



**COMMON COUNCIL
MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT**

**SPECIAL MEETING
PUBLIC HEARING FY 2023-2024 BUDGET
TUESDAY, APRIL 18, 2023
6:00 PM**

MINUTES

A Special Meeting of the Common Council of the City of Middletown, the Public hearing on the proposed FY 2023-2024 budget, was held on Tuesday, April 18, 2023, beginning at 6:00 PM. This meeting was a hybrid meeting with in-person participation in the Common Council Chamber and remote access via WebEx. The meeting was also simultaneously livestreamed on local cable access television, on the City's webpage, and on the City's Facebook page.

Present:

Councilwoman Jeanette Blackwell	Councilman Anthony Mangiafico
Councilman Grady Faulkner, Jr.	Councilman Michael A. Marino
Councilman Darnell Ford	Councilman Edward McKeon
Councilman Anthony Gennaro, Sr.	Councilwoman Philip Pessina
Councilman Vincent Loffredo	Councilwoman Linda Salafia

Hon. Benjamin Florsheim, Mayor
Linda Reed, Clerk of the Common Council
Officer Thomas, Middletown Police - Sergeant-at-Arms

Absent:

Councilwoman Meghan Carta
Daniel Ryan, Esq. – Corporation Counsel

Public: in-person: 8 WebEx: 0 Facebook: 3

Staff: Ramona Burkey, Director - Russel Library

1. Call to Order

Deputy Mayor, Councilman Vincent Loffredo, is Chair of this Special Meeting. The Chair calls the meeting to order at 6:02 PM. He welcomes everyone to the Special Meeting of the Common Council, the public hearing on the proposed FY2023-2024 City budgets.

A. Pledge of Allegiance

The Chair asks Councilman Philip Pessina to lead the Pledge of Allegiance

B. Council Clerk Reads the Call of the Meeting and Mayor declares call a legal call and meeting a legal meeting

The Clerk of the Common Council reads the Call of the Meeting and the Chair declares the call a legal call and the meeting a legal meeting.

2. Public Hearing on FY 2023-2023 Proposed Budget – Opens

The Chair opens the public hearing at 6:06 PM, noting that public comment is limited to the proposed bond ordinance. A separate public hearing will be held for all other agenda items. Any member of the public looking to speak may do so. Each speaker will have a maximum of five (5) minutes to speak. For those in the Chamber, members of the public may come to the podium. Those participating remotely may use the WebEx hand raise function to alert that Chair that they wish to speak. The Chair will alternate between speakers in the Chamber and remote speakers during the course of this public hearing. Each speaker will have a maximum of five (5) minutes to speak. Speakers are asked to state their name and address for the record. The public hearing is limited to 30 minutes. If, at that time, there are additional speakers, the Council may vote to extend the public hearing portion of the meeting.

Wendy Berling (2 Miles Avenue): She has been using Russell Library for 52 years. She has been a member of the Friends of Russell since its founding in 1983 as well as a member of the Board of Trustees for 12 years. She congratulates the Council for providing the library with competitively compensated staff. Everyone she knows praises the energy and creativity of Russel staff and the innovative programs that they have, spurred on

by the pandemic and continuing at a rapid pace as Covid cases diminish. Some examples are jobs program, Lawyers in Libraries, new equipment for digitizing film, VHS, and photos, an adult summer reading program, the successful outdoor library scavenger hunts held last summer, an echo story hour at Crystal Lake and the farmers' market. However, the staff is asked every year to do more with less. Funding for books, supplies, durable equipment, and repairs has declined drastically over the past 15 years. Friends have spoken to her about going to the Wallingford Public Library, saying that they have a better selection of books available. If books and downloadables are not available on the shelves or electronically, patrons cannot check them out. Over the years, she has noticed more and more vacant spots in the stacks. For many, the holes cannot be filled with digital materials, which are costly and not available to those who lack the appropriate device. Yet, the library must accommodate those borrowers and purchase the same book in paper and digital form. The average amount spent by Connecticut libraries, per capita, per City population is just over \$5. At Russell, that amount is just under \$5 and has declined in today's dollars from close to \$9 per capita 15 years ago. She opines that they want Middletown's public library to be above average in every way. She urges the Common Council to approve the 5% increase in the Russell Library operating budget. Thank you.

