

**Board of Finance  
Special Meeting  
Wednesday, March 23, 2016**

**MINUTES**

**Present:** Chairman Jim Fitzgerald, Members Ben Witte, Bart Baxter, Steve Tuxbury, Reggie Smith; Alternates: Bob Nilsson and Bill Coates; Administrative Assistant Christine Hayward (substitute recording secretary).

Others Present: Members of the Public; including the following who formally addressed the Board: Tom Buzzi, Paul Leclare, Christine Sullivan, Karl Hermanot, Kelly O'Dell Longhi, Kevin Longhi, Maria Moore, Nicole Helt, Thomas Thibault, Christine Ringuette, Glenn Phillips, Tim Goff, Amy Damboise, Jen Zenuh.

Chairman Fitzgerald called the meeting to order at 7:01 PM.

**Seating of Alternates:**

Chairman Fitzgerald noted that regular member Dan Charest was not present, but no alternate could be seated in his absence.

**Approval of Minutes:**

**MOTION:** by Smith to approve the minutes dated March 8, 2016 as presented; seconded by Witte.

*Unanimous.*

Member Tuxbury stated that he had not received a copy of the March 12, 2016 minutes to review.

**MOTION:** by Tuxbury to table the approval of the minutes dated March 12, 2016; seconded by Smith.

*Unanimous.*

**Public Comments:**

Chairman Fitzgerald asked for a show of hands of those present who wished to address the Board of Finance so that he could see how much time should be allocated to this item. Based on the interest expressed, he suggested that 7:35 PM would be an appropriate end time.

Paul Leclare— 43 Burwell Road:

Mr. Leclare asked the Board if there was a method in place that allowed for 2 budgets for the Board of Education to be considered when it came time to vote; stating that if there was the option to have a budget that included Bakerville School being open, he would vote in favor of that budget. If not, however, and the budget presented for consideration will be a budget that does not include Bakerville

School, he would not be in favor of it. He stated that it was his opinion that there will need to be several referendums if a budget is presented that does not include the school.

Chairman Fitzgerald explained the budget process for those present; stating that the Board of Finance reviews the proposed budgets of the local Board of Education and general government. The Regional School budget is also reviewed; but the Board has very little control over that budget – it is a stand alone item that is voted on separately. The Board of Finance determines whether or not the local budgets will go forward as proposed or if there should be any adjustments made. Following this action, there is a Public Hearing where the proposed budgets are presented to the public and there is an opportunity for the public to request changes. The Board of Finance then meets again following this public hearing to consider the public input and make any final adjustments necessary. They then formally adopt the New Hartford budget with a sum total that combines both budget requests that goes back to the Board of Selectmen to take to Referendum. Mr. Fitzgerald stated that he is not sure if there will be one, two or three questions; that is up to the Board of Selectmen. Mr. Fitzgerald noted that there can be “advisory questions” on the ballot – example: is the budget too high/too low?

Mr. Leclare stated that a lot of people will vote no to the budget if the school remains closed.

First Selectman Jerram clarified that there cannot be an option for 2 different local Board of Education budgets to be considered; there needs to be one budget presented for consideration; however, Jerram noted that he did ask the Town Attorney to opine as to whether or not the Town Budget can be broken down into two parts – the Board of Education and general government and be presented as two different questions. He has no answer to that yet, but hopes to have this clarified soon. Jerram noted that if it is possible to break the budget into parts, it will be necessary for the Board of Finance to tell the Board of Selectmen what the dollar figures are.

Tom Buzzi of Niles Road addressed the Board by stating that what he witnessed at the Board of Education was “disgusting.” It was a huge step backwards, in his opinion. He said that “it will be a long budget season if the Board of Education sticks with no Bakerville School in the budget.”

Christine Sullivan of High Street asked the Board of Finance if they could request that the Board of Education prepare 2 budgets to present to the Finance Board for consideration – one with Bakerville School and one without. The Board of Finance could then decide if Bakerville should be kept open. She asked “isn’t it your responsibility to appease the people?”

Mr. Fitzgerald replied that the Board of Finance has no operational control over the Board of Education and cannot tell them what to do. He stated that they are a separate entity; they are agents of the State.

Karl Hermanot of Cedar Lane told the Board that he does not believe the comment that the Board of Finance has no influence over the Board of Education. He stated “you have pressured them to lower budgets,” adding, “I now ask that you exert that same pressure to present a budget that includes Bakerville School.”

Chairman Fitzgerald replied that the Board of Finance acts in a transparent manner; the Board as a whole, sets the expectations. There is no one individual that drives anyone else. He noted that everyone has their opinions but that there is a balance on the Board.

Kelly O'Dell Longhi of O'Keefe Lane stated that during this entire ordeal she feels like "we're doing this dance – the Board of Ed says we need to present to the Board of Finance and the Board of Finance says we need to discuss with the Board of Ed." "The referendum was overwhelming." She added that it is her belief that the Board of Finance has the power to work with the Board of Education to develop a budget and keep Bakerville open. She pleaded with the Board to "step up and fight for us; do what is right."

