

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

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Hundreds Blast Tax Increase

BY **Thomas MacMillan** | APR 29, 2010 7:41 AM
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Jeffrey Kerekes speaks with public school parent Cindy Vieira.



One woman wept. She said she can't afford to pay more taxes. Another shouted and slammed the microphone on the table. And everyone cheered, even the people who had shown up to support the proposed budget.

That was the scene in City Hall's aldermanic chamber on Wednesday night as taxpayers spoke out against a proposed property tax increase.

It was a public hearing of the Board of Aldermen's Finance Committee, which set aside Wednesday

evening to hear from the public about the mayor's proposed \$476 million

budget for the next fiscal year.

And what a hearing it was.

Aldermen got an earful from a raucous, standing-room-only crowd of several hundred taxpayers. Voices were raised and fingers were pointed as taxpayers decried a property revaluation phase-in that will send them higher tax bills next year. Homeowners would see an average increase of 8.8 percent in their tax bills.

The meeting was preceded by a rally on the steps of City Hall, [organized by parents and school officials to fight against cuts to the education budget](#). That rally was called in opposition to a movement by budget watchdog group New Haven Citizens' Action Network (NHCAN), which is lobbying for a 10 percent budget cut from each department. But once inside, the education protectors cheered along with NHCAN members as neighbors urged aldermen to send back the mayor's budget.

Wednesday's meeting was the latest in a series of meetings the Finance Committee has been holding on the budget. Over the past several weeks, the Board of Aldermen's Finance Committee has been hearing from city department heads. They've attempted to demonstrate why they deserve a piece of the mayor's \$476 million budget for the next fiscal year. See coverage of those meetings [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

As in previous budget meetings, I provided live blow-by-blow coverage of the debate as it happened. See below.

New Haven business owner Brian Virtue was the first to earn the deafening applause of the capacity crown on Wednesday night. He said his taxes have increase 63 percent in the six years he's owned his house, but he hasn't seen a corresponding increase in city services.

"Please, you're going to drive the middle class out of the city," he told the committee.

[Alison DeRenzi](#), another business owner, spoke shortly after Virtue, and kicked things up a notch. (Click play above to see her speak.) She took to her feet in front of the committee. "The budget is completely unacceptable and needs to be handed back to the mayor," she said as applause grew behind her. "We are asking you as civil servants to give him the accountability for his spending ... and to figure it out!"

While there were many complaints about increased tax bills, there were also many calls for city services to remain, and there were very few specific suggestions about where fat could be cut out of the budget. However, budget watchers Jeffrey Kerekes and Christine Bishop offered a list of brainstormed ideas and a bullet-pointed outline of budget weaknesses, respectively.

"People are really concerned," said Board of Aldermen President Carl Goldfield after the meeting. "But people also want services. None of that comes for free." There are "so many constraints and mandates" built into the budget that the amount of discretion available is really quite small, Goldfield said. Union contracts lock the city into certain funding mandates, for example.

Goldfield said he hadn't heard any ideas of how to trim the budget. "It's the general frustration," he said. "There aren't a lot of specific suggestions."

The Finance Committee will meet again next Wednesday, to discuss the city's [plan to monetize parking revenue](#). The committee may begin deliberation on the budget at that time.

As in previous budget meetings, I provided live blow-by-blow coverage of the debate as it happened Wednesday night. See below.

Live-blogging commences below. (Note: only text inside quotation marks is directly quoted; the rest is paraphrasing and observations.)

6:30 p.m.: Previous budget hearings may have been sparsely attended, but this one is packed! Every seat is taken here in the aldermanic chamber, and most of the standing room is disappearing fast. There are at least a couple of hundred people here, many of them toting signs protesting any education budget cuts. They've just come in from the rally on the steps of City Hall, where the air was filled with chants of "Kids Come First!" and "Save Our Schools!" Superintendent Reggie Mayo gave a brief and rousing speech.





I spoke outside with Minerva Miranda, a parent of two students at the Conte West school. She said she's worried that budget cuts for the schools would mean fewer teachers at her daughters' school, where she said the classes are already too big.

Standing outside the aldermanic chamber a moment ago, NHCAN leader Jeffrey Kerekes said he understands the fear of Miranda and other parents and teachers. He said the problem is that there has not been a good public discussion of budget priorities, so when people hear about possible cuts to education, they are justifiably fearful. Kerekes stood by his previous statement that the rally was a product of "fearmongering" by school officials, who have the resources to send out mailers to parents.

6:40: People are getting restless here in the chamber. A chant just flared up: "Let's go! Start the meeting!"

6:41: Chairman Yusuf Shah is pounding the ceremonial crystal. Here we go. He's joined at the table by Aldermen Migdalia Castro, Greg Morehead, Jorge Perez, Andrea Jackson-Brooks, Maureen O'Sullivan-Best, Carl Goldfield, Justin Elicker, Roland Lemar, and Greg Dildine. Aldermen Dolores Colon and Darnell Goldson are seated above the table. Other aldermen are here in the crowd.





6:45: The room is completely filled now. People are standing in the aisles, including several cute kids with Save Education signs.

6:46: Brianna Bellinger-Dawson is first to speak. [Names to be spelled phonetically as best I can hear them]. She's joined by Eric Martin. They're both students at Co-op High. Brianna is speaking on behalf of the Shubert theater. She went to a five week summer program at the Shubert theater. She and Eric learned "the professional aspects of the theater world." This is Brianna's second year speaking for funding for the Shubert. "If I didn't have theater, If I didn't have dance, I honestly don't know what I would do." The room bursts into brief applause.

Eric says he performed before 700 people at the Shubert. "One of the best experiences of my life." He says he would be lost without the arts. "We need this. That's what it boils down to." More applause.

6:53: A man (didn't catch his name) is speaking on behalf of the Shubert. Very important for downtown business, he says.

6:55: Lori Hoffman-Soars, airport manager at Tweed, takes a seat with other Tweed staff. She says staff have improved the airport and facilities, thanks aldermen for continued support.

"We want to talk about our taxes!" someone shouts. Others cheer. Lots of angry murmuring. The crowd is restless.

Shah says everyone who signs up will get a chance to talk.

6:58: Two people mumble their names as they speak in support of the Commission on Equal Opportunities' workforce initiative: helping to create stronger members of society.

"You're mumbling!" someone shouts angrily. (People are testy!)

7:01: Tweed Board member Linda Balzano, from East Haven, sits down to speak for the airport. People mutter and yawn loudly and Shah stops the proceedings to admonish them.



7:03: Kyle Peterson and Rebecca Allen, from mental health services and Columbus House, sit down. They advocate for Town Green Special Services District (SSD).

7:08: Abigail Rider, of Branford, speaks on behalf of Town Green SSD. Rider works for Yale. The city has not increased its contribution to Town Green since it was founded, in 1998, she says. Tony Schaeffer, of Woodbridge, is chair of Town Green. Funding assists in the creation of clean and safe environment downtown, he says.

7:12: Gary Doyens of NHCAN is here and commenting below, along with others.

7:13: Donna Curren is here to express her “unconditional support” for Market New Haven and Town Green SSD. She says she is a New Haven business owner. She praises restaurant week for bringing people into New Haven. Robert Orr also speaks up for Town Green.

7:19: Diana Sousa, VP of communications at Covidien, which is [moving to Long Wharf Drive](#). Covidien is the second largest employer in New Haven, she says. The company has done a lot for the community, including donating more than 3,000 diapers. We really need infrastructure, such as an expansion of Tweed, she says. Her company staff fly out of Bradley airport in Hartford, because Tweed can't offer the flights they need.

7:22: Next: Pilot Pen advocates, three of them. Pilot Pen is more than just the tournament, they say. It's tennis programs, court improvements, and free lessons for kids.

7:24: Brian Virtue of NHCAN heads down. He's the first to call for cuts, rather than to advocate for a particular program. “I can't afford a tax increase.” Deafening applause and cheers. The crowd is behind him! “Thank .. Thank you,” Virtue says uncertainly, after the overwhelming response to his simple statement.

Dolores Colon tries to interject somehow. Not sure what that was about. [Late update: I'm told she was trying to see the list of speakers, to check if a constituent was on it. Shah refused to show it to her.]

Virtue says his taxes have increased 63 percent in the six years he's owned his house. “I can't figure why. The services in New Haven have not increased 63 percent.” More applause; Virtue is killing. He warns that the budget will drive people out of the city. “I understand it's tough times.” Virtue says he runs a business in New Haven and he hasn't raised his prices, because “my customers don't have the money.” *More* applause. Instead of raising prices, he cuts expenses where he can. “We have every right to expect that from our government.... Please, you're going to drive the middle class out of the city.... Please send this budget back.... You've got to work with us or you're going to lose us.” The room fills with applause and whooping.