Gregory Harris (161 Ridgewood Road): He is a member of the Russell Library Board of Trustees. He came to town in 1977, at the invitation of John Pickett Jr., to work at Dizallo, Pickett, & Allen. His co-worker, Eleanor Paris, spouse of Paul Parisi, encouraged him to become involved with Russell Library where she was a trustee. After some time, he became Chair when Stan Porter was the library director. The place needed renovations, so there was a referendum for the funds. Unfortunately, that was 40 years ago but it feels like yesterday that they had a splendidly renovated brownstone setup to give service. It is 40 years older, noting that the question of facilities is separate. Apart from the brick and mortar of the facility, the library has always been committed, not only to having books on shelves, but to service to the community, especially to the underserved members of the community. From literacy volunteers to helping people do their resumes, figure out how to interview for job, to the things going on today, the lawyers in Libraries for legal advice for a free consultation with a lawyer where they think they need legal advice. The devotion to young adults at the library and the selection and spaces and events is commendable and important to the City. His point is, when the Common Council considers increasing the budget just a little bit – 5% -- adding that he knows that is a lot of money, but given that the budget has been frozen for a number of years, he does not think is unreasonable. When the Council makes this decision, along with all of the other difficult decisions that they have to make, he asks that they keep in mind that Russell Library serves some of the neediest people in Middletown and make that decisions accordingly.

Jennifer Hadley (418 Pine Street): She is speaking in support of Russell Library. She is a long-time user, since she arrived in Middletown many years ago. She has served on the Board for many years. Her fellow trustees have given the Council lots of details about the library. She will be brief, asking that the Council please support the library increase – the small increase – in resources that they are asking for in support of the community. It is so important to have up-to-date resources for the people, who need it and for people throughout the community all levels, all backgrounds, all ages. It is important to have these resources available as well as the programs. It is important for a thriving community to have these resources available to everyone and to have a central place where people can go to have questions answered, to have help in economic and legal and resources. Thank you.

Steven Nelson (Newfield Street): he has been on the Russell Library Board for many years. It is important to recognize that a public library is the last bastion of democracy in society in any town. That is because it is free and it holds and gives to anyone free information, free access to help like searching for a job, looking for different things even a book report. It is the place to go to get things that you need to know. It is important that a 5% increase, compared to what inflation has done over the years, is in order to keep this piece of democracy going in our town.

Tracy Halstead (27 Berlin Street): She has been a City resident for about 29 years. She asks to read the following letter into the record. She thanks also thanks the Mayor for considering a budget change to reduce the mill rate from the current 35.7 mills to 28.3 mills in the new fiscal year.

Dear Eugene Nocera and Members of the Common Council, City of Middletown:

I am writing on behalf of residential property owners in Middletown who will be adversely affected by the recent dramatic rise in their 2022 home revaluations, as evidenced by the notices we received in November, 2022. I do not take issue with my home's revaluation from \$208,120 to \$310,550. I realize there was an appeal process for the assessment itself. The home's new value does not seem unreasonable to me. However, I would like to call your attention to the strain on household budgets that will inevitably occur if Middletown retains its high mill rate of 35.7 mills in light of the remarkable and sudden increase in the value of our homes (in my case, nearly 50 percent!). With a mill rate remaining at 35.7, my new taxes would be \$11,087 per year, an increase of \$3,657 per year from their current rate, or an extra \$305 per month.

According to Cassandra Day's 12/08/2022 Middletown Press article, "Middletown Property Values Rise After the Latest Reval: How Taxes Will Be Affected," Tax Assessor Damon Braasch noted that property owners should "not attempt to estimate their 2023-24 tax bill using the new assessment and current rate, as they will overestimate the taxes they owe." Yet when this article was written, the new tax rate was entirely unknown: "You can come up with a number," Mr. Braasch said, "but the number is just as fictional as anything. Whatever mill rate you wish to apply is just grabbing a number out of the air."

I am appealing to our town council members and to Mayor Florsheim to consider thoughtfully the implications of keeping the mill rate high. Even at its 2017 level of 32.7, homeowners like me with a dramatic rise in property value would still pay \$10,155 per year in taxes, a \$2,725 increase from what we pay now, or an extra \$227

more each month. When expenses like this are combined with the rising costs of food, fuel and utilities due to inflation, the strain on household budgets is stark. Please remember that our homes were revalued at the peak of the market in 2022.

I realize that important capital projects, such as the revitalization of our riverfront, are substantial considerations in determining Middletown's new budget. As an educator myself, I am a lifelong friend of the public school system and I realize that is an area of need. However, please do consider the implications of Middletown residents needing to vacate the city or compromise quality of life because of these potentially exorbitant property tax increases. Residents on fixed incomes and young families will be especially vulnerable. Potential homebuyers may shy away from Middletown if property taxes are unsustainable for household budgets.