Chairman Fitzgerald replied that there were some members of the Board of Education present at the meeting and he stated that "Chairman Lundin is aware that the Board of Education came come to the Board of Finance at any time with their needs and that those will be considered."

Kevin Longhi of O'Keefe Lane asked the Board of Finance "what did you give the Board of Education to deal with? A cut? Stay Flat?"

Chairman Fitzgerald answered Mr. Longhi by explaining that following last year's budget referendum, the Board of Finance met and discussed how to proceed for the next budget year. At that time, concerns were expressed regarding the dwindling surplus funds. Surplus has routinely been used to offset the follow fiscal year proposed tax increase. The Board of Finance instructed Chairman Fitzgerald to write letters ahead of the budget season to encourage the local and the regional Boards of Ed to consolidate their costs. Mr. Fitzgerald said that he had also requested that the School Consolidation Report be submitted to the Board; but never suggested Consolidation of the local schools.

Mr. Longhi responded saying that the letter that was written to the Board of Finance was pressure.

Mr. Fitzgerald replied that it is the decision of the Board of Education to do what they want with their budget. He noted that they originally had presented a budget that was at -2.81% but made some revisions and are now at -1.52%.

Maria Moore of Town Hill Road addressed the Board and the Public and stated that she would guess that most of the people at the meeting tonight were not aware of the budget process/discussions of last year. Options for reducing education costs were discussed that included cutting administrators, looking at Shared Services for Special Education services and consolidating services with the Town (such as bookkeeping and Technology services; in addition to closing one of the schools. She stated that the Board of Finance looks at the bottom line and it is left up to the Board of Education to determine where the cuts will be made. She then asked Chairman Fitzgerald to explain the Minimum Budget Requirement that is dictated by the State.

Chairman Fitzgerald briefly explained that the State Department of Education has a formula for determining how low a school budget can be cut. He noted that there is a 3% cap on the overall budget; which means that cuts cannot be more than 3% of the total budget. Even though school enrollment continues to decline, the percentage does not decrease.

Nicole Helt of 14 Gray Road asked the Board of Finance “what happens if the budget continues to get voted down?” and wondered if there was a limit as to how many times the budget can be voted down.

Chairman Fitzgerald replied that he would ask the First Selectman to answer that.

First Selectman Jerram stated that the Town Attorney does not think that there is a limit to the number of times the budget can be taken before the voters, but noted that he is checking into that. Board of Finance member Reggie Smith, a former First Selectman, stated the when he was in office several years ago, there was a contentious budget year and the budget was not approved until well after the start of the fiscal year. Mr. Smith stated that it was his recollection that if a budget is not approved for the new fiscal year, the prior year budget remains in place and the tax collector issues bills on that amount. When a new budget is eventually approved, the tax collector issues a supplemental bill.

Board of Finance member Ben Witte agreed with Mr. Smith’s response; but adding that while the local Board of Ed and town government budgets revert back to prior year spending; the Regional School budget is “stand-alone” and is not tied to the local budgets. Mr. Witte noted that there is a lot of support to keep Bakerville School open and added that it was his guess that there may be many families with children currently enrolled in New Hartford public schools who may make the decision to enroll their children in CREC Magnet Schools and noted that if that happens, everyone loses. He encouraged his fellow Board of Finance members to consider “taking a step back” and “be willing to fund the previously cut \$210,000 expenses associated with Bakerville School” as a compromise. He stated that there could be an agreement that the BOF is willing to put that back into the budget as long as the BOE uses it to keep Bakerville School open. He stated that it would show the people that we are taking what they want into consideration when developing the budget.

Tom Thibault of 771 Niles Road addressed the Board of Finance and expressed his concern with the capacity of New Hartford Elementary. He stated that the closure of Bakerville School was a “waste of a resource” and feared that once closed, the school would need to undergo extensive repairs/renovations to meet current stricter codes which would then turn into a plea for a new school building at some point in the not too distant future. He said that “we need to watch down the road as it could be very costly in the future; adding that “within 5 years, the Board of Ed will be looking for at least a \$2 million check for the school – you are not looking at the future.”

Christine Ringuette of 284 Cedar Lane added commentary regarding owning a home occupation in New Hartford. She chose to run her business in New Hartford because of the community. She feels that the Boards that are elected should be listening to the people. She doesn't understand why the Board is choosing to "squeeze children into less classrooms" when there isn't any need to do so.

Glenn Phillips of 199 East Cotton Hill asked "what are we doing squabbling over \$120,000?" He felt that the estimated savings of closing Bakerville School did not justify taking that action. He stated that if there is legal action pursued against the Board of Education, it will cost more than the estimated savings. He urged all of the Boards – Selectmen, Finance and Education – to work together with the community to find a solution that satisfies all. He thanked everyone for their service and their time.

A brief discussion regarding "bullying and name-calling" ensued with opinions expressed that Social Media had gone too far and had listed names of the children belonging to Board of Education members. This assertion was contested and it was not able to be confirmed that names were released. All agreed that children's names should not be released.

