



**SPECIAL MEETING OF THE COMMON COUNCIL
MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT**

PUBLIC HEARING ON FY 2021-2022 BUDGET

**THURSDAY, APRIL 22, 2021
6:00 PM**

MINUTES

The Special Meeting of the Common Council of the City of Middletown was held live in the Common Council Chamber, remotely via WebEx, and livestreamed on the City of Middletown's Facebook page on Thursday, April 22, 2021.

Present:

Councilwoman Meghan Carta	Councilman Anthony Mangiafico
Councilman Grady Faulkner, Jr.	Councilman Edward McKeon
Councilman Edward Ford, Jr.	Councilman Eugene Nocera
Councilman Anthony Gennaro, Sr.	Councilman Philip Pessina
Councilman Vincent Loffredo	Councilwoman Linda Salafia

Mayor Benjamin D. Florsheim, Chair
Linda Reed, Clerk of the Common Council

Absent; Councilwoman Janette Blackwell; Councilman Darnell Ford

Members of the Public: WebEx (10) and Facebook livestream (unknown number of viewers)

1. Call to Order & Pledge of Allegiance

Mayor Benjamin Florsheim calls the meeting to order at 6:02 PM. He welcomes everyone to the Special Meeting of the Common Council, the public hearing for the FY2021-2022 budget. The Chair asks Councilman Philip Pessina to lead the Common Council in the Pledge of Allegiance.

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.

The Chair thanks everyone for attending this evening. He thanks the Council for their work at the recent budget workshops. He has been watching and the discussion has been informative. They will be working over the next few weeks – the Executive Branch and the Legislative Branch – to come to a final budget product. The budget adoption meeting will be on Monday, June 14th, held both live in the Chamber and virtually via WebEx. Between now and that time, there are still issues to reconcile with this budget. They just received news for the State Legislature's Appropriation Committee. They hope that the State budget will pass with an increase in PILOT money for Middletown, which will have an impact on the bottom line as well as factors like the American Rescue Act funding. This is additional money that the City will be receiving. Over the next few weeks, they will take the feedback that came during the budget meetings and the feedback that will be offered tonight to heat and work on crafting a final document to vote on at the June 14th meeting. They are gratified for all the participating that there has been. He thanks everyone for being here.

2. Public Hearing Opens -- FY 2021-2022 City of Middletown Budget

The Chair opens the public hearing at 6:05 PM. The Chair notes that there appears to be only one (1) speaker in the Chamber. After that person speaks, they will call on remote speakers.

Bryan Skowera (15 Peck Road): Although I am an employee of the City of Middletown, tonight, I am speaking as a private citizen, a Company-elected member of the Russell Library's Board of Trustees and chair of the Library's Governance Committee. During last Thursday's budget presentations, the Library Director, Ramona Burkey, enumerated the library's successes during this past year of COVID-19. Rather than repeat her comprehensive report verbatim, I want to highlight the accomplishments near to my heart. Despite being closed for in-person programming, Russell Library developed nationally recognized online programming for all ages. They have continued to offer workshops that benefit our community – just this morning, the Library hosted a virtual job fair and skill building workshop, attended by my own friends who have lost their jobs and livelihoods due to the pandemic. Although health concerns closed the Library for in-person browsing, Russell Library staff quickly developed processes to get books, magazines, music, and movies into the hands of Middletown families who sought education and entertainment during the pandemic-inflicted isolation. The pandemic also drove us to implement touchless self-checkout, which has tangible benefits well after the crisis subsides. Russell Library's leadership and staff understand that their goal is to be open and welcoming to all members of our community. To that end, the Library has had ongoing discussions with the community to

develop anti-racism policies and incorporate inclusivity into our strategic vision. Discussion and policy documents alone are meaningless without actual changes to long standing business processes. As an example, Russell Library eliminated fines – while a nominal revenue stream, fines ultimately deter teenagers and families from using library services and drive away patrons who could most benefit from our programs. In the past week, Russell Library was the only secular organization to host Griffin Health's no-appointment vaccination clinic, providing a centrally located, vital health resource to those who lacked the means to navigate the state's online vaccination scheduling system or the transportation to reach distant vaccination sites. I highlight these accomplishments to confirm what we already know in our hearts – the Russell Library is a community center dedicated to the betterment of every Middletown resident. Therefore, I ask the Council not only to support the proposed Russell Library budget but to increase it. This year, like those before it, the Russell Library was asked to propose a flat budget. After years of pursuing cost efficiencies – such as cross-training employees and changing schedules to maximize coverage while minimizing staff costs – flat budgets represent budget cuts. Russell Library has new and increasing financial obligations, such as for the hygienic touchless check out systems. The proposed budget removed funding for four areas to make this a flat budget possible:

- Audio/Visual materials for all collections
- Public access to online materials like research databases and digital publications Facilities maintenance
- Technology maintenance and equipment replacement

These reductions have implications in the here and now for our community.

