

**New Hartford Board of Finance
Public Hearing
April 3, 2024 @ 7:00 pm**

Present Chairwoman Kerry Guilfoyle, Members: Dan Charest, Lou Helt, Charlie Neale, Ben Witte, Alternates: Ryan Bingham and Steve Seltzer, Region 7 Supt. of Schools Steve LePage, Region 7 BOE Chair Molly Sexton Read, Region 7 Director of Finance James Gaskins, New Hartford Supt. of Schools Jeff Sousa, New Hartford BOE Chair Tim Klepps, First Selectman Dan Jerram, Executive Assistant Christine Hayward and Recording Secretary Penny Miller.

Absent Camille Buford and Paul LeClair

Call to Order Chairwoman Guilfoyle called the meeting to order at 7:05 pm.

Seating of Alternates Ryan Bingham was seated for Paul LeClair

Opening Remarks Budget Overview FY 24/25

Kerry Guilfoyle, Chairwoman, BOF

Ms. Guilfoyle thanked everyone for coming.

Northwest Regional School District No. 7 Proposed Budget Presentation Molly Sexton Read, Chairwoman BOE and Steven LePage, Superintendent - <https://www.nwr7.com/fs/resource-manager/view/a6ca485a-8f0b-4dae-8d93-8d536ee78749>

Ms. Molly Sexton Read presented the Region 7 previously presented at the Budget Workshop on March 16th - <https://www.newhartfordct.gov/board-of-finance/minutes/board-of-finance-budget-workshop-minutes> . The highlights are as follows. The 2024/2025 budget increase is 3.47% which will result in a 3.78% increase in the assessment to the 4 sending towns. The main budget drivers are within the Special Ed programming as there is an increase in Special Education outplacements. These are students from the 4 sending towns whose needs can't be met at Region 7. In Regular Education there is a significant increase in Medical Benefits. Also, the addition of an Athletic Trainer. The school has been without this person for the last 1-1/2 years. The department level funding increase was held at 0%. Spending was deferred on some school capital needs. A new Ag-Ed teacher request was denied. The biggest actions taken by the Administration is a reduction in 3.5 teaching positions. Chinese language and culture had been offered but because of declining enrollment in the classes and overall declining school enrollment, that program will no longer be offered. Other reductions are: 2 English teachers have left the district and they will not be replaced. A 0.6 High School World Language, 0.4 Middle School (World Language), 0.5 Library Media Specialist replaced with 1.0 Current NWR 7 Social Studies Teacher.

Next year some of the additional courses that will be offered will be the expansion of the Ad-Ed program along with additional Art and Business courses.

One of the budget drivers is the increase in Medical Health Insurance of 10.95% which results in 6.2% in the budget. In the Professional/Technical Services portion the Excess Cost Grant is used to offset some of the budget. The Excess Cost Grant is one they get from the state. When the cost of educating a student in the district is more than 4.5 times their per pupil cost the state is

meant to reimburse Region 7 for all costs above that amount. That grant has never been fully funded. This budget reflects a realistic expectation that they will receive about 71% the amount they are actually due under this grant. They use them as budget offsets and they don't use them as a revenue line.

This budget reflects an additional five outplaced special ed students. That resulted in a 10.70% increase in Other Purchased Services.

Granby, Hartland, Torrington, Canton & Granby students attending Region 7 pay tuition. The total enrollment of 842 students includes the 4-member town students along with tuition paying students, magnet schools and outplacements.

Ms. Sexton Read went over the 2024-2025 Assessment Explanation. She said the budget number reflects an increase budget over budget of 3.47% with a slight decline in revenue and the assessment offset. As a regional school district at the end of the budget year whatever money is left there is designated as our assessment offset and it is returned to the 4 towns as an offset to next year's budget. The net assessment of \$21,904,933 reflects a 3.78% increase. This year New Hartford's increase will be 6.55%.

Public Comment Regarding Northwest Regional 7 Budget, only

Kim Estep, 385 Southeast Road, asked how many special education students are in the district. How many students are more than the \$25,000 per student. Ms. Sexton Read said there are 15 outplaced students that attend other schools. Ms. Estep said what is the total budget for those students. Which towns are they coming from. If New Hartford is responsible for majority of the Region 7 budget are there students from the other towns that New Hartford is paying for. . Ms. Sexton Read replied the philosophy has been that when students arrive at Region 7 they are considered Northwestern students and they are all responsible for them. She also said that she is uncomfortable sharing that information. It's not that many students and those students could become easily identifiable. Ms. Estep asked what was the total budget for the 15 students. Mr. LePage replied it is \$2.37 million and it varies from year to year as to which towns they come from. Ms. Estep asked how much gets sent from the state to offset that cost? Mr. LePage said they are supposed to pay 100% but they don't. This year it is 71%.