Tim Goff of 50 Birdview Avenue used the analysis of "animals being backed into a corner with no way to escape" to defend actions of "shooting down the budget" unless the issue of closing Bakerville School is readdressed. He stated that he agrees that "it is not a good thing, but an "out" is needed." He thanked Mr. Witte for suggesting that the BOF reinstate the \$210,000.

Amy Damboise of 24 Barberry Lane commented that she, as a parent of children enrolled in New Hartford public schools refuses to watch "kids sardined into classrooms." She supports the Board of Education's recent action to add an additional 1<sup>st</sup> grade class and an additional 5<sup>th</sup> grade class but noted that the addition of those sections leaves nowhere for expansion.

**Communications to the Board:**

Chairman Fitzgerald noted that communication in the form of an e-mail dated March 18, 2016 regarding the filing of minutes had been received from Maria Moore (attached).

Chairman Fitzgerald noted that communication in the form of an e-mail dated March 21, 2016 as response to Ms. Moore's e-mail had been received from Town Clerk Donna LaPlante (attached).

Chairman Fitzgerald noted that communication in the form of an e-mail dated March 21, 2016 addressing Town Clerk Donna LaPlante's response had been received from Maria Moore (attached).

Chairman Fitzgerald noted that correspondence regarding the Bakerville School closing in the form of a letter dated March 15, 2016 and written by Priscilla and Bob Marshall and Bob Tonkin has been received (attached).

Chairman Fitzgerald noted that all communications to the Board of Finance will be filed with the Town Clerk.

**Review and discuss any documents requested of Boards of Education and Selectman from the BOF**

**Saturday budget workshop:**

Chairman Fitzgerald noted that the Board members had received documentation from the West Hill Pond Association that had been requested to support their budget request. (document attached)  
Chairman Fitzgerald noted that Regional School 7 had not been able to provide any information to answer Member Smiths question posed to them regarding their electricity use.

**2016-2017 New Hartford Budget Discussion (all aspects) and take any potential action.**

It was suggested that since the Board of Education will be meeting on Monday, March 28, 2016 to revise their budget proposal, it seems prudent to hold off on any action with respect to adoption of a proposed budget and call a special meeting for next week.

A brief discussion ensued as to how the Board felt regarding the action of informing the Board of Education that the Board of Finance would “give back” the \$210,000 that was suggested by Member Witte earlier in the evening. Members were polled verbally regarding this suggestion.

Member Tuxbury was reluctant to support any action until there was comfort in knowing where revenues will stand. Member Witte replied that the revenue numbers probably won’t be known until May and noted that budget decisions cannot be based on final revenue numbers—they are received too late. Witte commented that there is room in the collection rate to mitigate the risks, if need be. Tuxbury stated that he was in favor of the recent action taken by the Board of Ed to add an extra 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher.

Member Witte commented that when he attended the BOE meeting the other night, he was not able to get a good understanding of where each Board of Ed member stood or the reasoning behind their decisions.

Member Smith stated that it is the Board of Education’s decision and not up to the Town as to what they do. Alternate Member Nilsson agreed with Member Smith.

Member Coates supported Mr. Witte and felt that there should be some sort of compromise looked at. He referred to the number of voters that turned out to vote and stated that it was his belief that there was an overwhelming majority that supported keeping the school open.

Member Baxter stated that it is the obligation of the Board of Finance to present a budget that will be viewed favorably by the public. He felt that there was pressure put on the Board of Education by the Board of Finance to present a low budget number. He stated that it should be noted that if the School remains open, there may be costs associated with that and the public needs to know that they will have to pay for it. Baxter noted that there is a strong likelihood that taxes will have to increase if everything that is wanted is included in the budget. He reiterated to the public that they need to realize that they will have to pay the increase.

Member Witte noted that closing the school may help to begin to mitigate the costs and commented that at some point in the future, there may be a need to close the school. However, the tax increase with closing the school would be minimal this year if everything stands as projected right now.

Mr. Tuxbury stated that this whole “ordeal has set back the educational process; test scores are down – it’s a distraction and the Board of Education needs to concentrate on other things.”

Member Smith informed the public of the credentials of Mr. Tuxbury --- stating that Mr. Tuxbury had been the Chairman of the Board of Education for many years and as such, “has the expertise and knowledge of what he is talking about.”

Chairman Fitzgerald reiterated his earlier comments that the Board of Education knows that “the path is there for the Board of Ed to come to the Board of Finance to seek funding” if it is needed for unanticipated expenditures. Mr. Fitzgerald thanked the public for coming to the meeting to express their viewpoints and concerns. He reminded those assembled that “we still have the revenue numbers to consider.”

**Discussion and take potential action regarding the date of and publication of Legal notice for Board of Finance Special Meeting -Public Annual Budget Hearing:**

Chairman Fitzgerald announced that the legal notice for the public hearing to be held on April 6, 2016 will be published in the Hartford Courant on Thursday, March 24, 2016.

**MOTION:** by Smith to adjourn at 8:17 PM; seconded by Tuxbury.

*Unanimous.*

*Respectfully Submitted,*

*Christine Hayward, Administrative Assistant  
(substituting for Recording Secretary Penny Miller)*