- Cutting audio/visual and online material development deprives Middletown residents of educational opportunities and cultural enrichment.
- Cutting facilities and technology maintenance will result in unexpected appropriations throughout the year, reduced ability to serve the public in-person, and ultimately increased budget requests in future years.

The residents of Middletown would be better served by an amended budget that:

- Increasing the General Repairs and Maintenance line by \$8000;
- Increasing the technology equipment maintenance line by \$5000
- Investing an additional \$10,000 in material acquisition
- Adding \$5,000 to general administrative expenses to maintain program development;
- Adding \$5,000 to the network maintenance line to allow the Library to move existing, outdated technologies to a more stable cloud model

These additions, totaling \$33,000 represent a one point zero two percent (1.02%) increase over the proposed flat budget, but will empower the Russell Library to better serve our community and to plan responsibly to avoid unexpected financial burdens. Before I end, I want to thank you all, not only for your support of Russell Library, but for your continued service on behalf of our City. In a year that has revealed problems within many governing bodies throughout the world, Middletown's Common Council has consistently fought for the well-being of this City and its citizens, and for that I am truly grateful.

The Chair takes a point of personal privilege to thank Bryan Skowera as Director of Information Systems, getting the equipment set up and making this all possible during this pandemic.

Kellin Atherton (16 Bayberry Lane): He triples down on the testimony of his colleague Bryan Skowera on the Russell Library Board, What the previous speaker has said with eloquence is all that he wants to say. He wants to encourage the City to continue its support of Russell Library. He triples down on the three (3) points that Mr. Skowera stated: the conversion of the system, which will allow for touchless checkout and makes the more efficient and a 21st century system. The curbside pickup has been excellent support the community. It touches on the core value of the strategic plan: "Do Connect." (*Inaudible*) has allowed them to do that. An underrated service is that the library supports is job creation. As many know (*inaudible*). Similar to education systems, for every dollar added to the library, you get \$7 out of that kind of institution. (*Inaudible*) The library is a job creator and it is extraordinary and encourages the added financial support to the library. For this City. (*inaudible*). He doubles down on (*inaudible*). The second reason for his call tonight is the possibility to expand how Council and the City will fund through this process the recruitment for the City. When we talk about equity, there are structural steps that we can take to make a difference. He believes that the recruitment step is something that we can change. Many ways of managing personnel can be reactive, if we were to put into place a role for new hires and promotions someone, who can take a role a find a way to recruit a more diverse workforce and a pool of folk who can support the City and this community. He thinks it would be prudent and speaks to the core values that so many of us, so many residents, want to see in our City. He wanted to take a moment (*inaudible*). These are the reasons for his testimony this evening. He thanks the Councilmembers for their services.

Diana Martinez (143 Prospect Street) She thanks the Council for continuing to the hard work of anticipating needs during the global pandemic. The pandemic has raised issues that people have not had to think about before, the ways that social inequalities can be exacerbated by in action or fiscally expedient decisions or alleviated by thoughtful decision making that considered the most disenfranchised or those with the most needs, those most at risk. As a community, we are looking at governing with consideration of those at the margins by racism, classism, and other forms of social inequality. She asks that the Council continue n that path and dig deeper. The budget is a reflection of priorities and values. She stresses the importance of continuing the funding of the work of the Anti-Racism Taskforce, which is under the leadership of (Councilman) Darnell Ford and

Sacha Armstrong, creating a plan for what the City needs to do to earn the title anti-racist and get closer to racial equity. Equity does not make itself nor does a taskforce or a solitary department create it for everyone. It takes a lot of work and investing in doing and undoing across the spectrum. In terms of the budget, reallocating money from measures that reactionary – like policing – to measures that are preventative – like mental health support or library support or the work of the taskforce. It can also make it look like we are creating the best possible, most culturally diverse and responsive workforce imaginable. Over and over again, she has heard from people of color, who are highly skilled and experienced, they are consistently passed over for work opportunities sometime to find less qualified candidates, which has happen to know or be related to the right people at the job. The problems they face are structural and exist because we have not closed the gaps where racism seeps in and replicates. She stresses the importance of not just meeting quotas or matching a box when numbers match the census data, but digging beyond tokenism and platitudes and investing in measures that will radially shift the culture at City Hall, making it a space where BIPOC feedings are valued, respaced, and see themselves reflected as patrons, and where BIPOC talent is sought out, hired at all pay levels and positions and not just clustered in lower paying roles where they are valued, supported, properly supervised, and weighted, retained, and advanced. This could be done by ensure in that the HR Department has the resources needed to actively and effectively recruit people of color to join the staff and investing in the communications infrastructure to make sure that highly skilled and talented folks that we have in Middletown know about opportunities open to them, can easily access them, and are clear about the processes to be hired and have a fair shot at them. Thank you a good luck with your deliberation.