Mr. Witte asked with the 15 outplacement students and their transportation has risen to \$629,000 - is that number bid competitively or is it an add-on to the current bus contract. How does it tie into how other things are bid competitively. Mr. LePage said he didn't have that answer now but he will get it. There are many other private, small companies that do van service. The new bus contracts will be coming up next year. Mr. Witte was concerned that it could slip by the radar screen of competitive bidding. Mr. Gaskins said the transportation number isn't just students attending other schools but it includes special ed students coming to Region 7.

New Hartford Public Schools Proposed Budget Presentation - Tim Klepps, Chairman BOE and Jeffrey Sousa, Superintendent - <https://www.newhtfd.org/fs/resource-manager/view/6d2c0afc-c9c5-4c65-bbc9-1423b256c960>

Superintendent Sousa presented the budget which was presented previously at the March 16th Saturday Budget hearing.

Supt. Sousa thanked his administrative team, the BOE members including in attendance Chair Tim Klepps, Vice Chair Tom Buzzi, Board Secretary Penny Miller and BOE member Frank Rodenberg. He said the total increase in the 2024/2025 budget is \$546,480 or 5.8%. Currently negotiations are in process with the Administrative Assistants, Custodians and Paraeducators. One of the large drivers is the insurance. The school is in a large consortium with Brown & Brown and that increase is 10.95%. There is no longer pandemic relief money available. Those monies came in the form of a grant and that grant expires in Sept. 2024. There is an increase of a special education teacher because of the large amount of special education students that moved in. Since March 2023, there has been a 27% increase in the number of students receiving Spec. Ed services. Some of these are new students and others have been in our services since they started school. Because of an increase in caseload, it is proposed to increase the speech language pathologist from 0.6 FTE to 0.8 FTE. The same is true for the occupational therapist an increase from 0.8 to 1.0 FTE. Since 9/2023 the caseload has increased 42% (as of 1/2024).

Any decreases and offsets are \$320,000 in grants. In the Retirement Account with the town the school realized a savings of \$51,000. Special Education is the highest driver along with employee benefits. The proposed Capital Expenditure total is \$128,515.00. Current district enrollment has surpassed last year's projections.

Public Comment Regarding New Hartford Public Schools Budget, only

Kim Estep, 385 Southeast Road, asked about the Talented & Gifted Programs. Mr. Sousa said it is still in its infancy. The curriculum is being developed in alignment with UConn. They are looking to provide opportunities for all students. The identification process that is being revamped. We want to provide enrichment for all the children. Ms. Estep asked about computer programming literacy at these young ages. Mr. Sousa said some of the software is just not keyboarding. The library media specialist is working on STEAM programs and getting the 3D printing up and running. They are working with 3D pens.

Town of New Hartford Proposed Budget Presentation - Daniel Jerram, First Selectman

First Selectman Jerram presented the New Hartford Town Budget for 2024/2025 previously presented at the Budget Workshop on March 16th - <https://www.newhartfordct.gov/board-of-finance/minutes/board-of-finance-budget-workshop-minutes> .

First Selectman Jerram gave a brief overview of where things stand "today" with respect to the budget. He stated that the audit for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2023 was completed and there were no findings. This means that what we are doing in bookkeeping/accounting is compliant with state regulations. The fiscal year 2023 -2024 has no surprises. The general fund has experienced growth due to the interest rates the town is receiving. The Board of Finance is considering using some of this surplus to offset expenses for the fiscal year 2023-2024 budget. This is their way of "giving some of this back to the taxpayers." Mr. Jerram stated that revaluation has affected property values and the Board of Finance is trying to mitigate the effects of inflation in a revaluation year.

We are a cash and carry – pay as you town. The next bond expires in a few short years. The Pension Fund is doing well. We are a very conservative town managed town with very little debt. We are benefiting from the high interest rate environment that we are in right now.