7:31: Duncan Goodall, owner of Koffee?, is next. He says he's a resident, homeowner, parent, and small business owner. Education is obviously very important, he says. On the other hand, “the taxes are killing me.” More applause. [I'll stop narrating the applause; you can assume it's happening after every statement about high taxes or a bloated budget.] “Small businesses are holding on by their fingernails.”

7:34: Eric Brown takes the mic. “You need to turn that budget back where it came from.” You're going to put homeowners in homeless shelters. There's tons of overtime for police and fire. Brown says he runs a business. “Be responsible with my money!” He hasn't seen an increase in services. Roads are “torn up” until you get to the Hamden line. “We love this city that's why we're here. Do not drive us out of the city.” Huge applause for Brown.

With these three last speakers we're hitting the meat of this hearing. This is what the crowd is packed in here to hear, not the previous speakers on Tweed and Pilot Pen.

7:38: Allison DiRenzi, business owner, takes it to another level. She asks people to raise their hand if they've had to take a pay cut or tighten their family budget. Most of the room raises their hands. DiRenzi is shouting into the mic, calling on aldermen to send the budget back to the mayor. [The video is at the top of this story]

7:42: Diane Casella is in tears. She says her husband and she need to work more and her children still can't do the dance and tee-ball programs they love, because of increased property taxes. She is a teacher in New Haven and decries what she calls the mayor pitting budget-cutters against school supporters. [Casella also broke down at [this meeting](#).] “I love New Haven and I want to stay here. Please reconsider passing this budget.”

7:45: Jeff Kerekes sits down. We're in the heart of the NHCAN batting order now. He says he wants to talk about all New Haveners being in this together. NHCAN's [citywide brainstorm](#) generated over 315 ideas, he say. He hands the list to aldermen. He urges aldermen to look at it, consider the proposals, and send the budget back to the mayor.

7:47: David Streever takes the mic.

There's some grumbling about people being skipped over on the sign-up sheet. Shah and O'Sullivan-Best are sorting it out. O'Sullivan-Best is acting as the maitre d' here, calling people to sit as their names come up on the list.

Streever says he's against [parking meter monetization](#). The administration is about to make the worst decision it's ever made. He compares the monetization scheme to the economic collapse in Greece. "The city needs a loan, that's what it comes down to," Streever says. Monetization is not the way to do it. The deal is too complex and too dangerous. Get a loan from a bank.

7:50: Tim Holahan, member of [last year's blue ribbon budget panel](#), is next. City debt has ballooned from \$125 million in 1992 to \$500 million today, he says. The result: taxes will go up, education will be cut. There needs to be better public information about where the money is going. Holahan says he has repeatedly asked Will Clark for information about how the Board of Ed spends its money, to no avail.



7:53: Rebecca Turcio (pictured), lifetime New Haven resident, says she will have to leave town if there is a tax increase. Turcio is shouting into the mic and pointing her finger. "You need to fight the city, you need to tell them take a good look at this budget!" Crime is only going to get worse!

7:54: Andy Orefice speaks. I'm hurting at business, I'm hurting at home. It's unconscionable that any alderman would pass this budget. Refers to [Register article about high rents in New Haven](#). Meanwhile median income in the city is \$39,000, he says. Orefice warns of reprisals in November for aldermen who vote for the budget.

7:56: Lisa Siedlarz, homeowner since 1998, has seen a tax increase of \$5,000 to \$8,000, a 63 percent increase (like Brian Virtue). "We can't afford another tax increase." She presents a petition signed by over 1000 residents. It's from every ward, she says. It asks the city to tighten its budget and asks aldermen to send the budget back to the mayor.

7:58: Anna Festa, lifelong New Havener and daughter of immigrants, says her parents "worked their tails off" for the American Dream. She asks her mom to stand up. Applause. The elderly are suffering, she says. "Please reconsider this budget." People are paying extraordinary taxes and not receiving services they deserve. "I love this city. I'm passionate for this city." "Look at this room... we don't want to leave... Who wants to leave?" No one raises their hand. Festa says the education budget is not being cut, responding to someone shouting. A very brief shouting match ensues when Festa says education will not be cut. Festa asks aldermen not to cut police or fire budgets. "Protect our services as they are without increasing our taxes."

8:02: Harry David is up. "I submit to you that this budget is unsustainable. It is not a real budget. ... The

numbers don't add up." David says he's analyzed the monetization deal. It comes down to an 8.5 percent loan, he says. "It's not a good deal."

David speaks against the flyers put out about possible cuts to education budget. "They take our proposal for a 10 percent cut and make it sound like we are against education. We are not."

8:05: Mona Berman speaks. She's a taxpayer, small business person and "overtaxed" resident "subject to the abuse of power that is rampant in this city." "You cheat everybody all the time." She talks about a recent arbitrary increases in certain taxes [referring to [this Advocate article](#)] that no one had the resources to fight.

8:08: [Ronald Huggins](#), youth leader, is up. He says he's not here because someone told him to be. He's the president of the student council at Hillhouse. Education is essential, he says. Otherwise, "the history of New Haven's youth will be of a continuing pattern of violence." Police need money too. "Please vote in favor of the mayor's budget." Applause. (Apparently not everyone here is opposed to the budget.)

8:10: John Daniels, former mayor of New Haven, takes a seat and takes the mic. "I come tonight to give an honest assessment of the budget," he says. "This budget should be returned back to the mayor." We have had tax increases and more spending for the last 16 years, "and the mayor has used the violence in the black community as a means to raise taxes." Daniels offers three examples:

1. Several years ago, the mayor said crime increases called for 35 new officers to fight crime and decrease overtime. They were hired and crime has increased and overtime has doubled, he claimed
2. The following year, the mayor said schools will stay open, to fight crime. Aldermen approved. The community schools program never happened. "Where did all that money go?"
3. The following year, youth violence went "off the chart." The mayor announced the answer: the million dollar youth initiative. This board passed it. "How many youth in the city were served? ... There was no youth initiative."

Daniels: Money to fight crime has not been used to fight crime. Not only must this budget go back to the mayor, the government owes taxpayers an explanation. "You owe that to the taxpayers."

"I don't know what city the mayor is living in. The people in New Haven cannot afford a tax increase," Daniels says, pounding the table with every word.

8:10: Former Alderman Allan Brison "zeroes in" on the education budget. There's a lot of fat in there, he says. There are gross inefficiencies and even corruption and patronage, he says. A study showed that there should be eight teachers for every administrator. New Haven at the time of the study had a ratio of 3 to 1.

It's wrong that the Board of Aldermen has "virtually no say" over the BOE budget. [They don't have line item veto power, and they rarely spend much time scrutinizing the budget before approving it.] Brison suggests aldermen vote down the Board of Education budget as a means of "leveraging control."

8:21: Daniel Haim, Hartford resident and BOE employee on school construction planning, says his position is no longer in the main budget; instead it's in a special budget. He's saying there is a "grant" listed in the budget that allows bond funds to pay for salaries, including his own! He asks aldermen to investigate. He says it's not right to pay for salaries with bond funds.

8:26: A union member from UNITE HERE is speaking. People around the room are holding signs that say "Good Jobs, Strong Communities." He says the city must:

1. keep good jobs
2. make bad jobs good (make them union jobs)
3. make good jobs accessible (to people of color, for instance).

"In the meantime, don't balance the budget on the backs of the workers."

8:27: Kathleen Muloney, Yale worker and member of Local 34, says good jobs would mean a better city, less crime, and less reliance on social services, and increased homeownership. A lack of good jobs, or the need to work two jobs, means less time to volunteer, mentor, and parent.

8:31: A teacher at Yale says he wants to talk about corporate responsibility. City and state dollars are lost to corporate loopholes, like the one that let's AT&T report its earnings in other states, he says. CEOs earn huge salaries. [There's some grumbling around the room. The speaker hasn't explained what his speech has to do with the city budget.] Here it is: low level employees should not be the first on the chopping block when it comes to tightening the budget.

8:34: Shirley Lawrence, resident of New Haven since 1973, and Pastor Abraham Hernandez. Lawrence says she is a community organizer. Pastor says Yale-New Haven hospital promised to hire locals, but hasn't.

[Hernandez and Lawrence and some earlier speakers are from a union rally that was held before the meeting at the Center Church on The Green.]

The crowd is thinning out here. Still lots of people standing, but no longer cheek-by-jowl. The momentum seems to have died down. Less applause and not as raucous when it happens.

8:40: Jerome Drake, of Winchester Avenue for 40 years, says it's a common political practice for the administration to try to divide the city when money is needed. He's referring to the education budget protest. He says he can't figure out what the budget means for him specifically, and he's tried to get answers. "There's a lot of smoke and mirrors here."

8:42: A woman [I didn't catch her name] has sat down and started shouting. She angry about Yale "picking what it wants, and getting what it wants," while "small people pick up the pieces." Taxes go up, "and Yale continues to have a free ride." "We want to know what you're going to do!" Pounding the table. ["Nothing. Nothing. Nothing," the elderly man behind me says quietly.]

