

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

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"Furious" Taxpayers Offer Their Own Plan

BY MELISSA BAILEY | APRIL 20, 2007 7:27 AM | [PERMALINK](#) | [COMMENTS \(13\)](#)



Melissa Bailey Photo

At an at-times raging public hearing on the mayor's proposed 7.1 percent tax hike, outraged taxpayers rallied around this man and his effort to scrutinize, publicize, and counter the mayor's proposed new \$445.2 million budget.

As aldermen pore over the budget, Jeffrey Kerekes, a young psychotherapist who lives in Wooster Square, has been leading the fight for citizens, many first-timers, to get involved in the budgeting process themselves and support an [alternative plan](#).

Over 70 people, many alerted of the meeting by Kerekes, poured into City Hall Thursday for a final public hearing before

the aldermanic Finance Committee.

Some came with specific topics.



"I can barely afford to live here anymore!" said Wendy Hamilton (pictured), fresh out of a [Fight the Hike](#) meeting across the hall. She directed her anger at Yale. "They have 20 billion, and they give us chump change! ... We need their help because we have been squeezed too much, between the utilities and the [pending tax hike]."

Hill Alderwoman Andrea Jackson-Brooks calculated Yale would contribute 11.3 percent of the general fund budget. "I don't want people to think that Yale does not do anything."

David Cameron of East Rock scrutinized the \$169 million education budget. He advocated stretching the city's \$1.5 billion school construction program over a longer period of time to ease costs. He pointed to six-digit salaries: Does the superintendent of schools really need to be paid \$184,045 per year (a salary 60 percent higher than the mayor's)? Is it justified that at least 92 school administrators make over \$100,000 per year?

With impending revaluations and ever-increasing taxes, said Cameron, "it's getting to the point where people are thinking seriously about leaving the city."

Others made sure aldermen felt, in person, the budget-prompted rage.



"I'm furious that I have to be here tonight," said Stephen Nelson (pictured), pounding his hand on the podium. Charging the city with "blatant fiscal irresponsibility," and said the recent revaluations would have adverse effects because property values were recorded at the peak of the real estate cycle.

Tweed New-Haven Airport

A hot topic at [previous](#) budget [meetings](#), Tweed Airport's request for \$900,000 of city funds — was the subject of coordinated lobbying.

A local attorney, as well as representatives of the business and tourist worlds, stressed the airport's value as a way to support small business and economic development.

"Tweed is the number-one economic development priority for the region," said John Cirello, speaking on behalf of the Greater New Haven Chamber of Commerce. Construction permits were signed just this week to make way for runway safety zones, he noted, urging the city to maintain its support.

If Tweed is such a priority, "have there been conversations about the region outside New Haven supporting the airport?" asked Westville Alderwoman Ina Silverman. Cirello said he'd take the message back to the chamber.

He also let out a personal request: That commercial property, whose value compared to the norm actually *fell* in recent revals, not be subjected to the five-year revaluation phase-in. If revals aren't phased in, businesses get their tax reduction right away, not spread out over five years.

The crowd — mostly ticked-off homeowners — responded with laughter.

The Citizen Proposal

Kerekes (pictured at top of the story) came with a 12-page proposal on how to cut costs. [Click here](#) to read it.

This year was Kerekes first time cracking open a city budget. He's a young homeowner and relative newcomer, having lived in the city for three and a half years. Through [this website](#), he created an organized way to turn revaluation jaw-drop into constructive criticism.

Kerekes' proposal, compiled with Wooster Square's Mona Berman and the input of others from his email network of over 100 taxpayers, ranges from the general — advocating regional sharing of costs — to the mundane: the cost of having watercoolers in City Hall.

He presented some highlights before the dozen aldermen gathered in the aldermanic chambers Thursday evening.

In response to those who lobbied to continue supporting Tweed: "If they really think it's a great airport to support, we should have them try to raise money to support it."

On regionalism: City Hall's community service staff testified that other towns conduct "institutional

dumping" — loading homeless people into vans and dumping them at city shelters on New Haven's dime. Can other towns be forced to pay the city back?

On the Shubert Theater: Can the region pitch in, instead of the city footing the proposed \$450,000 to help the cultural asset survive?

On the **Billy White** scandal: "Renegotiate contracts so that any employee convicted of fraud or abuse of their position does not receive a **pension**, disability, retirement benefits, etc."

On thirsty city employees: "Eliminate water-coolers and other non-essentials. If city water is good enough to bring into our homes and schools, it is good enough for city employees who can always choose to bring bottled water."

How about commission Yale School of Management students to slim down the budget? came another proposal.

Aldermen commended Kerekes for his hard work.

"Thank you. You know how hard we work now," said Westville Alderman Sergio Rodriguez, who chairs the Finance Committee. The committee closed the public hearing portion after over two and a half hours. It will now move on to the deliberation stage of the process, with an upcoming meeting on April 30 at 6 p.m.

