

My name is Joanne Kelley and while I am a member of the Ledyard BOE the opinions herein are my own as a resident, parent, and taxpayer of the town of Ledyard for over 40 years.

While I am very disappointed in the failure of the budget referendum last week I am more so greatly disheartened to see some of our elected officials attempt to decimate the Board of Education funding in order to satisfy a seemingly partisan attempt at persuading the residents of our town into thinking the school district is asking for too much from Ledyard taxpayers. A blatantly misleading campaign was waged to manipulate taxpayers into thinking the approved budget would result in drastic increases in taxes for the average homeowner. Examples were provided that would apply to only the smallest percentage of very highly assessed homes in our town and no mention was made of the decrease in motor vehicle taxes that will take place simultaneously to offset a portion of these increases. This is my analysis of that propaganda campaign that I shared on social media.

“Today is the day we, the residents of Ledyard, vote on the proposed budget increase. I've seen a lot of scare tactics being used to persuade people to vote against the budget. A graphic is being circulated with the words "largest tax increase in over 20 years" and a chart of property assessed values to make people think their taxes will be impacted on a much higher scale than is accurate. And it's working! At the town meeting last night a resident said no homes are assessed at \$150000 (the low end of the chart) when in fact almost half the homes sold last year in town were assessed at \$150000 or under. Only 8 homes sold last year were assessed at over \$300000. The ratio of assessed value, which is how taxes are computed, to market value is complicated and confusing and those who want the budget to fail are taking advantage of that fact by not providing context to their messaging. If you live in a neighborhood of 300-400k homes your tax assessment is probably 150k to 200k at most! I just noticed that a family I know sold their home in Pheasant Run this past year for well over \$500k and their tax assessment is \$194k.

(update: for the month of March 2025 the sales ratio (assessed value to sale price) is 0.3951 which translates to a home valued at 500k seeing an increase of approximately \$543 a year if this budget passes, homes that have a sales price of \$350,000 will see an increase of \$380 per year.)

FACT: The town of Ledyard always funds the BOE at the lowest level of any town in the area and the lowest 10% of the state of CT. When you run as lean as LPS does it's not easy to keep trimming and going without. It's also not fair to our students and staff. Each year at least 70% of the tax increase is due to contractual obligations and inflationary costs to just keep the doors open. The fact that our increases over the last two years are slightly higher than our normal bare bones budget is that it just simply costs more to provide our students with what they need and we are legally obligated to provide. This is not a Ledyard issue but when you are starting at such a basic, no-frills level as we are there is nowhere left to squeeze without hurting our students, it's that simple.”

This was written before the vote so I wasn't surprised that the vote failed. I was pleasantly surprised to see that, by a visible margin, more voters expressed that the BOE budget is less of an issue for them than the general government side. I am confused and honestly disgusted that the proposed cuts to the BOE budget are so drastic and impactful to our students than the “cuts” to the general government side. As I sat in the meeting I heard that many of the town government side “cuts” will be made to things called “building funds” and “reserve funds” that are based on future needs that may or may not materialize. To the contrary line items on the BOE Operational budget request are to address needs that are not currently being met for our students and any reduction will have a negative impact in real time. Some of the disconnect may be that these are called programmatic “improvements” making them seem more “optional” than they truly are. Additionally, I have not heard any evidence that any of these requests are unnecessary. While it is true that the Town Council may not dictate where cuts are made specifically when a budget fails at referendum it is not true that the elected officials may not express opinions on operational spending line items. That is why multiple budget workshops are held, including joint TC/BOE meetings. Before it was approved earlier this year the BOE voted to reduce the Superintendent's proposed budget by removing several line items, for a total of \$67,000, to keep this year's increase under 6%. This is lower than last year's increase.

In another stunning example of how drastic the impact to our students and staff would be from these cuts, this is the timeline/background on the BoE Capital plan for FY 25/26.

“The Board initially approved a capital request totaling **\$569,000**. The Mayor forwarded **\$504,500** of that request to the Town Council—a reduction of approximately **11%**. The Town Council then reduced the allocation further to **\$374,500**, representing a **34% total reduction** from the original request.

In the most recent round of deliberations, a further **\$260,500** was removed, bringing the final approved allocation to **\$114,000**. This leaves us with just **20%** of our original request and reflects an overall reduction of **\$455,000**, or **80%**. This substantial reduction will necessitate reprioritizing our capital improvement items and deferring several projects previously identified as important to maintaining and upgrading our school facilities. (Source: Superintendent Hartling)”

How is this a responsible decision?

Are we really willing to sacrifice the health, comfort, and safety of our staff and students or the basic quality of their learning environment year after year, also asking them to do without basic services, supports and interventions that other districts provide for an estimated \$4 a month reduction? Keep in mind none of these capital needs are going away, they will still be on the list next year and every year after until they are addressed with ever increasing cost to taxpayers. I am always happy to hear that thanks to our Public Works Department’s diligence (we have a terrific PW Dept in Ledyard, make no mistake) our town roads receive a grade of 87%. Those science labs and classrooms in our aging facilities that get delayed every year would not be graded so highly. Years and years of kicking that can down the road is not fair to our students.

Finally, it has been made public that there are very large salary increases included in the general government side of the budget this year for multiple department heads. How can that be defended after a failed budget referendum? Before any cuts are made to the BOE budget I ask that the Town Council limit any salary increases to no more than 3% for this budget cycle and that we respect what the residents have asked for which is a responsible budget. I believe that means adequately funding our schools and addressing our capital needs in a timely manner to avoid ballooning costs due to delays.

I would also hope that in the future the residents are provided with accurate information on which to base their vote and the misinformation campaign that occurred this year will not be repeated. We can do better than that as a community.

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