8:45: NHCAN's Gary Doyens sits down. Reading from a prepared statement, he says his tax bill has doubled since 2000 and will go up 12 percent this year, to more than \$600 per month. The increase "is unconscionable, immoral, and unnecessary." It lowers the value of his home, reduces its sale-ability, and hurts the economy by taking money from families. "There's a reason why two thirds of city employees don't live here and why 82 percent of police officers don't live here."

Doyens also says the education budget brouhaha is a "smokescreen." "There are ways to make strategic cuts without hurting public safety or education." Department heads need to be told to cut. "They'll find those things." Department heads need leadership.

Doyens: If, as the mayor says, these are not ordinary times, why is this an ordinary budget? He says he had to cut back on his daughters' piano lessons to biweekly, to save \$50 per month. A tax increase will be devastating. Fire, police and education account for 80 percent of the budget. That's where the money is and where the cuts need to be made. "There can be no sacred cows in this economic time." Other cities and towns are making do with less police. We have almost four cops per 1000 people; the national average is less than three per 1000. 14 percent of the budget is going to debt service. [Doyens is laying out a lot of numbers here and Shah seems to be giving him all the time he needs.] Foreclosures are out of control. We don't have a money problem; we have a vision problem. "The time to cut this budget is now. ... If not now when? Please don't hurt us." He asks department heads to achieve 10 percent cuts.

8:54: Roberta Thornton, a senior citizen who works in real estate, brings up seniors and "young people just starting out." They mostly live in condos and can't afford a tax increase.

8:56: Shanice Johnson, from Hillhouse High, speaks on behalf of the education budget. She says she loves all the teachers she's had in public school. "We don't have enough money for books; we don't have enough for programs." Hillhouse can't afford a field trip to D.C. "You want a vital thriving city, you need vital thriving individuals." You'll find them in the schools. Don't take that away.

8:59: James Duwett points to his corduroys embroidered with skulls and crossbones. "This is what I think of the budget... You're attacking the people of New Haven." He says he's on Social Security, a fixed income, and can't afford more taxes. "I can't afford to live here anymore."

9:00: Wendy Hamilton asks to face the audience. Gets a nope from Shah. She faces forward, but she's really addressing the room full of people behind her. She says she's been in the city for 25 years. "People, pay attention to how your alderman votes!" "I think you're going to try to pull a fast one on us." "No more taxes." "Why is it that the poor black cities in the richest state get the burden" of high taxes "while the rich white suburbs get lower taxes?"

Hamilton is taking the energy up a notch.

Hamilton: There are two places you should look for money: "Not us." [She gets a laugh from the crowd for that one.] Now: "the elephant in the living room:" Yale, which "owns New Haven." "We're still their slaves and anyone who doesn't agree with that is Uncle Tomming you!" [Hamilton is heated; the crowd likes it.]

She ends with a triumphant: "Put that in your pipe and smoke it!" and slams the mic down. "Keep fighting!" she shouts as she walks away.

9:06: Ruth Swanton, a widow, says she couldn't own a home without a high skill level. Investment in education is needed. Hands over a petition signed by parents at Microsociety school. "We cannot afford to cut education, period."

9:09: Crowd has thinned out even further. Lots of empty seats now.

Richard Bell speaks: New Haven used to be known for the export of manufactured goods. Soon it will be known for exporting young people, because there are no jobs. He says he's a grandparent. "I don't want to be a voice on the telephone." "We can no longer rely on property tax as the sole source of revenue." The state needs to kick in more. "We are the employer of the region. ... If you work here, you should pay taxes here."

Someone shouts: "We've been waiting for three hours to speak!"

Shah lets the person jump the line. Complaints ensue. There are apparently several sign up sheets circulating and people feel they are being overlooked.

9:12: It was "Friends of the New Haven Animal Shelter" that complained: three women. One is a Humane Commission member appointed by the mayor. [I didn't catch their names.] She urges aldermen to reconsider the elimination of an animal control officer position. It was the result of a personnel incident, involving a transfer to public works. [Huh? The whole story here is unclear.] The three speak at length about all that the animal shelter does and ask aldermen to reconsider the elimination of the animal control position.

9:22: Christine Bishop reads from a prepared statement. She reiterates Doyens' statement: these are not normal times, and a not-normal budget is needed. She has looked at the budget closely and has some bullet points:

1. **Innovation Based Budgeting:** this should be incorporated into regular departmental procedures without hiring a new staff person.
2. Unfunded positions in the budget: these don't look like new positions now, but they are; they will incur salaries, benefits, and pensions
3. School construction: \$15 million for new projects that are "still on the drawing board." There's no cost for stopping them now; it will save money this year and for years to come.
4. Contract reserve: money reserved for contract negotiations. Calculation: unions are predicted to provide concessions of just 0.6 percent.
5. Taxes: "We all know there's no silver bullet." If we reduce the mill rate by one mill, then we're only looking for \$5 million in savings.
6. Parking monetization. "I'm not a financial wizard." But look at the money we're receiving; it's only a \$5 million benefit because we trade \$4 or \$5 million in revenue for \$10 million. And that's for the first five years. After year six, we don't get any revenue from the deal.
7. If we raise taxes 8 percent this year, what happens next year, when things will be even worse?

9:30: O'Sullivan-Best calls a number of names to let people speak, but they seem to have left. Katherine Escobar takes the mic. Her son is beside her. She says she's a property owner in New Haven. "I feel like we're just not getting ahead." Don't increase taxes. "We have to tell our children you can't go to summer camp." She lives in West Haven, but pays taxes in New Haven because she has tenants in New Haven.

9:34: Robin Rausch, has lived in New Haven for years. She no longer shops downtown. She closed her "little law practice" because of the tax bill. "I probably can't afford to live here." Her three adult children have left town and will not return. "I have very little confidence in the process we're going through this evening." She's astonished by the eloquence of people saying how much they love the city. "I feel like a hostage in my own home and I feel like my bank account is being treated as a cookie jar." She says she has no confidence in school reform in New Haven. They haven't been able to do it before. Police will not reduce crime. "Mentor patrols" are needed.

She runs some numbers:

Forbes ranks New Haven as 57th most expensive property tax city in the country. \$1,854 is the average property tax bill in USA. "I pay eight times that." The average tax bill should be 1 percent of the value of the home; she pays twice that. Nationwide, homeowners pay 2.5 percent of their income on property taxes. Based on that, "I should have an income of \$508,000. But I don't!" "Cut the fat. Make it work. You can do it." "Please stop this perilous path to economic destruction.... Thank you for your time and please return that budget to the mayor."

9:42: Mr. Lipsch says he's lived 60 years in New Haven. He's an elderly man with a thick accent. I'm having trouble understanding him, but he's objecting to high taxes. He says he can't find renters for his property. Why

not cut the salaries of top earners? "I'm wondering what they're doing with the money?" "You kill all the business. ... All the factories move." "Where are people supposed to work now, in City Hall everybody, and suck my pocket?"

Mrs. Lipsch takes her turn. "Well, it used to be fun to own property. Not anymore. It's a big headache." And you can't sell it because the property tax is too high. "I think New Haven builds too many new schools. ... Doesn't the mayor think a little bit? ... And besides, where is the mayor this evening?" Applause. "Anyway, please don't raise the tax. ... He should cut down with all the school buildings."

9:49: I have to take a quick break. Be right back.

9:58: I'm back. I seem to have missed something. There's an argument between Shah and the current speaker. The speaker: "This is a tragedy to have this gentleman running this committee."

Shah: Do I go into your father's church and start talking?

"I have received with nothing but contempt from you!" says the speaker. He's speaking against the cutting of custodial jobs. He's a union guy. "I can't afford my taxes to go up." He says he's been waiting since 5:30 p.m. to speak, only to be disrespected by Shah. [What on Earth did I miss? Anyone?]

[Late update: Apparently there was a confrontation between Shah and the speaker, who is a member of the Brooks family and a relative of Alderwoman Andrea-Jackson Brooks. According to multiple people in the room: There was a call for anyone else who would like to speak. Brooks went up, sat down, and grabbed the mic. Shah interrupted him and said he had not been recognized. According to several people, Shah said, "You Brooks think you run everything." Shah let other speakers go ahead of Brooks and then returned to him just as I was coming back into the room to hear the end of their dispute.]

10:01: Dick Lyons, former alderman, says he was on his way here tonight and people told him it was no use because aldermen are just a rubber stamp for the mayor. There are no new revenue recommendations in the budget. We've talked for years about fee for services for the major non-profits in New Haven. "You heard from the revenue source tonight and they're not happy." The whole state "reeks of a lack of creativity." Connecticut's big idea is Kenos. Everywhere else on the East Coast you have to pay highway tolls. [Tolls could raise \\$1 billion](#), he says.

10:05: No one else to testify. Meeting adjourned.