Education is a big chunk of our budget. The proposed budget for 2024/2025 is \$29,182,329.01. Mr. Jerram said the increase in General Government is \$227,642.00 or 3.8%. The negotiated increases for town employees is 3.75%. Health care is costing \$70,000. Early voting cost is \$10,000, computer maintenance is \$13,000. Recently early voting happened over 4 days for 8-9 hours and only 51 people voted during that time. In this budget year the state did give us \$10,000 to help defray the cost for early voting.

In Debt Service, one of the bigger accomplishments was we transferred sale of the Water & Sewer asset to Aquarion. We cleared \$8 million and paid off every debt associated with the water & sewer. The water & sewer rates have been reduced.

Public Comment Regarding Town of New Hartford Budget, only

Kim Estep, 385 Southeast Road, said there was nothing in the revenue for old equipment. Mr. Jerram said the old equipment is sold on GovDeals. Those sales come in as Other Income. Ms. Estep asked why don't you borrow money instead of paying for the new equipment out of the taxes. Mr. Jerram replied that bonding initiatives cost money. To do a debt you have minimum thresholds. It's not worth it to bond small amounts.

Steve Unger, 706 West Hill Road, said if he understood correctly that if the revaluation was above 25% you might see a tax increase or below 25% you might see a tax decrease. Mr. Jerram replied you have to use Vision website and using the current mill rate, the equalized mill rate and the proposed mill rate to see how it affects you. It can be very uneven.

Steve Bedford, 11 Shaefer Road, asked if Vision is ever going to be transparent on how they do assessments. Mr. Jerram said massive appraisals is different than from one person with an appraisal license. Mr. Bedford said the problem is they are not transparent and they don't explain how they come up with anything. Vision has a monopoly and they do most of New England. What is frustrating is that they do not explain as to how they got to your assessment. Mr. Jerram replied reveals in tract developments in the mid-west are easier than doing a development in a small farming community like New Hartford. Mass appraisal is not individualized appraisal. Mr. Bedford said he wasn't objecting to his assessment but he was objecting to the method of how they got there.

Jeannete Francini, 82 Evergreen Crossing, said she worked as a Director in the Beekley library for over 30 years. She said that last year she paid over \$10,000 in taxes and of which \$40.00 went to fund both libraries. She thinks it is a good return on the money.

Melanie Ollett, 551 Main Street, current Director at the Beekley Library said she has seen the importance that the library plays in New Hartford. There are over 25,000 visits to the library every year.

New Hartford Public Schools Security Grant Presentation New Hartford Safer Schools, FY23 COPS School Violence Prevention Program, Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS)

Supt. of School Jeff Sousa gave a brief update on school security. He said he wants to make sure that our schools are up to date infrastructurally for safety & security. He applied for and received 3 grants – 1 from the Federal Dept. of Justice and 2 from the State of Connecticut. The Federal Department of Justice grant gives the best reimbursement – a 75% reimbursement rate. The State grants offer a 52% reimbursement rate. The grant funding will be used for

replacing the doors, camera technology, glazing film to the windows to prevent someone from getting in easily, radios that give direct communication with 911 & Emergency Services and working panic buttons. He wants to mitigate any threat to our children, the staff and our schools.

The Board of Finance had decided to remove \$157,000 from the BOE Capital Expenditures and to fund it through overages from the General Fund or from ARPA.

Chairperson Guilfoyle said the Board of Finance will discuss how to finance this initiative but it was pulled from the BOE Capital Budget. Because of the cost it will go to the town for approval.

Public Comment Regarding Security Grant, only

Charles Birdsall, 100 Timberline Road, said he is fully supportive of hardening our schools. He said when he and his wife went to the security meetings at Antolini School, they were able to walk into the school unchallenged. He said that just having a uniform can get you into most anywhere. When he trained people to make deliveries to Antolini, you only had to ring the doorbell and the office person seeing the uniform just let them walk in. His suggestion would be to install another wall after the 2 initial doors. This would prevent anyone from accessing the hallways. Supt. Sousa there are mantraps at all 3 schools.

Mr. Jerram at the annual town meeting there may be another question and a request for funding. Usually, the town budget meeting adjourns to referendum. A town meeting then follows for smaller initiatives and/or ordinance reform.

Meeting ended at 9:45 pm.

Respectfully submitted, Penny Miller, Recording Secretary
No attachments