

Roxanne Maher

From: Chris Jelden <chrisjelden@gmail.com>
Sent: Sunday, May 25, 2025 8:35 AM
To: council@ledyard.org; Town Council Group
Subject: Comments and follow up from 5/21 Finance Committee Meeting

Hello,

I write today after attending the Finance Committee meeting that took place on Wednesday, May 21st, the day after the failed referendum vote.

I spoke at that meeting, and I'll try not to simply repeat myself, as my thoughts on the failure of the budget are already on the record. I'll just start by saying that I fully supported the budget as presented to the town at referendum and was greatly disappointed by its failure to pass.

For all the reasons I can imagine why the "No" votes outnumbered the "Yes" votes by such a significant margin, I have to admit that when the vote goes the way it did on Tuesday... changes have to be made.

Sitting in on the meeting and watching the Finance Committee, along with the Mayor, present, discuss, and debate cuts to an already extremely lean budget was difficult at times—but truly impressive. All involved should be proud. Despite that, as a resident who did not want to see significant cuts to the BOE budget, I found myself physically reacting when the final number ... over \$400,000 in decreased spending ... was announced at the end of the three-hour meeting.

So where does that leave us? While I applaud the hard work, tough compromises, and well-intended efforts of all involved in that meeting... I have serious concerns about **where** the money was taken from—and where it wasn't. Two specific things keep coming to mind as I look back at the meeting.

The first was a discussion of optics. In several meetings, arbitrary numbers, either neatly rounded or using that ".99" tactic like retail stores, were set as goalposts. The part of me that has watched the work of our Town Councilors and BOE members over these last few months finds these convenient benchmarks simplistic and frustrating. However, another part of me recognizes that not everyone can spend three hours watching a finance meeting or follow multiple evenings of town business each month. So, I can see how optics come into play when trying to demonstrate sincere effort by the town to cut costs to the busy, overwhelmed citizens of Ledyard. In this case... despite what I wish were true... optics matter as much as the details.

With that in mind, I think the town needs to revisit the optics of double-digit raises for town employees. The arguments made at the Finance Committee for leaving the raises as-is were rooted in the details. It's the same argument I would make about not delaying capital projects at our schools: pushing them off costs the town more in the long run and hurts students and staff. But we, as a town, have decided to take on that pain.

The argument that these raises constitute such a small portion of the budget, that they are essential to retaining valuable personnel and that losing them would cost the town even more if they leave these positions is absolutely valid. It's why I voted for the budget. But it doesn't meet the moment or the optics

the town is actively seeking. Without every resident filling out a line-by-line survey, we'll never know what pushed each "No" voter over the edge. But I think it's reasonable, even if you personally have not heard the comments some of us have regarding these raises, to assume that double-digit raises would strike many residents the wrong way.

For optics, I believe these raises need to be lowered. Not eliminated—but reduced. Seven percent? Five percent? I don't know. One potential option is to match an average of the percentage of cuts applied to the BOE and the town budgets.

Second is the discussion of felt pain. The cuts, as I heard them on Wednesday, are significant. They will make town employees work harder with less. They will make our schools less safe and less productive. They could push dedicated workers to consider employment elsewhere... costing the town more to onboard new personnel. They depend on best-case scenarios (no snow, no broken vehicles). But what they don't do is affect the average Ledyard resident's day-to-day life. And because of that, those residents may not understand how deep the cuts really were.

As a parent, unless my child comes home and gets physically sick again, I won't have a daily reminder of the BOE cuts. The impact is real, but it's hidden. And if you don't have kids, it's entirely off your radar. People may look at this and say, "See, they could've made the budget smaller all along ... I didn't feel anything."

That's my concern. When we hide the cuts in gas costs, janitorial service reductions, and deferred maintenance, it just doesn't resonate. It's like telling my kid they're in trouble for a behavior, but the punishment is secretly pulling money from their college fund—they won't feel it now, but it's still a loss... and in the long run, they WILL feel it.

My first thought was to suggest something like garbage pickup be on the table for cuts. However after talking with another resident, I realized that would disproportionately hurt our most vulnerable neighbors. The same applies to library services or any number of public facing services. I don't have the perfect solution, but if we're going to cut, we need to cut in a way that people feel, even just in some small way. That way, they'll understand what was sacrificed to lower the budget.

There was a lot of talk about the cost of the original budget hurting the most vulnerable here in Ledyard. I just hope that we remember that when we're making cuts to services and capital projects as well.

Again, I greatly appreciate the work of the Finance Committee, the Town Council, the BOE and the Mayor's office. I hope that after your next special meeting, you can come to a bipartisan consensus on a budget to present on June 10th that we can all enthusiastically support and clearly explain to the residents of Ledyard.

Thank you,

Chris Jelden

3 Whalehead Drive, Gales Ferry, CT 06335