Comments

posted by: Doyens on April 28, 2010 6:58pm

This is a rowdy bunch. Tweed New Haven got a bad reception. ouch.

posted by: Doyens on April 28, 2010 7:21pm

The public is here over the mayor's extraordinary property tax hike proposal; and because NHPS has frightened people over possible cuts to education.

Testimony from organization/airport/university/downtown people are getting negative reaction from the public. I suspect they believed this is a short process. It is not.

posted by: Doyens on April 28, 2010 7:29pm

Brian Virtue's testimony got rave reviews. All he said was "I can't afford a tax increase." Wild cheers after every statement.

posted by: streever on April 28, 2010 8:02pm

Despite being mobilized by the Mayor, city-wide PTO members are speaking in favor of voting no on the tax increase. An entire room of people enthusiastically clapped for Brian Virtue, Duncan Goodall, Diane Cassella & many many others who are out against the tax increase.

The mayor claims we want to shut down schools. That's blatantly false. We just want him to look at his budget in a sensible way like ALL OF US ARE DOING with our home budgets.

posted by: streever on April 28, 2010 8:05pm

Harry David mentions the elephant in the room: a misleading flier sent to school kids to get their parents out. It

claims NHCAN wants to shut down schools & eliminate teachers. Obviously this isn't true—and I think it's well-established by how many citizens the mayor mobilized who applauded those of us against the tax increase.

posted by: Burning Question on April 28, 2010 8:10pm

Did Mayor DeStefano come to meet his critics, or did he just send his underlings to act as shields?

posted by: streever on April 28, 2010 8:10pm

FINALLY:

an artist came up and said that the tax assessor "arbitrarily assessed her at 5,000 dollars":

according to an article in the New Haven Advocate published today, this is a wide-spread practice:

<http://newhavenadvocate.com/featured-news/taxing-artists>

This is what those of us against the budget are against: corrupt practices that hurt the citizens. Not cutting teachers & police. This is a fiction the Mayor has written and distributed.

posted by: streever on April 28, 2010 8:13pm

NH!!!! Send your reporter over here. The PTO mobilized parents are saying, "Ronny meant to say "DO NOT support the mayor's budget"." I kid you not, folks, you can't make up stuff like this.

posted by: streever on April 28, 2010 8:19pm

@Burning Question:

The Mayor DID not show up. He had his ENTIRE staff here and it looks like most of them didn't get the memo. When the PTO mobilized "pro tax" people changed their mind, and started applauding those of us out for transparency and a sensible budget, his people took off real quick.

The funniest thing was one of the PTO leaders admonishing her people to stop clapping for us. Where the heck does Destefano get these people? What does he make them drink?

posted by: Doyens on April 28, 2010 8:21pm

The mayor is not here. He has several department heads and others lurking about...

posted by: streever on April 28, 2010 8:30pm

Daniel Haim, you have my extreme respect. While the other employees of the BOE sit up here and say nothing but protect their job, you have the courage to step up and point out what you believe is an illegal act by your employer.

That takes courage, and it's something the [people] who are flanking the meeting room should learn. When people who depend on the city for their employment step up and say things are wrong, why can't you? Why do you choose to [...] admit problems and then say, "But we're working to fix it on the back-end".

We got into these problems because of a lack of transparency. The Mayor doesn't want to fix the problems: When we call him out & ask for transparency, he hides and sends [others] to speak for him.

posted by: Amicahomi on April 28, 2010 8:31pm

Great job, TMac. Thanx for enduring a long, loud night so we can read in relative peace.

posted by: Eva G on April 28, 2010 8:34pm

Damn I wish I was there.

(side note: the thing I have to type in to submit this comment is rate85—will this be the new mill rate?)

posted by: streever on April 28, 2010 8:43pm

"8:40: Jerome Drake, of Winchester Avenue for 40 years, says it's common political practice for administration to try to divide the city when money is needed. He's referring to the education budget protest."

I feel the need to point out again that the "protest" failed completely, with the vast majority of it's members applauding our stance & agreeing that this budget is irresponsible and should not pass.

posted by: streever on April 28, 2010 8:54pm

Despite organizing an “anti transparency” protest (well, they didn’t call it that, they falsely claimed we wanted to close schools), the Mayor’s office only found one spokesperson for their platform in the last 2 and a half hours: a high school student.

While Ronny spoke eloquently & articulately, and impressed all with his viewpoints, it is deplorable that the Mayor has chosen to use teenagers and children to make his case.

This is what New Haven’s city government does? It makes me sick to my stomach.

posted by: streever on April 28, 2010 9:08pm

Me: “Where are the parents and adults? You’ve had two teenagers speak out in favor and no adults. How can you lie to children and tell them that we want to close schools and fire teachers?”

Her: “I know budgets and I know what will happen if we make cuts.”

Me: “Then you shouldn’t support a mayor who you KNOW will make the wrong cuts.”

Even the people who came out in support of the budget (all 3 of them?) know that the mayor is not competent enough to manage the finances of the BoE.

posted by: Jeffrey kerekes on April 28, 2010 9:18pm

Thank you to the BOE staff for turning out so many supporters of our position.

posted by: Burning Questions #2 & #3 on April 28, 2010 9:55pm

Okay, so Johnny Boy was a no show.

Was his Budget Director Rusconi present?

Was his Chief of Staff Matteson present?

posted by: tess tickles on April 28, 2010 10:40pm

Dan Haim must have been misquoted. Since when would a city employee admit to something honest like this without getting fired? Is he married? I want his baby. That city school company, Glibane, must have been the one to come up wif the idea to use the bond money to pay haim so they would have more for their no-show employees who don’t do anything ... Why do we have 10 high schools that only graduate 850 city kids and 150 out of town kids a year? Hillhouse and Cross used to graduate 900 between them. Get rid of the other 8 schools and save all that money paid to out of towners who don’t spend their money in new haven. Bring back residency laws. The mayor pushes for more schools to be built so he can get the contractors to make campaign contributions so he can run for governor. stop the madness!!! Revise the charter for term limits, just 2 - 3 year terms, then go find a job where you have to be held accountable.

posted by: streever on April 28, 2010 11:10pm

so many well-spoken people tonight, it’s hard to list anyone here for fear of all the people I’ll leave out. But it’s worth noting Christine Bishop because her testimony came on late and may not have been heard. She gave the alders a sheet of information on where they can make cuts/how to work on the budget. As a member of the Blue Ribbon Budget Panel she did an excellent job & has a great perspective that should be heeded.

posted by: robn on April 28, 2010 11:28pm

The relevance of the NHI is so explicitly clear in this thread. Thank you NHI for informing and engaging.

posted by: Brian V on April 28, 2010 11:35pm

When spreading lies and propaganda, it is helpful to tell your supporters exactly what they are supporting and how to vote on it.

One would think that the BOE’s “Chief of External Affairs” making \$95K/year would have gotten this point correct. ...

She tried to use and manipulate the PTO and that is SHAMEFUL. Why exactly does the BOE need a “Chief of External Affairs” making \$95K/year??? Anyone???

I hope the Alders (and the King) listened to their constituents tonight.

DON’T RAISE TAXES.

posted by: first observer on April 28, 2010 11:44pm

Excellent report, Mr. MacMillan. Thank you so much.

posted by: anon on April 29, 2010 12:31am

Those supporting lower crime and better schools in New Haven should be calling for the budget to be slashed by even more than 10%.

Good schools and low crime have nothing to do with how much money you throw at the problem. New Haven has been spending millions on police overtime yet crime has barely budged. Billions have been poured into schools with little impact.

What the government doesn't seem to realize (or care about) is that good schools and low crime are a direct result of strong neighborhoods filled with homeowners, renters and businesses who are planning to stay here and invest time and money in their neighborhoods. They exist where problems like noise, trash, graffiti, loitering, litter, traffic, lack of greenery and lighting are brought under control by an efficient city government that actually cares about how the streets and neighborhoods look. Residents can become proud of these places. Jobs are created and crime is lowered when you have beautiful and walkable neighborhoods. Lower stress levels associated with an overall higher quality of life are what enables our students to succeed. Places that are pleasant to live are places where students and families do well.

If you try to improve schools without improving neighborhoods, all you get are high school and college graduates who leave, and the city continues to spiral downhill. Ironically, this just makes schools worse in the long term. Funny, but you can spend billions on schools, and things will just get worse. In contrast, if you spend a tiny fraction of the education budget fixing up streets and parks, picking up litter and installing lighting, businesses will open there, and the schools will all improve without spending a dime!

Spending billions of dollars on schools, administrators and police overtime does absolutely nothing for us in the long term, except make the people who get all that money (e.g. contractors and administrators), happy. And as Doyens points out, almost all those people live in the suburbs.

Let's start investing in our own city again. Sorry unions, some union jobs in the suburbs may be cut, but better jobs will be created right here. That's the best the taxpayers can do right now.

