librarian, WES Librarian, WES Computer Program, WMS 7th Grade Spanish, WES Gifted Program, WMS Gifted Program, Language Arts Coordinator, Math Coordinator and Technology Coordinator. All Woodstock Public School sports have been removed from budget and are now Pay to Play.
 - v. Other impacts to the quality of Education in Woodstock due to finance restrictions to consider are: The education budget is unable to budget for any capital expenditures, the buildings and systems require regular maintenance and upgrades including the Public Address Systems, HVAC systems and structural maintenance. Budgetary limitations cause the School System to wait until something fails, and then fund it as an emergency expense and Campus Safety cannot even be addressed.
 - vi. In conclusion: Nearly one third of Education budget is controlled by High School costs that Woodstock has no control over because of the state statute. The brunt of all budget limitations is absorbed by PreK-8 Schools and Municipal budget. There is currently no room to maintain or improve services and voters currently do not have the ability to approve or decline a reasonable budget request.
 - vii. Victor Toth noted that Woodstock is currently \$2500 per student below average in the state of CT for public school and mid-range for high school education spending in which the Town has no control.

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- viii. Hans Frankhouser noted that this information is prior to COVID and now rebuilding after COVID is the challenge.
5. Su Conner stated she understands that the BOE and BOF are volunteers and she thanks them for what they are doing. Also, she appreciates the work of the Board of Selectmen as well. She asked if they have any control over handling Prop 46 different than the citizens of Woodstock may have.
- a. Jay Swan noted that prop 46 is like the law and must be abided by the officials. Only the citizens have the power to change Prop 46.
 - b. She asked for input on general town budget cuts that may need to be cut.
 - i. Jay Swan shared that by state statute, items that cannot be cut include audit services, revaluations, environmental requirements, elections, probate, IT services, union contractual services, insurance increases, pensions, Fire & EMS, NDDH services, animal control, debt services, certain Boards & Commissions, fuel and electric cost, trash removal, OSHA requirements and Emergency Dispatch Services.
 - ii. He shared that the following items are eligible for consideration of cuts- The Board of Selectmen, Office of First Selectmen, Tax Collector, Town Clerk, Assessor, Contingency Emergency Fund, Open Space, constable services, Highway Department, Transfer Station, Recreation, health & welfare services, various boards and commissions and Libraries.
 - c. Hans Frankhouser seconded that the process around prop 46 does have to start in the community. He feels that repeal is unlikely but amendment is needed.
 - d. Michele Woz noted that any amendment or appeal has to go to town meeting. The only ways this can start is by petition or question set forth by the Board of Selectmen.
6. Sherry Magden noted that she has heard of prop 46 since she arrived here. She is torn and sick of hearing about it. She feels that the concern comes down to trust. She feels that a safety for the budget is good but Prop 46 absolutely needs amending. She also noted that ARPA spending is not being spent the way that residents want it to be spent and this is where her trust issues stem from.
- a. Karen noted that ARPA funds are considered revenue loss and the BOS elected to use ARPA funds for public safety. She reviewed how projects approved were all public safety based.
 - b. Adam Keser noted that when discussing removal of academy from prop 46, it needs to include removal of the entire costs, not just the increases in cost. He reminded that even without 46, the town still votes on every budget
7. Jeremy is new to town and noted that cuts are a one way street. You don't get back what you have cut. Amending seems to be the logical approach but residents need to know what the timeline is to accomplish amendment.
8. Glen Lessig thanked all involved this evening. His question is to Board of Finance chair in reference to numbers created on his spreadsheet being accurate and how we got to this point.
- a. Michael Dougherty noted that the numbers are currently a moving target as none have been finalized at this point. He feels we got to this point from limiting budget increases in the past to the point where increases do not even match inflation rates. With current Prop 46 restrictions, the town is going into a deeper hole.
9. Reid Chamberlin noted that he is late to the party as many are. He wants to know what is needed to "pay the bills" for our town and put our town and schools back to where they should be.
- a. Victor Toth noted that the wish list keeps what we have at the current time, as the schools cannot move further backwards via loss. He would like to have librarians again for our students among other things.

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He wants to be funded at a level where the school is competitive with other schools learning. He noted that WES was built in 1950 and needs upkeep.

