

SCHOOL BUDGET JOINT MEETING - OPEN SESSION

The special joint meeting of the Hightstown Borough Council, East Windsor Township Council, and the East Windsor Regional School District Board of Education was called to order by East Windsor Mayor Janice S. Mironov at 7:40 p.m. on May 9, 2006.

Municipal Clerks Cindy A. Dye and Candace B. Gallagher and Board of Education President Alice Weisman each certified in turn that adequate notice and posting of the meeting had taken place in accordance with the requirements of the Open Public Meetings Act. The rolls were called for each body.

Present from Hightstown Borough were: Mayor Robert Patten, Council President David Schneider, Councilmembers Constance Harendza-Harinxma, Lawrence D. Quattrone, Ryan Rosenberg, Walter L. Sikorski and Patrick Thompson. Also present were Candace Gallagher, Borough Administrator/Municipal Clerk and Frederick Raffetto, Borough Attorney.

Present from East Windsor Township were: Mayor Janice S. Mironov, Deputy Mayor Walter T. Daniels, Councilmembers Hector Duke, Marc Lippman, Alan Rosenberg, Perry Shapiro and Marsha Weinstein. Also present was Municipal Clerk Cindy A. Dye.

Present from the East Windsor Regional School District Board of Education were: Board President Alice Weisman, Board members Bruce Ettman, Suzann Fallon, Bonnie Fayer, James Hauck, Susan Lloyd, Kennedy Paul and Richardo Perez.

The flag salute was led by Hightstown Borough Council President David Schneider, East Windsor Deputy Mayor Walter T. Daniels and East Windsor Regional School District Board President Alice Weisman.

Mayor Mironov stated that tonight's meeting was required following the defeat by the voters on April 18th of the East Windsor Regional School District's budget. Under the process required by the laws of the State of New Jersey, she said, the budget now goes to the District's two governing bodies for their review and decision. That decision is due by May 19, 2006, and the discussions and deliberations are commenced with the presence of and in consultation with the members of the Board of Education. Mayor Mironov stated that the primary purpose of this meeting is to offer members of the public an opportunity to share their views and comments on the school budget. There will be additional meetings and deliberations prior to the May 19 deadline, she said, and she requested that those wishing to speak sign up to do so.

PUBLIC COMMENT

At this time, the floor was opened for public comment. Mayor Mironov called each speaker in turn from the sign-up sheet.

Stuart Dolgon, 119 Danbury Court, East Windsor, expressed support for the school budget as proposed, and added that the State Legislature does not provide adequate and legally required State aid.

Lisa Ernst, 106 Hausser Avenue, Hightstown, stated that the school budget was defeated because residents are angry about high taxes. She requested that no cuts be made to the budget, which, she said, would send a strong message to the State regarding their "antiquated state funding formula." "Cutting the school budget," she said, "doesn't fix the problem but masks it, and hurts us for years to come." She encouraged all in attendance to be at the upcoming meeting with our legislators.

Chuck Rowley, 12 Wendover Road, East Windsor, requested that the budget not be changed. The cuts made last year, he said, “put us at a disadvantage to start,” and to do again would put the school district even further behind.

Michael Stewart, 539 Dutch Neck Road, East Windsor, indicated that last year’s “token cut” in the school budget did not make much of a difference in the taxes, and asked how changing the school funding formula would help. Some in the community, he said, can’t afford this, and he asked the Councils to “look seriously” at the budget before rejecting all cuts.

Amanda Porter, 214 Stockton Street, Hightstown, indicated that the leadership in the School District has made phenomenal changes for the better. She urged that no cuts be made to the budget. “Make the harder choice the right choice,” she said, “and support this administration.”

Eugene Sarafin, 628 South Main Street, Hightstown, stated that “what we *should* be looking at is merging the two communities.” That, he said, would result in reduced taxes.

Kelly Giblin, 51 Wendover Road, East Windsor, indicated that he voted against the budget not because he feels that the school district is doing a bad job but because he is tired of the taxes he pays. He suggested that a revaluation be done.