I have lived in my home since 1998. My late husband was able to make many improvements until his death in 2014. Since then, I have maintained the home on an educator's salary, making improvements slowly through time and on a budget (a new roof installation in 2021 was actually the result of a warranty claim due to faulty initial installation, yet it potentially balloons my tax liability). If the mill rate remains at a high level, many Middletown residents will strain under the new tax burden.

Please take these issues under consideration as you determine the new budget for the city of Middletown for the 2023-2024 fiscal year. I am happy to answer any questions you may have regarding my perspective on these issues.

Sincerely,

Tracy Hallstead
Assistant Director, Peer Education
The Learning Commons, ABL N-125
Quinnipiac University
Work: 203-582-5242
Cell: 860-759-9982

Gail Thomson Allen (retired - Russell Library staff): Per the Chair's instructions, the Clerk of the Common Council reads a letter into the record, as requested by the author. The reading is abridged to adhere to the 5-minute allowance. The full text of the letter and supplementary data state:

Dear Mayor Florsheim and Members of the Common Council,

I spoke to you at last year's budget hearing concerning the Russell Library budget. At that time, I spoke up, hoping to make you and the public aware of the large disparity between the total administrative salaries budget and the total materials budget.

I factually reported that the 6 administrative salaried positions totaled \$672,000 and the total materials budget was \$225,000. This translates to approximately 21% of the total budget for administrative salaries and 6.89% going to all materials.

I also correctly stated that most libraries the size of Russell list 3 administrative positions. Russell Library has two assistant directors, which is not the norm for a medium-sized library like Russell. I also researched salaries of administrators in comparable towns and found that Russell's administrative salaries were significantly higher. Russell Library's administration includes a Director, two Assistant Directors, a Head of Finance, a Head of Facilities, and an Executive Assistant. Most public libraries of a comparable size list the administration as a director, assistant director and an executive assistant, a total of 3 administrative positions. This information is available to the public in the CT State Library's annual statistical report and City of Middletown CT website.

After I spoke at the budget hearing, I received a "cease and desist" letter from an attorney representing the Library Board and the Library Director, demanding that I retract the "false and defamatory" statements that I made in the same public forum in which they were presented and that I "cease and desist" speaking in public about the Library. The Union President, who also presented at the budget hearing received a similar threatening letter.

I hired a lawyer who responded to the Library with a letter that I shared with you last year. I am citing this below to remind you of the seriousness of this issue.

III. The Role of a Public Library in Safeguarding First Amendment Rights

The Russell Library tried to intimidate my client, sought to punish her for engaging in constitutionally protected criticism of the Library's operations in a public forum, and attempted to discourage future speech by threatening her financial security. The Library's conduct is a stunning departure from the historic role of public libraries as bastions of intellectual freedom and open debate. One would think a library would have the institutional wisdom to recognize that the First Amendment, on which it would rely to protect against book burning, also protects citizens from government censors seeking to silence their critics.

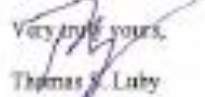
The fact that the Library chose to threaten the financial security of a recently retired long-time employee, in order to prevent criticism that made it uncomfortable, suggests there are profound internal issues which the Library needs to address.

IV. Conclusion

For the reasons set forth above, your letter of April 29 constitutes a baseless effort to chill public debate by threatening my client with economic loss. Ms. Thompson-Allen's presentation before the Common Council was a model of civic involvement and constructive criticism. Based upon in her testimony and the similar testimony of others, the Common Council subsequently considered a resolution for further study of the proposed library budget for 2022-2023. A copy of the resolution is attached as Exhibit D. The vote was 4 in favor and 6 against. Although the resolution did not pass, the closeness of the vote indicates her testimony clearly made a positive contribution to the council's deliberations. To claim her testimony "violates Connecticut law," was "maliciously false and defamatory", and exposed her to "significant compensatory and punitive damages" was a profound error and abuse of authority.