Milling in the hallway with other citizens he'd met through his budget-watchdog website, Kerekes recounted what he'd learned from the whole process.

First, he learned aldermen "have a tough job." Second, a lot of people weren't aware of the upcoming tax hike, nor when the budget hearings were. The **website** got them organized.

Several who spoke at the hearing weren't clear on how the revaluation process works. (Many still believe taxes will automatically double — **click here** for an explanation why that's not true.) Though a doubling of your property value doesn't mean a doubling in taxes, Kerekes and others are concerned because the increased Grand List will give the city the opportunity to get away with spending more money without raising the mill rate.

"It seems like when they can make more money, they'll spend it," he said, pledging to watch over the process throughout future fiscal years. "It's going to be a long-term process — this is just the start."

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Comments

POSTED BY: [BRUCE](#) | APRIL 20, 2007 9:16 AM

Great work, folks. Some very good ideas presented here.

To the author -- was it really necessary to point out the "embroidered blue yacht"? Were you trying to paint a picture of a rich, stuffy New England whiner or simply making fun of the way he was dressed? Either way, I would like to thank Mr. Nelson for testifying on behalf of us homeowners who are pushed to the brink. High taxes affect EVERYONE, not just the wealthy. It makes the city a less attractive option to homebuyers, renters, businesses etc.

Please LOWER the taxes for once instead of raising them. It will improve New Haven considerably.

POSTED BY: MONAB | APRIL 20, 2007 11:06 AM

As reported in the NH Register the president of the Greater New Haven Convention & Visitors Bureau said "THE REGION is losing \$1 million in conference and convention activity because of inadequate air service." If that doesn't prove our point about regionalism being the answer, I don't know what does. It really is time to cut loose from New Haven's commitment to the airport and let those who think it is essential 'put their money where their mouth is!' Same for all other regional services we provide.



POSTED BY: CEDARHILLRESIDENT | APRIL 20, 2007 4:27 PM

I have to say BRAVO!!

If the Board approves this budget "as is" there is something really wrong in town hall!!!

These are all excellent and do-able savings!!

The Board of Alderman does not have to OK the budget they can have all of the aboved looked into and make such changes!

Again thank you for all the work!!

and as MonaB said THE REGIONAL things we provide to make the suronnding citys better, well they need to start pitching into the pot! And if the airport is a plus for Yale they need to pay for it. All they contributed to the city was the 4 million!! That is a drop in the bucket. I relize they do this and that but reality is they have sucked up so much of our land and real estate and resourse that 4 mill. does not cover close to what they have pilaged from us.

POSTED BY: ISR | APRIL 20, 2007 9:57 PM

I carefully read the Citizen's Budget Proposal and I am grateful to those who prepared this thoughtful document.

Regionalism and Yale and Yale-New Haven paying their fair share are two ideas whose time is well overdue.

As far as property tax relief is concerned, I wonder whether these and other ideas in the document are more than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

The clearest path to real property tax relief is a progressive municipal income tax. New York City, which has had an income tax for years, is at the top of the list for property values and at the bottom of the list for property tax rates.

Income taxes are the fairest way for governments to derive the maximum income. For most taxpayers, an income tax would mean a reduction in their total tax bill. Lower income citizens, for example, are greatly burdened by the highly regressive property tax they must pay on their vehicles. This would be eliminated.

Moving beyond New Haven, sharply increasing the state income tax would lower property taxes everywhere. It would also eliminate the material differences in education funding between property rich towns and property poor inner cities, and at long last fulfill the mandate of Sheff v. O'Neill.

Let's think different.



POSTED BY: CEDARHILLRESIDENT | APRIL 23, 2007 9:04 AM

ISR you make some good points. I think there ideas are more for the here and now. Federal and State funding are down a lot. We can not keep spending on things as if that money was still coming in. All of us would love to keep everything the city has, but reality is we do not have the money to right now. We the residents of this city have had to rearrange our spending for the increases in gas, electric and everything that has gone up in price because of those to expenses going

up. Now the city wants to take more out of our pockets. We do have a choose, the city leaders who are our employees need to make the needed cuts to make this tax increases less than what it is. We pay them to do that. It is there jobs! But here is citizen Joe Q doing it without pay; showing them that there are possible changes that can make it work for us.

POSTED BY: ISR | APRIL 23, 2007 11:16 AM

cedarhillresident, I agree with everything you say. I could quibble with some of the alternatives, but it's clear money can be saved by examining the budget. Long-term I'd like to see a restructuring of the whole State tax system to more progressive taxes.

POSTED BY: DAVE KOS | APRIL 23, 2007 11:53 AM

As a recent retiree and new haven home owner, I am appalled at the prospect of facing 5 years of increasing real estate taxes. I recently traveled to Virginia Beach to see if it could be a place to relocate. At tax rates of 1\$ per 100\$ of property value it makes Rell's 3% limit laughable. My real concern is the value of my house will be going down due to the high tax rate and I could not afford to relocate.