The rest of the world (and even many other progressive cities in the US) seem to have realized these things for decades, so it is strange to see that New Haven is tied to an incorrect model that assumes throwing money into bureaucratic systems is the way to cure problems rather than directly addressing these problems' underlying causes.

posted by: cedarhillresident on April 29, 2010 6:42am

Wow what a night! My head still hurts!

I would like to echo Streever and Jeffreys comment

"posted by: Jeffrey kerekes on April 28, 2010 9:18pm

Thank you to the BOE staff for turning out so many supporters of our position."

As I talked to many that were coming in I found the same story...above Goldfield said we want services but we do not want tax increase. Well lets start with all the non union over priced admins in the BOE bet we can save A boat load of money there contracts to not protect them. And let some of the funds trickle down to the class rooms for a change. The mandate says we can not tell the BOE where to make the cuts...but we can cut there budget. WE CAN BE THE WATCHDOGS ON WERE THEY MAKE THE CUTS!!! So that the right ones are made!! That is just for starters... And the list the NHCAN got from citizen has MANY do-able cuts in it...they can be implemented and we could even see a tax decrease. but right now all we want is WISE SPENDING! and a 0 increase! TAKE 10!!!

posted by: Jaime Savo-Brockett on April 29, 2010 7:44am

This was my first time attending a budget meeting and was amazed at the turnout. It really opened my eyes to become more involved in where my money is going. I am a teacher in the city. I waiting as long as I could to speak last night but could no longer. My husband, father, and brother (all life time residents of New Haven) are custodians in the city in jeopardy of losing their jobs. Combined we currently pay well over \$20,000 in taxes. A tax increase and job lose will be a double hit for my family. The board has spent millions in the past with companies like Aramark and AFB to manage custodians and neither have been successful. Over 30 schools are outsourced to private Landscaping companies with contracts \$75,000 or more-not including snow removal. When the mayor says he can save 7 million dollars by privatizing custodians-he needs to rework his numbers. 200 plus jobs are at risk-many New Haven residents. Here is a union willing to concede that has taken care of NHPS for over 50 years. There are definite ways the BOE can trim money, the Mayors solution to cutting jobs is going to punish the schools, and taxpayers.

posted by: Moira on April 29, 2010 8:13am

God, I wish I could have been there. I was at a little league game instead, cheering on my kids who have had the fear of King Johnny put in them when told they would lose their beloved teachers and even their school if people like me insist on cuts to the proposed budget. Nonsense! I resent that tactic, and I am so glad that NHPS supporters and NHCAN protesters realized last night that they—WE!—are all on the same side of the fence with this. Kudos to everyone who spoke out against this proposed budget last night. SHAME on DeStefano for not showing his face at the meeting last night, and for encouraging the use of our children to further his bloated, unqualified “innovative” budget proposal. He didn’t get my vote last time around, and he sure won’t get it next time.

posted by: Jaime Savo-Brockett on April 29, 2010 8:19am

Kudos to Ronny for getting up there but come on folks....Ronny is a high school student that has no idea about paying taxes and supporting a family. He doesn't realize that what ever amount the BOE gets...he will see nothing more.

posted by: about time on April 29, 2010 8:23am

Wow, great coverage! Thanks Independent... As to some suggestions for Goldfield’s statement, “There aren’t a lot of specific suggestions”...
How about getting rid of that ridiculous calendar New Haven sends out every year. Why do I pay for this, and why do we need this? Post a statement on the city web-site.

posted by: streever on April 29, 2010 8:38am

@Jaime Savo-Brockett:

well-said! I'm glad to see a teacher speak up on this.

NHCAN has asked the mayor to be creative: to think outside the box, to ask teachers, workers, and city hall employees how he can make cuts that don't put them out of work, but instead remove redundancy and improve efficiency.

His answer was to send home a flier threatening to cut teacher positions & shut down schools. That's his method.

I think it's time that the teachers, janitors, city hall employees, and citizens have their method instituted.

Last year, the Mayor claimed that we were facing unprecedented harsh economic times. He was correct.

He gave his top employees raises (off the budget and behind aldermen's backs) and his coterie of top employees then criticized and sniped aldermen like Roland Lemar for speaking out against this misuse of mayoral power.

That's tough times? My staff gets a raise?

My friends at engineering firms: newspapers: corporations & in retail all took pay cuts last year. They had furlough days. Some were laid off. Some are STILL out of work with no jobs in sight.

The Mayor thinks that's sharing the pain? Raising the salary of his top employees?

When times are good, anyone can fill the seat, making decisions that don't hit us until later (multi-billion dollar new school construction program, for instance), but when times go tough, it lets you see how poorly your representative is really doing.

This is the wake up call to New Haven.

If you attended last night, you heard employees of the BOE, citizens, and politically engaged people bring to light misuses and misspending by the city. You heard former Mayor John Daniels give an accounting of taxes raised and money raised and ask where it all went.

There is no doubt that these are tough economic times, but that doesn't excuse the off-the-books accounting we're seeing. That doesn't excuse the severe lack of transparency. If we were in this situation with a transparent city government, money on the books & no attempts at off-the-books deals like the parking meter nonsense, I would gladly give the Mayor a pass.

All he was asked to do was present a transparent budget and find some way to make cuts. No one told him how to do it or where to do it: That's his job. He's the mayor. He is the one who instead of providing an alternative when requested, just to show his citizens what cuts would look like and where they'd have to happen, arrogantly pushed through with his final plan.

The Mayor's campaign re-election group (City employees earning tax dollars for their salaried positions while working on his campaign) will try to paint any opposition as the party of NO. They will say that we lack ideas

and energy, and simply embody NO.

The Party of No, however, sits squarely in city hall. Consider:

Mayor DeStefano said NO to transparency, NO to budget options, NO to citizens who asked him to just TRY and find some cuts in the policy. Let's make sure that we say NO when he asks us to vote for him.

posted by: Doyens on April 29, 2010 8:46am

Congratulations to one and all for a great turnout. The message was heard. It remains to be seen if it will result in spending changes that will save us not from an average of 8.8 percent tax increase but a 12 to 24 percent net tax increase with reval.

As for Carl Goldfield, it is really difficult to let his comment stand unchallenged. Carl, as you well know, in past years, the Finance Committee was given very specific recommendations on where to make cuts. You specifically ignored every single one of them. You embraced not one. None. You lectured us on MBR - remember that myth? Minimum Budget Requirement? that's why we decided to challenge the Finance Comm to use the bright people in these departments to get the targeted 10% cut with no sacred cows.

But specifically to your complaint, last night, Jeffrey Kerekes gave you a list of 316 very specific cuts. Look at the list. I'll give you more:

1. Cut Tweed. It's a private airport. It provides limited public use and the people who use it, can afford to pay market rate to land their private planes, park their cars and pay user fees on every ticket. Million Dollars.
2. Cut the Fair Rent Commission - \$100K
3. Cut one of the staff people in the Disability Office. It only handles 300 "cases" a year.
4. Cut LCI and refocus its mission on code enforcement.
5. Use technology so that taxes, fines and fees can be paid for online and cut the associated staff needed to deal with all the paper.
6. Eliminate all new hires - this budget proposes 43 new staffers.
7. Cut education and send a strong message that the cuts should not be made in the classroom but in re-org of bus routes, closing windows, eliminating administrators and culling "consultants" and "special assignments."
8. There were only a handful of people who said not to cut services - you know what? Cut services. But find your cuts like the mayor did last year, in the lowest wage, most public sector. That's not where the money is.
9. Cut police and fire. Our police force (street) is 35% larger than the national average.
10. Look at the new communications department. How can a re-org of that function actually cost us more? Maybe because you have a \$90K department head?
11. Don't approve any more borrowing for school construction. Finish the projects where ground has already been broken. If still in the design stage, cork it.
12. Debt is your enemy. It is now consuming 14% of this budget - \$62 million. It has exploded.
13. Cap nearly all your capital bond projects. These will drive the debt and debt service higher.
14. Do not monetize the parking. Raise rates and move rapidly to pay kiosks if you can find evidence this will yield more money. This plan together with other proposed debt will jack our debt by \$100 million this year. Bad idea.

Carl: Quit saying "I can't." You can. No more excuses.

posted by: Uncle Egg on April 29, 2010 8:53am

Hey Mayor D: If you're looking for cuts, I have a sneaking suspicion that you could cut the schools' administrative payroll by half (please don't touch our teachers) without degrading educational quality. In fact, you'd probably improve it.

I am currently looking for a house in Hamden. This budget is the reason why.

posted by: dollars and sense on April 29, 2010 9:08am

how's that democrat rule working out for you?

posted by: Dan Haim on April 29, 2010 9:45am

At no time did I use the word "illegal".

On a not unrelated topic - If I could pick one thing to do I would make it a requirement to reside in the city that you work for. This comment really stuck out to me:

"two thirds of city employees don't live here and 82 percent of police officers don't live here."