The question becomes: Where do we go from here? I suggest the honorable thing is for the Director and the Library board to apologize to Ms. Thompson-Allen and confirm that my client will not be sued.³

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Very truly yours,

 Thomas S. Luby

³ If you do decide to bring suit against my client, it will be regarded as a SLAPP suit (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation). "SLAPP suits are brought to obtain an economic advantage over the defendant, not to vindicate a legal cognizable right of the plaintiff. A SLAPP suit . . . is typically filed to delay and to punish activists by imposing litigation costs on them for exercising their constitutional right to speak and petition the government for redress of grievances, rather than to prevail on the suit. *Wilson v. Superior Court*, 27 Cal App. 4th 809, 826 (1994), quoted in *Piscatore v. Town of Somers*, 393 F. Supp. 2d 187, 198 (N.D. Conn. 2005). If you do bring suit against my client, please be advised that my client will regard your suit as a SLAPP suit and seek early dismissal of the action and recovery of attorney fees from your clients as provided by C.G.S. §52-190a.

The Library's Attorney's response was simple:

From: "Michael J. Spagnola" <MSpagnola@fordharrison.com>
Date: June 2, 2022 at 6:09:26 PM EDT
To: Irls Torres <IT@lubyolson.com>
Cc: Thomas Luby <tsl@lubyolson.com>
Subject: RE: Your Letter of April 29, 2022

Attorney Luby -- suffice it to say, we do not agree with the allegations, insinuations and characterizations of the facts and law in your letter. As to your request for an apology and a statement that we will not pursue legal action against Ms. Thompson-Allen, we will do neither.

Thank you.

To this day, I am still living under the threat of being sued by the Library and the Library Director.

In the 2024 budget cycle, there are 6 administrative positions totaling \$706,679, which is 21% of the total operating budget of \$3,397,564. The increase is \$34,679 from FY 2023 budget to FY 2024 budget. The materials budget for fiscal year 2024 is \$252,555 which comes to 7.4% of the total budget, an increase totaling \$27,555.

While Russell's library director makes a considerably higher salary than do her peers at comparable libraries, it is important to look at other positions within the city to see what might be an equivalent position.

One possibility might be an elementary school principal. In FY 2024 the library director will make \$182,293. The highest pay for 2 of 8 elementary school principals for FY 2024 is \$156,520, all others make \$154,520. There are no assistant principals at the elementary schools. By contrast the Russell Library Director has two assistants, each making \$135,714. From what I can ascertain, elementary school principals have only a secretary and a building superintendent as support. The Russell Library administration oversees 39 employees, whereas the staff numbers at the elementary schools range from 60 to 107. These principals are also responsible

for their students which range from 332 students at Snow School to 209 at McDonough.

One of the primary responsibilities for any library director is the development of a budget. It is surprising that an experienced library director would neglect to factor wage increases into the budget. The Director came to the Common Council in February 2023 asking for an additional appropriation of \$96,177 to cover union wage increases retroactive to July 1, 2022 in the new Russell Library Employee Union Contract. The Director should have anticipated and budgeted for the increases that would be necessitated with the new contract. This budget item could be easily ascertained as the contractual increases in the past have mirrored the City's 466 contract.

The taxpayers of Middletown love their library and as long as they can find the materials they need, can bring their kids to story time, attend programs and more, they are none the wiser. However, they count on their elected officials to see that their tax dollars are spent wisely.

My goals in writing to you are two-fold. I would like the threat of being sued by the Library removed. And secondly, as a long time employee who still cares deeply about the staff and the community, I find it distressing as to how the resources are being expended at the Russell Library, and would like to see that remedied.

Respectfully,

Gail Thompson-Allen
Former 40-year Russell Library Employee.

Library/Town	Population	Total Exp. Salaries	% of Budget Salaries	% of Budget Materials
East Hartford	50,731	\$919,215	75.3%	7.8%
Enfield	42,031	\$1,156,247	66%	8.6%
Groton	38,456	\$1,243,713	76.8%	8.5%
Hamden	60,923	\$1,781,477	79.9%	9.4%
Manchester	59,426	\$1,956,233	59.7%	10.6%
Meriden	60,517	\$1,312,066	63.5%	7.9%
Milford	52,390	\$948,379	52.5%	9.2%
Norwich	40,014	\$827,046	64.8%	3.8%
Shelton	41,474	\$850,754	77.1%	13.3%
Southington	43,500	\$1,157,369	55.8%	6.2%
Stratford	52,268	\$2,037,268	57.1%	8.5%
Wallingford	44,194	\$1,721,402	54.4%	8.2%
West Haven	55,294	\$842,878	55.6%	9.4%
Middletown	47,108	\$2,707,789	80.2%	6.7%

Town	Population	Director's Salary	Asst. Director's Salary	Total Admin Staff	Total Staff	Total Phys Items Circ
Manchester	59,426	\$107,347	\$69,595	3	65	534,090
Middletown	47,108	\$154,560	\$129,253	6	50	187,076

