

## LWV OBSERVER REPORT FORM

*Board or Commission: West Hartford Board of Education*

*Date of Meeting: March 31, 2009*

*Members present: Bruce Putterman arrived late*

*Nature of meeting Routine \_\_\_\_\_*

*Special Public Hearing/Budget Workshop*

15 people spoke during the public hearing portion of the meeting, nearly all expressing opposition to one or more of the possible budget reductions discussed by the board so far. QUEST and class size were defended most frequently, with guidance, social workers, and 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade PE also receiving multiple mentions of support. The one person who spoke in favor of reducing the budget provided no specific suggestions, but asserted that the process of “letting go” of existing programs or functions could generate creative new approaches if we let it. One other person asked that any cuts made not touch “core” programs.

Before the workshop began in earnest, board chair Terry Schmitt spoke about prospects for obtaining concessions from the district’s union employees. He stated that all unions have been approached and that the smaller bargaining units wish to follow the lead of the largest, the WHEA, representing teachers. The state teachers union, the CEA, has been fighting concessions everywhere across the state, however, and was instrumental in the cancellation of the first formal meeting between the administration and the WHEA, which would have taken place last Friday. Mr. Schmitt stated that the district is now not allowed to approach the WHEA at all, but expressed his continued willingness to talk with anybody anytime. Based on conversations with individual union members, he believes the rank and file would be willing to make concessions to save jobs, and he would like them to have a chance to vote on the matter, but that does not look like a realistic possibility at this point. He said that if all the district’s bargaining units agreed to a wage freeze for next year, none of the personnel or program cuts currently being discussed would be necessary.

Director of Finance and Planning Chip Ward opened the workshop with an update on the funds coming to the district from the federal stimulus package (ARRA). He said there are still many unanswered questions about the use of these monies, but that he hopes for clarification on April 3, when another meeting with the state department of education is scheduled.

Board members asked administrators a variety of questions about areas of the budget already suggested for reduction and also brought forward other ideas for savings, many of them suggested by the public. Among these were pupil services clerical staff, program-wide PE savings reportedly suggested by Department Supervisor Rosie Bonner as an alternative to the major 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade proposed cut, possible cutbacks to high school interscholastic sports, various ways to save on bus transportation, and ways to manage elementary class size without adding sections. None seemed immediately productive, except for the discovery of a \$50,000 overstatement in the allotment for field trip transportation. The administration’s response to the new ideas was generally either uncertain based on a lack of information or outright unfavorable. In the former case, further investigation was promised.

Board members expressed reluctance to make budget decisions at this point given the lack of solid information about revenues, especially in light of an expected Democratic state budget proposal that cuts ECS funding 5% to 10%, due to be announced April 2. They asked the administration to look into the possibility of postponing budget adoption from April 7 to April 21.

The second and final public hearing on the town budget will be held April 2 at 7:00 pm in Town Hall Auditorium. Unlike past public hearings, this will be a joint council/board forum that will allow questions and answers between citizens and elected officials in addition to the usual one-way public comment.

The next board of education meeting will take place Tuesday, April 7, at 7:00 pm in room 314 at Town Hall.

*Observer name: Kathy Wilson*