

LWV OBSERVER REPORT FORM

Board or Commission: West Hartford Board of Education

Date of Meeting: April 2, 2009

Members present: All but Bruce Putterman

Nature of meeting: Routine _____ Special Joint Public Hearing/Forum with Town Council

This was an unusual meeting, in that it involved both the town council and the board of education and departed from normal public hearing procedure by allowing an exchange between the public and officials.

Highlights of information provided:

- The town has reached tentative agreement with its 9 bargaining units for a wage freeze. This means that the manager's proposed budget can be implemented without layoffs.
- With the exception of the teachers, prospects also look good for concessions from school bargaining units.
- At a zero spending increase for both town and school budgets, a 3.3% property tax increase will still be needed because of projected revenue declines. Individual taxpayer's outcomes will vary because we are still phasing in revaluation.
- The legislature's Appropriations Committee has approved a state budget that retains the governor's flat-funding of most grants to towns, with the exception of the Mashantucket Pequot grant, which was reduced.
- New traffic signals and street lights installed around town were paid for by a federal grant using no town funds. In both cases, the LED bulbs they contain will substantially reduce electricity consumption.
- The new traffic cameras are for traffic control purposes only. They are incapable of recording and are thus unusable for enforcement purposes. They are also less costly to maintain than the old asphalt-embedded trip wires.
- Due to uncertainties about the use of revenue from the federal stimulus plan, **the board of education vote on the budget has been postponed to its April 21 meeting, 7:00 pm** in room 314 at Town Hall. The board's April 7 meeting is cancelled.
- The town council will vote on the budget as scheduled on April 28.

24 people spoke, most in support of reducing costs and improving the quality of the schools. Many speakers asserted that spending is out of control, particularly for town employee benefits and "the school side," and also that the quality of education in West Hartford is declining. They feel this is evidence that spending more for education does not produce a better product. It was not clear whether these people would support the zero-increase spending plan the council is aiming for. The few people who had something positive to say generally spoke in support of a specific program or service, such as library hours, teachers, and kindergarten paras.

David Dippolino, president of the WHEA, presented his account of the union's dealings to date with the school district regarding concessions, saying that board chair Terry Schmitt's remarks of March 31 mischaracterized the relationship between the two. He said that several informal conversations have actually taken place regarding concessions, that CEA provides only counsel to WHEA during talks, and that any decisions are local. Mr. Dippolino further stated that in

February WHEA met with the district and suggested an early retirement plan and health insurance incentives that would save an estimated total of \$600,000, but these ideas were not pursued. On March 23, the district made a formal request to enter into concession talks with the union, but the meeting scheduled for March 27 had to be cancelled because of Mr. Dippolino's health, not because of pressure from CEA. He stated that a vote of the union representatives' council is necessary for talks and that such a vote is scheduled for April 6. He concluded by expressing WHEA's support for the superintendent's budget as proposed.

Terry Schmitt said that he experienced the March 27 meeting cancellation differently from Mr. Dippolino, but expressed hope that talks are still possible and repeated his willingness to meet with anyone anytime in order to save jobs.

The meeting may be viewed in its entirety online at West Hartford Community Television, http://www.whctv.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=18:town-council-on-demand&Itemid=11&layout=default.

Observer name: Kathy Wilson