Bertrand Fougnes, 44 Wendover Road, East Windsor, stated that he voted against the budget simply because the McKnight School has not yet been completed. “That is a big issue,” he said, “when you pay \$12,000 in taxes each year.” He stated that West Windsor’s school system is better than East Windsor’s and a lot of his friends are moving there for that reason. He recommended that cuts be made with clear objectives, and added, “You are accountable to the public.”

Sandra Rosenthal, 8 Plymouth Drive, East Windsor, stated that she is very happy with the school but voted against the school budget because taxes are too high. She suggested that teachers start paying for their benefits. She said that, even without a basement or a deck, she pays \$15,000 per year in taxes, which she feels is “outrageous.”

Lisa Ernst, 106 Hausser Avenue, Hightstown, spoke again to state that “voting no on the school budget due to the taxes you pay is ludicrous” and hurts the children’s education.

Cliff Mintz, 153 Dorchester Drive, East Windsor, stated that everyone makes a decision as to where they live, and children should not be penalized because one’s taxes are high. He praised the work being done by Superintendent Bolandi and the teachers and said that they should not have to pay for their health benefits. He asked that no cuts be made to this budget.

Carolyn Freedman, 2 Beechcroft Drive, East Windsor, expressed support for the budget as proposed and said that she agrees with some of the concerns stated about high taxes. She said that teachers here are not paid enough to allow them to pay into their health benefits, and asked the Board members to “think creatively” during negotiations with them.

Brad Sherwin, 17 Keswick Road, East Windsor, said that he feels that the issues here have nothing to do with the School Board. “The bottom line,” he said, “is tax assessments.” He expressed support for the concept of merging the two communities. Mr. Sherwin said that the school is doing a great job, and he voted in favor of the budget this year. “There are places to cut,” he said, “but not much,” adding, “Until you address the political ends of these issues, we will have these problems over and over again.”

Paul Levine, 39 Oxford Drive, East Windsor, stated that he voted against the budget. He said that this discussion is regarding taxes, but it should be about the education of our children, and he questioned whether spending more money would have a direct and measurable impact on the quality of education and test scores. That, he said, should be a goal associated with budget increases.

Lisa Giblin, 51 Wendover Road, East Windsor, objected to the fact that teachers are not paying a portion of the cost of their health benefits. Taxes go up each year, she said, and added that she does not see an effort being made to do things more efficiently.

Vibha Patel, 4 Shorham Court, East Windsor, stated that, although she moved here because of the school system and is proud of what the teachers have done, she voted no on the budget because of the high taxes she pays (\$15,000 per year). She added that she feels that the teachers should pay for part of their health benefits, and an incentive should be offered to waive those benefits if they can be covered by their spouse.

Alan Mosley, 16 Keswick Drive, East Windsor, noted the need for a revaluation. He expressed support for the school and the Township, but said "we have to do something to get an even tax rate across the towns." He feels that new home buyers are at a disadvantage with respect to tax assessments.

No one else came forward and the floor was closed.

Superintendent Ronald Bolandi spoke briefly to state that the District's focus at this meeting was not to respond and debate, but to "make sure that we clarified some things." There were people at this meeting, he said, who have never attended Board of Education meetings. "We have tremendous goals and objectives," he said. He noted that the school has had four community meetings this year and in the past two years there have been 10 meetings outlining those goals and objectives. "We hold people accountable," he said, and questioned whether West Windsor's school district is indeed better than ours. "Look at the test scores ...," he said, noting that they are now some of the highest in the State. "We've turned this place around." He promised that it would get even better.

Mayor Mironov, on behalf of the governing bodies, thanked everyone for coming out and sharing their comments. All comments, she said, will be respected and considered.

Mayor Mironov added that on Monday, May 15, 2006 at 7:00 p.m., a meeting will take place at Hightstown High School with our 12th District Legislators. She encouraged all to attend and participate, and also to sign a petition regarding property taxation that was available at this meeting as well as on the website of both towns. The petition will eventually be forwarded to the Governor and the New Jersey Senate and Assembly.

There being no further business, Mayor Mironov adjourned the meeting at 8:35 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Candace B. Gallagher, RMC
Borough Clerk