That is absolutely absurd!! It's no wonder so much money is wasted (most notably with police and school administration). They could care less what happens in OUR CITY!! THEY DON'T EVEN LIVE HERE!!

posted by: streever on April 29, 2010 10:51am

Daniel Haim: Apologies if I misunderstood you/misconstrued your words. I think the point of what you raised: that the City is using shenanigans to pay you without it being in the Education budget—still speaks volumes to the need for transparency & open government.

posted by: Brian V on April 29, 2010 11:08am

@ Sean

So few ideas? How about 316+ ideas.

Not one of them good enough to act on? ...

and, Who was race baiting? -now YOU are trying to spin race into it. The PTO spin failed. When will you learn to stop all the spinning and start having some meaningful discussions about the budget?

posted by: V on April 29, 2010 11:23am

anon wrote:

"good schools and low crime are a direct result of strong neighborhoods filled with homeowners, renters and businesses who are planning to stay here and invest time and money in their neighborhoods. They exist where problems like noise, trash, graffiti, loitering, litter, traffic, lack of greenery and lighting are brought under control by an efficient city government that actually cares about how the streets and neighborhoods look."

I like the first sentence, but the second sentence - residents have to care about their neighborhood, not the government. When I drive down Edgewood and see trash strewn everywhere, collecting up against chain-link fences, I see apathy. It's not the government's job to pick up that trash, it's ours.

Like many others, I will move as soon as I can, to get out from under these taxes. I get very little value out of my real estate taxes, and until that changes, more and more people will leave.

posted by: LST on April 29, 2010 11:30am

What an excellent and detailed editorial! The Register didnt even mention this important meeting.

posted by: Jen on April 29, 2010 11:35am

Can someone post a link or address to sign up for NHCAN's email list.

I usually don't get too involved with these things, but taxes are already outrageous given the level of services and the terrible school system.

posted by: cba on April 29, 2010 11:48am

The City of New Haven's government is a typical bloated municipal government that is not living within its means. King John and his lackeys are spending funds that they do not have and then proceeding to raise taxes to cover their excesses. If one goes back to the Britannica annuals from the 50s and 60s and looks up New Haven, one will clearly see that the City has suffered a drastic decline in population because residents voted with their feet to leave the City and not pay for its costly bureaucracy. What is needed is a Mayor who has experience in the private sector running a business and controlling costs and not a professional politician whose goal is to make a bigger mess on the State level!!!

posted by: cedarhillresident on April 29, 2010 11:54am

jen

tips@nhcan.org

the web site is nhcan.org

Welcome aboard

posted by: Tim Holahan on April 29, 2010 11:57am

Once again, thanks to the Independent for excellent coverage.

It was encouraging last night to see advocates for jobs, education, and more responsible governmental begin to find common ground in our goals. Better education will lead to better jobs, less crime, a broader tax base, stronger communities, and fiscal health.

However, we have to be honest with ourselves: we're in a deep hole, and we're not going to get out quickly or easily. Because of unwise decisions made in recent years, we're likely to face both higher taxes and reduced services for a long while. Debt service takes a large and growing portion of the budget, and that's not going to change any time soon. Even if Yale were to play a more significant role in compensating the city for its loss of tax revenue, as I think it should, that's not going to solve our financial problem.

Given that, it's vital that the people of New Haven get a realistic picture of how our government spends our money and what we get for it, so that we can have an informed conversation about our priorities. The city's budget documents do not provide that. Instead, they confuse and intimidate those who try to understand them. They are the polar opposite of transparency.

We have large slices of the pie labeled "Debt Service", "Pensions", and "Employee Benefits"; how did we incur that debt? Whose pensions and benefits are those? Until we can easily answer these questions:

- * How much do we spend on that department/school?
- * What are that department's/school's performance targets?
- * How that department/school actually perform last year?

... we can't do more than say "don't raise my taxes" and/or "don't cut the schools".

The aldermen complain frequently about contradictory and unreasonable demands from constituents, but despite considerable powers granted by the charter, they have not required the administration to provide clearer documents that will enable us to better understand our government.

Defining such measurements won't be easy. As the TV series *The Wire* made painfully clear, a phony, easily-gamed data-driven strategy is worse than no strategy. That doesn't mean we shouldn't try to do it right. The alternative is the status quo, and last night's crowd was nearly unanimous in agreement that the status quo isn't acceptable.

If we don't make a concerted effort to change the way the budget is created in this city, we'll find ourselves repeating the same testimony year after year. New Haven deserves better than that.

posted by: elected official on April 29, 2010 12:01pm

Alders the taxpayers are the voters. They are calling to you loud and clear. Stand in their light. Please do not simply play follow the leader. His career is near the end, your political career is merely starting. The state cuts their budget and so should the city. Please listen to the voters and taxpayers. I know it is uncomfortable to challenge the administration. But when you do we will all come to your aid and support you in your reelection. do not fear

posted by: Jaime-Savo-Brockett on April 29, 2010 12:03pm

Presented to the BOE A&F committee on April 19:

a. To approve a Fifth Option to Renew a Lease Agreement by and between the New Haven Board of Education and Gateway Partners, LLC, 100 Trumbull St., Hartford, CT for the lease of 6,647 sq. ft. of office space located on the 8th floor of Gateway Center, 54 Meadow St., New Haven for the period of July 1, 2010 to June 30, 2011, in an amount not to exceed \$59,823 payable in 12 monthly installments of \$4,985.25.

Funding Source: 2010-2011 Operating Budget

Acct. #190-58000-56652

Presenter: Will Clark – 691-2681

SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN TO US WHY???

Hmmm...here's a though... shut Gateway altogether and use a vacant school building.

posted by: Jaime Savo-Brockett on April 29, 2010 12:07pm

By the way Mr. Mayor, I pay \$4000 in taxes and my kid is on a waiting list to get into a New Haven Public School.

posted by: simple question on April 29, 2010 12:19pm

Paraphrasing one of the comments in the article, I think a simple question for which an answer could be very illuminating is:

Clearly property tax revenue has gone up considerably in the last 5-10 years, so where has that money gone? I

don't mean this as an accusation, just an honest question. How much is needed to cover new shortfalls from the state? How much for school construction or paying back loans for construction? How many new jobs are being paid for by this money? Are there any new services?

posted by: gogle on April 29, 2010 1:12pm

You elected him. Now you deal with him.

posted by: Jonathan Hopkins on April 29, 2010 1:37pm

cba,

In the 50s and 60s, people did not leave New Haven because of high taxes. They did not leave New Haven because of crime. They left because the city had been steadily aging since before the Great Depression. People and businesses had no money to fix up their properties and manufacturing was done as cheaply as possible with no consideration for the environment. During WW2, the city was too busy producing goods for the war to take care of the massive problems that had built up in the city. Immediately following the war, the federal government acted to avoid falling back into a depression and to address the issues on unhealthy living environments in urban centers, which was were much of the country lived. Their solution was to provide cheap mortgages for the new middle class that was created through a massive suburban construction project (to date, it has been the largest man-made project in the history of the universe). The cheap mortgages persuaded people to move out of their aging city homes into brand new housing in the suburbs. Even people who loved their homes and wanted to fix them up, were not being provided with subsidies or loans so if they wanted a decent standard of living they had to move out. In the 60s, the mass demolition of vacant buildings began in cities, as did the the beginning of massive amount of money being poured into social programs to combat the problems created by the decanting of cities. When the mortgages allowed the well-established families to move out, all that were left in the cities were mostly people who did not have at least 3 generations of stable neighborhoods and families. By the mid 60s crime had risen dramatically and continued to do so into the 90s. If we start from the assumption that the great depression and WW2 were unavoidable, then the problems began following WW2 and with the decisions made at the federal level. Instead of pouring everything we had into suburban construction, we should have provided loans to individuals to fix up their houses, loans to developers to gut and refurbish tenements, loans to businesses to fix up their properties, loans to manufacturing plants to convert some facilities to office space and clean up pollutants or update machinery. Then some money could have been invested in new housing that was connected to the city be efficient mass transit and was organized as little towns instead of suburbs. Crime, poverty, segregation, failing schools, etc would never have happened and our biggest problems would be cracks in sidewalks, and cutting and replanting trees. Instead we send \$400 billion to the middle east each year to support our suburban landscape as well as continue it. We have created environments to make people sick and discourage exercise that would make people healthier. We have build low-density housing over much of our local farmland, which means that we have to import produce from the mid-west or other countries where efficiency is king and the end product is un-nutritious, imitations of real food that make people sick. So healthcare and health-related stuff as a result becomes unaffordable for individuals and for the country.

Where do we start?

