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Member, Ledyard Finance Committee
Submitted remarks for 3/27/24 Town Council Meeting to be included in the official record

Remarks with respect to Agenda Item #5:

The community relations committee has done some amazing and impactful work since being implemented by the prior Town Council, engaging the community with various events and promoting recognition of some of the remarkable achievements of our residents.

It is with that notion of admiration that I am confused by and do not support the motion to rename this committee to the "Community Relations Committee for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)".

No matter how you personally feel about DEI initiatives, no one can deny the very phrase has become a political lightning rod, inevitably drawing attention away from whatever it is attached to. This is what causes me concern.

Renaming this committee as such only accomplishes one thing – and that is actually taking attention and focus away from the stated mission, while simultaneously overshadowing any accomplishments the committee has made.

Nothing in the committee's current mission statement necessitates a potentially optically damaging name change, and so the only conclusion one can rationally draw is that it only serves to satisfy what appears to be a politically motivated agenda. I think we can all agree that it is generally unacceptable to politicize any official government function.

I am further concerned that this name change was sent to council without a fully represented vote at the committee level; I can't imagine a committee (or council) considering such a significant change without input from all current committee members, especially one that is a former committee chair.

For the above reasons, I believe the motion should be sent back to committee for additional discussion before being considered by the full council.

Remarks with respect to Agenda Item #6:

I firmly believe that, among the top aspects that attract people and businesses to a particular town - affordability, safety, quality of services, quality of housing and quality of schools figure as some of the most important. I know this rang true for me when I moved here 5 years ago from New London.

Prioritizing all of these aspects, however, becomes a financial balancing act, and responsibly budgeting now allows us to obtain favorable treatment when it's time to bond for larger investments in the town's future.

Sure, budgets could always be more flush, revenues could always be larger, but we need to take a consolidated, Ledyard-centric approach to addressing the real needs of our community, balanced against what the community can afford. That community, our tax payers, fund 70% of the town's revenue and while inflation is often cited as a reason for increased budget demands, we can't forget that these very same tax payers are facing the same inflation in other areas of their lives, and many are without the benefit of mandated contractual salary increases, I might add. They are being forced to choose priorities and make hard decisions in how their finite resources are spent – and the town and school district should be expected to do the same.

It is against this backdrop that we should consider the town budgets put before us. What follows are some salient, high level data points and observations for public awareness:

- The Town's municipal budget, which includes Capital investments for both the town and schools, represents a 1.4% increase over last year's expenditures
- The proposed Board of Ed budget represents a 6.85% increase over last year's expenditures; much like every other municipality, the education budget is the largest driver of overall town expenses - nearly 70% in Ledyard's case.
- The proposed budgets would represent a .65 Mill increase in our Mill Rate, or roughly another $162 a year for a single family home assessed at $250,000. Keep in mind, this budget is subsidized with $1M from the town's Mill Rate Stabilization fund.
- For FY24, Ledyard currently has the 3rd highest Mill Rate in our region, behind only Norwich and New London.[1]
- Ledyard's total grand list value is in the bottom half in the same referenced region, even when taking into account 4% growth from last year. We simply do not have the taxable real property – especially Commercial and Industrial – that would help bring in much needed revenue.

Since the 3/20/24 Finance Committee meeting, I have taken an additional deep dive through both the proposed Board of Education and Municipal Budgets, and have engaged stakeholders for both, asking myriad of questions; to that end, I appreciate the patience of Mayor Allyn, Superintendent Hartling, Board members Joanne Kelley and Anthony Favry, as well as Town Finance Director Matt Bonin, as I developed a deeper understanding of various aspects of both budgets.

Coming out of 3 days of department by department proposed budget reviews, as well as the additional deep dive noted above, I continue to believe the municipal side, at a 1.4% increase, represents the leanest that operational budget could be, with savings taken in many places that helped offset contractual increases in wages and other areas. At the 3/25/24 Special Finance Committee meeting, however, I did vote in favor of funding an additional capital project for the schools in the 2025 budget – the Juliet Long Fire Alarm project, valued at $75,000. Depending on the outcome of some current ARPA projects, there may also be the opportunity to fund that project using leftover ARPA funds.

In regards to the proposed Board of Education operation budget, after careful consideration, I do believe there is the opportunity to obtain some efficiencies ***without affecting current student facing services*****.** To that end, at the 3/25/24 Special Finance Committee Meeting I moved to revise top line education budget figure to $38,170,595 – a 6.3% increase over last year's budget.

Notably, this motion was disappointingly not seconded for discussion by my peers on the Finance committee, effectively suppressing any productive dialogue that could have taken place about how I arrived at that figure, which included funding many of the desired improvements and additional positions that the board of education had requested. I will note that, while less than the Board of Education proposed increase of 6.85%, my proposed increase of 6.3% is still greater than the baseline budget increase of 5.98% originally proposed to the Board of Education. That is further evidence that my proposed figure would have indeed covered basic district needs, as well as some value-added additions.

Since some have made a point of comparing our spending to other districts, I will also note that my proposed increase of 6.3% was significantly greater than budget increases being proposed for surrounding districts like Montville and Stonington, at 4.5% and 4.9%, respectively. In fact, Ledyard has enjoyed a greater cumulative percentage increase than either of those districts over the last three budget cycles – 12.7% for Montville, 14% for Stonington and 15.5% for Ledyard.

We are no doubt in interesting and challenging economic times, and I believe, as a town, we should further prioritize expenses to reflect the financial reality of our tax payers and start to implement some of the recommendations from the Committee to Review the Budget Process Final Report to ensure we are making the most out of every dollar sacrificed by the taxpayer.

[1]https://data.ct.gov/Local-Government/Mill-Rates-for-FY-2014-2025/emyx-j53e