Library/Town	Population	Director Salary	Assistant Director
East Hartford	50,731	\$115,003	\$107,494
Groton	38,456	\$98,924	\$91,436
Hamden	60,923	\$99,996	\$81,646
Manchester	59,426	\$107,347	\$69,595
Meriden	60,517	\$115,169	NA

Library/Town	Population	Director Salary	Assistant Director
Milford	52,390	\$112,242	\$78,877
Norwich	40,014	\$92,963	\$61,869
Shelton	41,474	\$82,173	\$75,530
Southington	43,500	\$100,627	\$80,735
Stratford	52,268	\$104,704	\$94,603
Wallingford	44,194	\$127,783	\$93,483
West Haven	55,294	\$84,961	\$72,423
Middletown	47,108	\$154,564	\$129,251

SOURCE: Connecticut State Library, Hartford CT, *Connecticut's Public Libraries: A Statistical Profile* (2023).

The Chair asks the Clerk of the Common Couicl if there is any more correspondence. The Clerk replies, "No," adding that there are no other remote speakers online and no other correspondence.

Brandie Doyle (Assistant Director for Administrative Services, Russell Library) She thanks the Council for the opportunity to reply, in part to this letter, that was just read and to supple more context.

The Chair asks the speaker if she is a resident. She is not a City resident, adding that the letter just read into the record is not from a City resident either. She states that she has worked at the library for 12 years and continues to work there. She commends the City. Many libraries in Connect and across the country do not compensate staff in a way that is commensurate with qualifications required and responsibilities involved in the positions, Not only do they uphold a democratic institution that is fundamental to societal order, they also manage the building ad staff,. She reiterates that she has worked at the library for 12 years. For a brief period in spring 2018, she was interim direct during the 2nd period on transition in a few year. She stood at the podium to defend the full-time salaries lines. She was told by then-Councilman Gerald Daley that the library needed to get their budget in order, the suggestion was that there were too many staff at the library. Well, having heard this directive from their funders at that time, they took it seriously. When Ramona Burkey came as the new library director, knowing that directive had been given, they took steps to get that under control. Namely, they instituted centralized, standardized scheduling, which most of you, who have ever worked, is a fundamental of employment, They set the expectation that staff would come to work when scheduled to work and that they would keep a set schedule. Some staff did not appreciate this change when they were allowed to come to work when they wanted to come to work and leave when they wanted to leave. They recognized that it was not good stewardship of taxpayer dollars the implemented the change despite the impact on staff chi created discontent. It also allowed them to shrink staff from a high of 88 individuals to less than 50. This brings them into closer alignment with tier peers across the State. It is the hard work that an administrator does. Some organizations require more administration than others do because, for instance, you have a quasi-structure, which is running 2 to 3 organizations under the guise of one. These changes made some staff unhappy. It allowed the library to absorb the loss of two full-time clerk positions in the upcoming FY24 budget. They also embarked on cross training of all staff. Rather than each individual working only one public service point, most now work several. These are the hard decisions and hard changes that administrators have to make. We made these changes over 5 years to try to minimize the impact as much as possible, but it did cause discontent among staff, who were used to the library being run in a very different way. She feels that she is pushing her 5 minutes, adding that she is not comfortable in front of a microphone. She points out that her voice is aquiver. She leaves it at that. She encourages the Common Council to look at their budget over the past 5 years, and they will see a dramatic decrease in the part-time salary line, the fulltime salaries are negotiated by contract, and they follow 466 so they don't get a choice in that matter. The same is true for administrative positions: they have no say in the raises that they receive as executive non-bargaining.

5. Public Hearing Closes

There being no further public comment, the Chair closes the public hearing at 6:32 PM and calls for a motion to adjourn.

6. Meeting adjourned

Councilman Edward McKeon moves to adjourn. Councilman Philip Pessina seconds the motion.

There being no discussion, the Chair calls for a voice vote. The proposed resolution is approved unanimously by a vote of 11 to 0. (AYE: Councilmembers Blackwell, Faulkner, Ford, Gennaro, Loffredo, Mangiafico, Marino, McKeon, Nocera, Pessina, and Salafia; ABSENT: Councilwoman Carta). The matter is approved.

The meeting is adjourned a 6:33 PM.

ATTEST:
LINDA S.K. REED,
COMMON COUNCIL CLERK

K: review/ minutes/ 2023 April 18 – special meeting – public hearing FY23-24 budget – 18 April 2023