- b. Adam Keser noted that the School Budget should be submitted by March 14th and it will display what is needed for the school system. He noted that changes need to be made reasonably and intelligently and slowly to get back to better standards.
 - c. Michele Woz noted it is hard to monetize the size of the hole. Everyone uses a qualitative analysis for services. She feels that we are at a pivotal point now where things can be turned around and change can be seen for the better in future years but support of the community is need for this to happen.
10. Lindsay Balasario noted that she is lifelong citizen and parent of a middle schooler. She remembers many changes in the town including the relationship between the Town and Woodstock Academy. She asked if we are being charged for use of this facility tonight. Jay Swan noted that he does not know if the town is being charged for tonight as money was never discussed.
- a. Hans noted that fees had to be paid for use of the Auditorium during times when there was not contract in place with the Woodstock Academy.
11. Megan Bard Morse asked the Board of Finance to share more about where we are now, funding wise. She asked how close the Town is to not being able to pay mandated services.
- a. Michael Dougherty noted that the town is still trying to figure that out. He did note that the further we continue with the current system, the larger our hole grows. He also noted that even if we had additional revenue, if it did not fit within the constraints of Prop 46, we would not be able to spend it.
12. Travis Blair noted that ARPA spending for fire and safety were all capital improvements and needed. Travis asked how many towns have something similar to prop 46. It was clarified that no other town has this type of ordinance.
- a. Michele Woz noted that other towns in other states do have spending limits. The difference is that those others are state wide decisions. When our state makes funding decisions, they do not care that we have this unique spending limitation.
13. Peter Green noted that he moved here because Woodstock seemed like heaven. He feels he is hearing that the citizens need to take ownership of what they want this town to be and how they are going to turn this town around. He sees no alternative other than amending or repealing Prop 46 to accomplish this feat. He noted that the yellow sheet handed out seems to be a good summary of the situation. We (citizens) have to get it together and move things forward. There is a big downside to doing nothing at this time. Things have changed in the last 43 years. He does not want to see this community divided and fighting over what is left of the pie.
14. Paula Wilmot thanked the Board Member for their work. She was moved by the EMS desire to provide timely response for loved ones in needs. She is pleased that she did not have to remind the group that our children are also loved ones that need to be saved. She thinks that we agree we do not want to be in scarcity forever. She asked if it is true that only 25 signatures are needed for petition.
15. Crystal Adams noted that 87 people are online. Mr. Murphy noted that money is not the only consideration. He asked about the dropping enrollment rates and the impact of that on the school system.
- a. Victor Toth noted that the disparity for this town is the difference between spending on high school level and K-8 levels.
16. Keith O'Hara noted that his family taxes are and investment to EMS because lives matter, to the librarians because literacy matters and to education because children and teachers matter. He stated that we have to stop thinking of taxes in the old ways. He asks that we repeal and get us to benchmark where we belong. He noted that paying your fair share is not hard.

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17. Lindsay Belasario noted that Woodstock Public Schools do pay to use this facility (Loos Center for the Arts) and she asks that this be confirmed at next Board of Education meeting.
18. Mathew Cabe thanked all involved and asked that in the 44 years that prop 46 has been in place, how many times it has gone to referendum and the outcome of those votes. He also wants to know if a petition has been brought to the town.
 - a. Ed Higgins noted that a petition usually comes with proposed language and review of legal counsel. It takes time to prepare a petition for submittal.
 - b. Information about past attempts to repeal or amend Prop 46 can be found with the Town Clerk.
19. Jessica Weaver Boose asked if Prop 46 was repealed, what would become the budget process.
 - a. Michael Dougherty noted that nothing would change if repealed and if amended the process would depend on amendment. The process would remain that the town bring proposed budget to Board of Finance and they would in turn approve appropriate budget to go to town meeting and referendum.
 - b. He noted that a question would have to be placed on ballot asking if no vote was too high or too low.
20. Ian Webster clarified that 20 signatures are needed for petition. He also noted that the selectmen can call a town meeting for amendment or appeal
 - a. Jay noted that the process starts with petition brought to the Selectmen. Then he would verify statutory requirements with Town Clerk and Town Attorney before bringing the matter to Town Meeting. The Selectmen cannot simply recommend that this ordinance be changed.
 - i. Ed Higgins noted the procedure for ordinance change must be followed.
21. John Dlugosz noted that transparency is very important for this town and for the most part that is being done at this time.
22. Shannon Garcia is concerned that Woodstock has a community problem. She wants to know where one would go to get started volunteering in town. She wants to know if citizens are able to donate privately to services they care for and want to support.
 - a. Holly Dearborn noted that she volunteered at the libraries and that attending meetings will give you leads for volunteering. There are a variety of ways to find volunteer service opportunities.
23. Travis Blair and Russ Downer noted that all fire departments are looking for volunteers and donations of all kinds. Feel free to knock on any fire department door (or give them a call). Volunteerism is a nationwide problem and anyone who can help in any way should volunteer. The community side of this town is what keeps Woodstock as Woodstock.
24. Megan Bard Morse asked for clarification about generating revenue and how Prop 46 does limit the spending of revenue. She noted that revenue does not equate to spending under Prop 46
25. Glen Lessig noted that there is a group that has been looking into the Prop 46 issue for several months. Lindsay Paul noted that she is hearing the town has not been well supported by Prop 46 over the years. She reviewed spending gap numbers for repeal and amendment options. She would like for voters to repeal Prop 46
 - a. Jay Swan asked that no presentations be made at public forum. This is a time for questions and comments of citizens.
 - b. Emily Hayden stated she does not understand the combativeness and tone and feels that the public should be able to speak.
26. Don Charzan noted that he is concerned with the impact of the large range of all aspects of life in this town on the topic of Prop 46. In his opinion, if you repeal prop 46 it will fail as it has in the past.
27. Hans Frankhouser noted that the 2 processes (amend and repeal) are not mutually exclusive and both can be happening at the same time.