Sacha Armstrong Crockett (12 Shirleys Court): She is speaking as a resident and as co-chair of the Anti-Racism Taskforce. As many know, some 150 BIPOC residents, primarily black took part in a dialog about experiences in town. An overwhelming item is the lack of work and lack of representation within the City. It is an overwhelming issue. It so hard to fix this without transparency. Sometimes those roadblocks feel really intentional. Evening following the Affirmative Action Monitoring Committee, on January 28th, the Chair and one of the members, who is also a Taskforce member, spoke about requesting recruitment information from HR so they could assess the process. They requested twice and then – the third time – through the Anti-Racism Taskforce. As of today, they are zero for three (3), adding that his has been going on for months. The Chair of the Affirmative Action Monitoring Committee asked about the City's (*inaudible*) improvement and Miss Jackson had stated that it would be a question to direct to HR. part of her goals, her process, is stating the EEO goals and doing the employment requisition. This creates the standard goals and the paperwork for the request for new hires. Her department could not explain how HR recruits or how broadly they recruit. We could not get that information from HR and they were also not at that meeting or responding to any of these requests. She is bringing this all up to show that there is a disconnect. It seems necessary that we explore reallocating funds towards HR, not just for a recruiter, but for a diversity, equity, and inclusion recruiter, adding that that person can also be dedicated to some repotting responsibilities to these committees that Middletown has created, but created for what? So we have conversations. You are not giving us information to make meaningful changes. She knows there was a recruiter in the past, but that is not enough. We need something done through inequity lens, someone who understands that having LGBTQA resident represented, BIPOC residents represented, people with physical disabilities represented, all needs to be seen in this City. The culture won't change if we don't force it and make departments accountable. That is not happening. We have less than a percentage point in improvement in diversity a year over the past 20 years, so we have had four (4) percent improvement. Other towns like us are doing much better. She thinks it's the system and we need to look at the system, maybe it needs to be dismantled before we start giving money to departments. We need to look at how we can improve it all together.

John Hall (555 Main Street, Portland) He is speaking on the tree maintenance budget, having emailed the Council on this issue. He wants everyone to know that Middleton has a large number of dead trees, which need to be removed. The first group is 120-175. Generally, tree removal costs are very large. This is about a \$250K expense, these are trees along highly travelled roads and post a danger and liability risk to the City. He raises this issue at this budget meeting because the current tree maintenance budget increased tree maintenance and removal. They got \$50K added to this line last year to plant trees. It was fantastic, a great success. Now, with this large number of dead trees, they are very concerned that his whole budget will be exhausted and going over budget with this year's tree removal so het there will be no new planting. They suggest that there two uses be separated into tree maintenance, including a budget allocation this year for the huge cost of removals that are required this year, and removal and pruning from tree planting. Again, that is separating it into the two functions. It would be a good idea to fund this need by another source, perhaps a special appropriation or a bond. After this 175 very large trees there are another 450 trees, which are not so large. He opines that the City is way behind on tree removal. He does not want to see this situation create a setback against the great progress that was made last year with the increased money for tree planting. He represents the Jonas Center for Earth & Art.

4. Public Hearing Closes

There being no additional members of the public looking to speak, the Chair closes the public hearing at 6:27 PM.

5. Meeting adjourned

Councilman Vincent Loffredo moves to adjourn. Councilman Philip Pessina seconds the motion.

There being no discussion, the Chair calls for a voice vote. The motion is approved unanimously by a vote of 10-0 (Councilmembers Carta, Faulkner, E. Ford, Gennaro, Loffredo, Mangiafico, McKeon, Nocera, Pessina, and Salafia; Absent: Councilmembers Blackwell and D. Ford.) The matter is approved

The meeting is adjourned at 6:28 PM.

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

K: review/ minutes/ 21 April 22 – minutes - public hearing FY21-22 budget – 22 April 2021