We reverse the mistake made after WW2 by addressing the problems at a neighborhood level-a local level. Get rid of the yellow busing system, re-establish neighborhood schools, keep the teachers, have a couple people answering phones, a couple people to look over everything and that's a school. Cut the police force, assign walking beats emanating from the neighborhood-based sub stations with periphery car patrols-that's a police department. Keep firefighting the same. Take all the extra money and pour it into bringing the middle class back to the city, which in just a few years would increase the amount collected in taxes, while dispersing the burden more so individual taxes can be lower. This is accomplished by the measures outlined in anon's post as well as lowering property taxes (or improving neighborhoods to a point that their cost is matched by their value), fixing up old buildings, restoring a local network of commerce along neighborhood thoroughfares, etc. Teachers and police are not a substitute for families and neighbors that are part of a community based on jobs, housing, stores, recreation, and civic assembly space.

I've written too much, yet haven't even begun to say what I want-oh well.

posted by: Tim Holahan on April 29, 2010 2:09pm

Jonathan, that's a convincing historical analysis and some interesting, possibly promising ideas about how things could change.

I hope it's clear to you and everyone else who came to City Hall last night or who's reading this now: nothing is going to change unless you connect your frustration with the state of things with your vote in November.

We have seen remarkable and encouraging change at the Federal level because people got fed up with government that wasn't engaging with our real problems. That can happen here in Connecticut and New Haven,

too, but not without effort and organization.

posted by: Just can't afford more.... on April 29, 2010 3:51pm

Let me start with this: I love New Haven. With the exception of 4 years away at college, I have spent my 60 years as a resident of the city, growing up in Westville and living in Wooster Square when I first got married and moving to the Prospect Hill area in 1984. My property taxes are now in the range of \$25,000 a year (No...this is not a typo - \$25K is the number). When we bought our current home, taxes were around \$6500, and even then, we thought them to be excessive.

We stayed in New Haven when it was decidedly unfashionable, as most of our contemporaries were moving to the suburbs. My wife and I have long held the notion that New Haven needs a vibrant middle class component to its population: Professional people, educators, business owners and managers...who understand that while we may not get a lot of bang for the buck as far as our property taxes are concerned, as long as we can afford to pay, we are helping to sustain a wonderful city.

During the past couple of years, my business had endured some very difficult times and we have responded with some very difficult initiatives to remain viable:

- Reduced employee count (by 1/3rd)
- Reduced hours for hourly employees
- Pay cuts for all salaried employees
- SIGNIFICANT pay cuts for owners (in my case, more than 50%).

We have now pretty much reached the breaking point as far as taxes are concerned. I am now cashing out some of my retirement funds to pay college tuitions and property taxes, and to add another \$3000 or more to our payments is absolutely unconscionable (and not viable).

In our business, we have not had the "luxury" of raising our prices (i.e. taxes) to offset the decrease in revenue. In fact, we have had to lower many of our prices as more competitors were competing for far less business. The fact is that raising property taxes is tantamount to raising prices, and it is time that the city followed the lead of private businesses who have had to endure these horrible economic times and lower overhead, not simply "raise the price" of living here.

There are not easy answers to these very complex issues, but to simply decide to once again place the burden on New Haven's already overburdened taxpayers is simply not a viable solution. I am not alone in my notion that increases like those that have been proposed could, in fact, be the straw that breaks the back of the city's middle and upper middle class.

posted by: notty on April 29, 2010 4:16pm

Tim H you said it best when you mentioned the word that everyone commenting here seems to dismiss, "VOTE" I said this at a public hearing one night and was practically ran out of the building, I told the people in the chambers if you are not happy with your Aldermen, and or Mayor, then the Power is in your vote, so all of you who are unhappy with what is going on in New Haven, start a movement to put the Mayor out in November, and that includes your Aldermen as well if they are not bringing results.

posted by: The Count on April 29, 2010 4:46pm

Good for you, Mr. Shah! Those hooligans who didn't want to hear about Tweed's progress should have been shown the door. Let them vent their wrath at East Haven for 45 years of blocking Tweed's needed improvements to keep up with the changing aviation landscape.

posted by: HewNaven?? on April 29, 2010 5:06pm

Can I add that we need CANDIDATES! It doesn't help that many Alderman ran uncontested in the past.

And, please can we have a VIABLE contender for mayor?

There's a leadership void in the city that is hurting us all, and it stems from the lack of participation on the ward level. Neighborhood leaders (e.g. Ward Co-Chairs) should be nurturing young voters, encouraging participation and essentially building future leaders. My Ward co-chairs, who in theory should be the liaison between citizens and aldermen, do not engage their neighbors on any level.

In my ward I canvassed before the election and was honestly dedicated to the candidates. A lot of us volunteered hours of our time to help, and it worked - they won! However, I haven't heard anything from them since, not even to thank us for helping get them elected!

Have they re-established the ward committee as promised? Nope. Have they made any effort to keep us informed and engaged? Nah.

In 2010, if you're at that level of civic engagement, in a city as big as new haven, you need to figure out how to

interact with your community! I'm not asking you to go door to door or stand on a soapbox, just start a blog, or listserv. Something to keep us in the loop and have some kind of cohesive voice in our neighborhood. No wonder the current administration is able to run all over us, WE ARE DISJOINTED AND UNINFORMED!

Am I being naive? Are the co-chairs and aldermen just shells?

posted by: 85378967873 on April 29, 2010 5:37pm

What the mayor fails to understand is that the only reason most of us live in this provincial town is because it is supposed to be more affordable than a real city. Keep raising our taxes and, as seen last night, we'll transform into rowdy hicks fast!

posted by: cedarhillresident on April 29, 2010 5:46pm

HewNaven??

Can I ask what ward. I tried contacting several Alders because when out there they said there new Alderpeople where no where to be found. It is now that you need to start the push on them. I have 3 off them that have not stood up for there areas as promised and people said they do not inform them as previous alders did. about the issues that are happening. so Please where do you live?

posted by: streever on April 29, 2010 7:11pm

HewNaven,

I can't speak for all ward co-chairs, but I know those of us who are freshmen are somewhat overwhelmed.

We were elected a little over a month ago: built ward committees, handled the legal aspects, and are now preparing to engage our ward committees and start moving on this.

That doesn't defend every ward committee: I know most of them utterly fail at reaching out to constituents or engaging neighbors. Part of that is the difficulty in reaching people, many of whom don't even want to answer the door when we're campaigning or asking them to vote. Of course there are extremely dedicated citizens like yourself, but you are in extremely short supply.

If anyone would like to receive e-mail updates from Ward 10, drop me a line. dls@davidstreever.com I am also building a web site that will allow ANY ward committee the ability to sign up & have a page which lists:

committee members

contact information for ward chairs

meeting dates/locations

events in the ward

city-wide events

and other features as requested

thank you!

posted by: HewNaven?? on April 29, 2010 8:25pm

Streever,

You're absolutely right- it's only been about a month, I should be a little more patient. (I guess I'm pretty anxious to help out). Thank you for being so outgoing. I hope my ward co-chairs will follow suit.

You're also right about the lack of response going door to door. I experienced that when I was canvassing in my ward. I apologize to my co-chairs if the plans are in the works. Just let us know. Give a shout out on the NHI comment board! Let us know you haven't forgotten about us.

posted by: Charlie O'Keefe on April 29, 2010 9:16pm

The teachers are now being assessed and the non performers will be canned. Isn't it time we introduced incentive based pay for the mayor. It would go something like this. If taxes increase at the inflation rate there's no penalty. If taxes go 1% above the inflation rate the mayor takes a 2% pay cut. 2% over inflation a 4% pay cut. 3% over inflation a 6% pay cut. With this years budget he'll probably be paying the city to come to work. Now come on alders. This should be looked at as part of the Charter review process. If teacher performance is being assessed it's only fair and democratic the mayor should have the same treatment

posted by: streever on April 29, 2010 10:11pm

HewNaven:

phew, I'm glad you aren't Ward 10, I was worried we lost someone :) There are so few people like you who put

your time & energy out there, it's terrifying to lose any of you.

Patience is good, but let's be honest a lot of ward chairs don't do the work. They don't estimate what the commitment will be, they find out how political it is, some of them think they are solely there to endorse candidates, etc etc.... ultimately, if they don't speak up, if they aren't reading this article, if they don't reach out, you have every right to call them out and demand they do something. Hopefully your ward chairs will surprise you and put some time & energy into it. At the very least, they probably should have attended the meeting.

The reality is that in all of our wards, we're taking looks at our streets & saying, "This person might leave, that person might leave"... it's not a pretty picture. I can't imagine what we'd do if we lost passionate & committed people like Rebecca or my other neighbors who haven't spoken up yet. They show up at ALL of our events, they put on half the events. Heck, they are the community. They work as hard as us for the same amount of money (zero) and still have jobs and taxes to deal with at the end of the day.

I think City Hall forgets that they are the only people paid to care about this stuff, and even some of them will admit off the record that their is an unhealthy level of BS going down. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark indeed. The same people who can admit that there are awful things going on act offended or hurt by those of us speaking up, like it's some personal slight or insult to them that we're sick of the mayor doing things behind the scenes and without citizen involvement. Sorry, but if I have to choose between those of you at City Hall who don't return calls, who let the status quo keep going while saying "we're trying to fix it trust us" and my neighbors who actually stand up & do the work, I pick my neighbors 100% of the time.