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28. Adam Keser stated that amending would not get us where we need to go. But he feels that what Don said is important because for his speaking of that opinion, there 500 others that feel that way. In order to make change, more than the people here in this room and online need to be involved and behind the change.
29. Jean Pillo asked if it is true that with no Prop 46 the budget vote can be edited to increase and decrease budget (not just decrease if voted down). This is true that a failed budget would be able to be adjusted to a higher or lower amount for the next vote. There would have to be a question added to each budget vote of NO that would ask which direction that voter would like change towards (more funds or less funds).
30. Megan Bard-Morse spoke of timeline for petition and town meeting stating that there is a 5 week window from petition to vote. This is not ideal during budget season but would have to happen fast to impact upcoming budget.
31. Su Connor noted that this town has association of libraries and fundraise regularly. All libraries will take donations.
32. Su Connor noted that people need to pay more to maintain services. As Agent for the Elderly, she is concerned with the impact on the elderly population. There is currently a state tax program but Woodstock has the option to consider a local municipal tax freeze option. She reviewed the concept of such option.
33. Ken Rappaport asked about revenue generation and the lack of business districting. He would like to see a vision for the future in the Town of Woodstock for revenue generation besides tax payer money.
34. Norma Jean Loftus noted that prop 46 is an arbitrary cap, that communicating a complicated problem to a group of people creates problem and that the timeline at hand is a problem. She feels that many concerns brought forward are valid and that we need to start looking ahead to the future and fix the communication problem in this town. She feels there should be a third party that can help us deal with the current problem. There needs to be an organized way to bring community together and deal with concerns.
35. John Ferland noted that Prop 46 did work but is not working now. He feels that repeal will fail but amendment could pass as it needs to be done.
36. Jennifer Therian asked about Prop 46. She noted that people who want to keep Prop 46 do not want to pay more taxes and want additional revenue generated. But Prop 46 won't allow for spending of more revenue. She feels that those who want to keep Prop 46 do not understand Prop 46. She wants to know if there is a simple and clearer way to help people understand Prop 46.
 - a. Karen noted that any additional revenue outside of budget goes into general fund and can be used to offset taxes, which keeps mill rate down.
 - b. Michael Dougherty noted the example that: if there was a marijuana facility that generated 2.5 million in tax revenue, the town could not spend it.
37. John Dlugosz asked how the town will move forward to explain concerns.
 - a. Phil Parizeau noted that the attendance at this meeting is less than the original forum. The town can only explain when citizens want to participate and learn.
38. Maureen Quinn asked if families could pay a percentage of tuition cost to offset budget concerns.
 - a. Adam noted that the Town cannot charge for High School tuition costs per state statutes.
39. Richard Griswold asked why EMS is looking for funding when they bill for services.
 - a. Russ Downer noted the billing revenue goes to operating costs and the money from the town is solely for the ambulance personnel and operations.
40. Mary Patrella works at WES and noted that the onus is on the people to know what is happening and if you don't know then seek out the information. She also noted that the education budget does not help the schools succeed. Teachers are exhausted and tired of working so hard to only make due. These are real human people working hard to do the best for your kids.

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41. Hans Frankhouser noted that he will not voice his opinions outside of the meetings because that is where the work is done. Social media is not the proper place to deal with concerns.
42. Jay Swan thanked all involved to provide the open forum including the citizens, board members, employees.

Respectfully submitted by Amy Monahan, Recording Secretary.