Home owners need to push back now! When companies are forcing employees to assume more of there retirement and health care benefits the city should be doing more to trim there employee costs. Only if we push back will the city push back to control there costs. This is just one of the many ideas suggested by others to control costs but we have to push back.

POSTED BY: LOOK AT THIS TOO | APRIL 23, 2007 1:39 PM

Hi All,

Just think about this now that tax season has closed. The maximum credit for property tax is like \$500. If the state and fed gov. are going to make cities pay more, why don't the sate and coties fight for a higher tax credit. That way people who live in area's with higher levels of education, healthcare and social services. thus driving up the level of tax-exempt, aren't killed with taxes. Or better yet, why doesn't the state collect a tax from each non-profit, after reviewing the funds they get and how they use them, then pay the money to the cities?



POSTED BY: CEDARHILLRESIDENT | APRIL 23, 2007 2:00 PM

Can I ask a question..... If the board puts this through as is....is there anything that we the people can do to fight it?? Meaning going to a higher court??? Showing the works that these people have done and finding out why they did not take them under advisement?? Anyone know??

POSTED BY: CHARLIE | APRIL 23, 2007 4:52 PM

\$180K for the Supt. position is ridiculous. That should be cut back.

Yale already pays way more than its fair share, 11% of the City's budget is an understatement because much of the rest of that funding comes from general State grants. Just like cutting the airport off, attacking Yale is just going to come back and backfire on the City because the University is either not going to expand as quickly, or it will stop contributing so much to its employees.

The only way to cut the budget is to cut administrative salaries, encourage regional towns and the State to pay more to support all the services they use in the City center, and break up the City unions in order to increase worker productivity, cut excess staff and save money. Or better yet, encourage efforts to grow business here by developing the land out at Long Wharf, expanding the airport, and enacting measures to become as business friendly as possible downtown (where 60% of the City's revenue & jobs come from) and in the major commercial neighborhoods. Increasing the parks budget would be one way to do that, by making our major parks and squares more attractive places to be.

Ever hear of the downward spiral or snowball effect? That's exactly what will happen if the City raises taxes on its growing institutions and businesses here, or cuts the airport, just to save on homeowner taxes. Businesses will stagnate and taxes will just go up again.



POSTED BY: [JEFFREYKEREKES](#) | APRIL 23, 2007 11:22 PM

We can get a non-binding referendum on the ballot in November. We can get a binding one only through a change in the city charter. The city charter can be changed by the full BOA. This would be quite an undertaking but is the only way I know of to get the citizens to override the mayor and the BOA. Of course, that would involve the BOA in making such a process available to the citizenry. If you are interested in getting a nonbinding referendum on the ballot, I can send you the information on how to move forward. Remember also that this is an election year here in New Haven and we can start making this an election issue for the mayor and the BOA. There may be other remedies through the courts, but that is not something I am aware of. Also, Jodi Rell is trying to get a 3% cap/year on property taxes. Perhaps contacting her office for other options or working with her to get that provision through the state legislature.

POSTED BY: [MAYBE](#) | APRIL 23, 2007 11:48 PM

I believe you can contact the Office of Policy and Management in Hartford and request they review the revaluation and indeed meets the guidelines in Conn. General Statutes. I think either East Haven or Branford did this a few years ago, but I really don't know much about it. I do know the sales are supposed to be over the past year, and I know the recording of sales was at least six months behind. That being the case the reval was based on all old sales which showed the market at its peak, and completely missed any downturn in the market. Plus I believe you can request an inspection by the real estate assessor to confirm the valuation. Also, since this was a "statistical revaluation" Vision must show they had statistically relevant samplings. That would mean sales in every neighborhood, of every type valued and the number of sales could not be only ten or so to value a whole neighborhood. The city knows this. There is also a local option ordinance that the BOA could pass that caps property taxes at 8% of your income. They wouldn't use this for the elderly, because it would have helped too many people in the city. The money is in all the inside deals that the city never collects on...the Brancati deals, the Fernandez deals...all done at the bidding of the mayor. It seems his best line lately "is don't blame it on me". Time for a new mayor New Haven. Oh and don't count on the BOA. The mayor worked very hard on getting them on his side so he could get Perez out as President and Goldfield in, John owns the BOA, and as long as he is not challenged they have nothing to fear



POSTED BY: [CEDARHILLRESIDENT](#) | APRIL 24, 2007 9:48 AM

"maybe" I think that the reval's were done on the up and up with the exception of a few mistakes which are being fixed. I think the question is more about the city's new budget. In hard times should the city keep spending or should it tighten its belt. And these great people came up with some ideas to do just that. The question is if they do not review the info they have been given we the people would

1 - want to know why

2 - if the reason why they did put the budget through as is can we second guess it. Kind of like a second option.

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