Folks, I have a question for you all.

WHEN IS THE LAST TIME YOU SAW A DEPARTMENT HEAD AT A COMMUNITY EVENT? WHEN IS THE LAST TIME YOU SAW A CITY EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEER?

I know some great people connected to the city who DO volunteer and who DO show up, but they aren't the ones the mayor touts out for this stuff. They aren't the ones who are calling me crazy for standing up to this latest round of bullying and propaganda. Most of these people take money from city coffers—from taxpayers—that they aren't entitled to. They work 15 hours a day, spending part of the time on campaigns for alders.

Guess what? We didn't elect the mayor so he could use tax payer money to hire political canvassers to run campaigns in this city to strengthen his position. That's bull.

If the mayor's office is serious about transparency and cutting costs, they will eliminate ALL POSITIONS DEDICATED TO LOBBYING ALDERMEN. They will let aldermen represent CITIZENS: people who DON'T have money to burn spending 15 hours a day working on aldermanic campaigns and begging aldermen to vote for their idea.

The mayor's office is misusing citizen money to run and support campaigns that support their administration. It's wrong, it's rotten, and it's just one more example of why we need a comprehensive review and reformation of this budget.

posted by: New Havener on April 29, 2010 10:25pm

To "can't afford any more" - I totally agree!! You nor anyone else can't afford any more. ... I'm a New Haven resident and a City worker and we too are in the same boat trying to survive these difficult times, just like you. The Administration has always picked on the "real-workers" for give-backs. During my years with the City, we have given back more than you realize. Many jobs has been eliminated thus forcing the workers to do double the work, and in many cases, without compensation. We've taken pay freezes, etc. And for you to suggest cutting hours from hourly workers, cutting salaries, and whatever else you're rambling off-about, shame on you. If you and/or your spouse work, perhaps your BOSS should cut your hours, your BOSS should cut your pay. What you suggest for others could happen to YOU!!!!

posted by: Darnell on April 29, 2010 11:06pm

Charlie O'Keefe, I love your suggestion of tying the mayor's salary to tax increases.

To all of you anti tax advocates out there, keep it up, don't let down on the pressure until this deal is done.

You have one Alderman who will not accept any raise in taxes this year, 29 more to go.

posted by: streever on April 29, 2010 11:45pm

New Havener:

Most companies HAVE cut pay: they've cut pay or they've mandated furloughs or they've laid off 20%, 30%, 40% of staff.

... Look, I'm sorry the mayor misled you all and then gave raises to his staff. That was rotten. We're against that type of awful abuse of power, and want him to stop doing those things.

I'm sorry. I hope you keep your job—if you are worthy of it—and that you don't suffer as a result of cuts. However, please, be real. Municipal government is not somehow immune to the reality of the economy.

The Mayor has hired back (or given cushy consulting gigs) to almost every employee he has laid off. He's even given raises to his personal staff! So, odds are you will come out of this better than you think, no matter what happens to the rest of the country & the world.

(although, honestly, if you aren't working LOBBYING ALDERMEN I suspect your job is one they should keep. I'm sorry, but city hall workers who have time to twiddle their thumbs, gossip, post snarky facebook garbage about voters, and work campaigns SHOULD NOT BE THERE. They should do what the rest of us do, and VOLUNTEER their time to do that stuff. No one pays me to post facebook comments or to campaign, least of all not the taxpayers. I'd love to see people who spend their days targeting taxpayers with snark & nonsense see a pay cut/furlough days in their future, and I'd ESPECIALLY love to see them stop working on political campaigns for the Mayor's friends. Justin Elicker ran a clean campaign & won 2 to 1—that's a mandate!)

posted by: Just can't afford more on April 30, 2010 8:53am

New Havener.... You misunderstood the intent of my comments. The fact is that I OWN my business and have purposely taken the biggest hit of any of our employees (with the majority of current employees now receiving more compensation than me). I was not suggesting that the way to reduce the budget was to place the burden on the hourly workers, but rather, my opinion that it's time for the city to have to operate within the same types of fiscal constraints that private businesses have to abide by. When we max out our credit line with our bank, we have to find ways to stay solvent - we have no other options. If the city's modus operandi is going to continue to be "we need more money - let's raise taxes," - there will never be an end to the process. What I am suggesting is that if there is a finite dollar amount that the city has available in its budget, it needs to make whatever cuts/adjustments/modifications are necessary in lieu of simply raising taxes.

posted by: taxpayer on April 30, 2010 9:54am

The state of Connecticut has a budget shortfall and they look to reduce spending. The city of New Haven has a budget shortfall and they look to INCREASE THE BUDGET OR SPENDING, INCREASE TAXES TO JUST BELLOW THE BREAKING POINT OF THE TAXPAYER AND TO AVOID BREAKING THE "BACKS" OF THE TAXPAYERS FOR THE NEXT FEW YEARS SELL OFF FUTURE RTEVENUE. The chief elected official or mayor is clearly not connected to the voter

posted by: anon on April 30, 2010 2:34pm

Streever is correct. Considering benefits, public sector employees are now making far more than private sector employees. There desperately needs to be a re-balancing. City employees will need to immediately get used to the idea of doing more work for less compensation.

As others have pointed out, employees of the city generally do not live here and therefore do not care about us. How about using this rebalancing as an opportunity for a new policy that encourages employees to actually live here?

Elicker, Goldson and others have suggested policies like these. Proposals to require folks to live here won't work. A better plan would be an across the board 25% slashing of salaries and benefits (for all employees), combined with a generous home-buyer and rental assistance program, applicable only in city neighborhoods, as well as other incentives (e.g., free college tuition for children of city employees who live in the city). The homebuyer program is used by Yale University, for example, and as a result their employees are twice as likely to live in New Haven as city employees.

This city is going nowhere if 90% of its public safety employees, and the majority of its other employees, live elsewhere.

posted by: The Professor on May 1, 2010 1:09am

Hold on just a minute here. I wasn't going to weigh in on this debate because I haven't had a chance to read NHCAN's proposals yet, but I was a bit taken aback with this line:

"Streever is correct. Considering benefits, public sector employees are now making far more than private sector employees. There desperately needs to be a re-balancing. City employees will need to immediately get used to the idea of doing more work for less compensation."

That is an incredibly incorrect generalization. I don't dispute that SOME city employees are doing less work for far more compensation than similar private sector employees. But that DEFINITELY does NOT extend to all city employees.

Consider public attorneys—I have a relative who is an amazing bankruptcy attorney and who works for a state

attorney general's office. This relative literally brings in tens of millions of dollars per year in settlement money, works between 60 and 80 hours every week, and still makes about 25% less than the average starting salary at large private law firms. If this relative were to become a solo practitioner and take a cut of the settlements, or even billed per hour, this relative could easily make five to six times more. Granted, it would probably involve working longer hours, but even compensation computed on a per-hour-worked basis would be significantly greater.

There are definitely similar people currently working at City Hall. Victor Bolden, the city's corporation counsel, is a great example. I did some research, and he has a stellar resume (and probably some equally stellar connections)—he's an alum of Columbia and Harvard Law School and has worked in private, nonprofit, and government sectors. Even in this awful economy, somebody with his qualifications could probably find a job as an "of counsel" attorney at a law firm that would be willing to pay him significantly more, even on a per-hour basis, than the City of New Haven does. And I'm sure that there are other highly-qualified professionals like him working at City Hall for a fraction of what they could make in the private sector.

That said, I am very sympathetic to the argument that it's bad policy to pay certain unskilled workers a significantly higher level than they would be paid in the private sector. Unfortunately, I get the impression that a significant number of the employees that are earning way more than they would in the private sector are locked into bloated union contracts and therefore can't really be touched. I don't see how the solution to this problem is to make government service even LESS appealing to bright, highly qualified professionals.

posted by: streever on May 1, 2010 11:03am

The Professor:

You're correct that some of them are making lower salaries: I think that's really part of working for municipal government. What gets me is when I look at a serious professional like Mike P., who at a private sector job could be making a good 20k+ more considering his age/experience, and then I look at less qualified and younger city hall employees who make 20k more than him. That to me is just bizarre that we have all these wunderkinds making well above what they'd be worth on the open market at the time of their hire.

These are the same ones who were OK with the off-the-budget raises last year, at a time when employees in the private sector were taking pay cuts, furlough days, and being laid off.

The City employees really haven't had to sacrifice. If you worked John's campaign, you're set, solid, it's all OK. If you're a highly trained professional with years of experience, that's OK, you can make less than the mayor's wunderkind, especially if you're not willing to work campaigns & be a political hack who drinks the kool-aid. But that has nothing to do with the economy, and everything to do with the political patronage system that John seems to operate.
