

**CITY OF BRIDGEPORT
JOINT BOE/BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS
SPECIAL MEETING
MARCH 31, 2010**

ATTENDANCE

- Budget and Appropriations:** Robert Curwen, Chair; Angel dePara, Co-Chair; Susan Brannelly, and AmyMarie Vizzo-Paniccia, Carlos Silva
- Board of Education:** Barbara P. Bellinger, President; Leticia Colon, Vice President; Delores Fuller, Secretary; Maria Pereira, Bobby Simmons, Patrick Crossin, Sauda Efia Baraka; Dr. John Ramos, Superintendent of Schools
- City Council Members:** Mayor William Finch, Council President Thomas McCarthy, Council Member Robert Walsh, Council Member Michelle Lyons, Council Member Andre Baker, Council Member Lydia Martinez, Council Member Denise Taylor-Moye, Council Member Martin McCarthy
- State Delegation:** Rep. Auden Grogins, 125th Assembly District; Rep. Christopher Caruso, 126th Assembly District; Rep. Jack Hennessy, 127 Assembly District
Rep. Joseph Clemmons; State Senator Anthony J. Musto 22nd Senate District

CALL TO ORDER

Council Member Curwen called the Budget and Appropriations meeting to order at 6:38 p.m. at the Bridgeport Aquaculture School. The members of the Board of Education, the Council and the State Delegation introduced themselves.

Mayor Finch said that this was a new venture because there has not been a meeting like this before and it was about the children, not unions and not politicians. The schools have many challenges. Two weeks ago, the Connecticut Justice lawsuit was awarded to the people because paying for schools from the property taxes with the median of 36,000 is unconstitutional. He went on to speak about the Race to the Top and other items. By working together, the District and the City can move forward. Funding for education will

be civil rights issue for the coming year, Mayor Finch said. Much discussion has occurred about the Capital plan, focused on fixing what already exists.

The Mayor then thanked the BOE members for their recent vote regarding the Discovery Magnet School. It will be important to work with Trumbull to move the high school through the Inland Wetlands and Planning and Zoning in Trumbull because the parcel is just over the line. He went on to stress that the curriculum will be top of the line and that it will benefit Bridgeport students greatly.

Mayor Finch said that he would like to amend his recommendation to the council and said that he would like to include 10 million dollars to build a new Harding High School on the site. The City only has 17 square miles of land. 12% of that land is polluted. State regulations could be cleaned to residential standards and have schools on them. It will be helpful to be able to increase the density and be able to go up five stories, rather than taking 20-30 acres. This will reduce the amount of land needed. Mayor Finch said that he had endorsed the recommendations for a number of schools.

Dr. Ramos said that he would facilitate the discussion. The purpose was to have a discussion regarding how the District and the City could specifically promote the welfare of the students. He stressed that it would be important to look forward and embrace common agendas. There were concerns about being on the same page regarding the capital projects.

Mayor Finch said that towns that do not need financial assistance to build new schools receive State financial aid and he felt that this was wrong.

Council President McCarthy said that he appreciated the invitation and had been on the Council for nine years. Everyone is a volunteer and Council President McCarthy said he appreciated the fact that the Board was talking with the Council rather than having a confrontation about the budget. The town of Greenwich and Fairfield are both larger than Bridgeport in terms of land coverage. The reality is that there has to be some recognition that the Bridgeport students are being left behind because the tax inequality.

There was a question by a Board member regarding Harding High School being built on the site. He asked about the deadline of June 1st and asked for clarification on the 10 million dollars for this project. Another Board member asked about an authorization of 79 million for a new Harding High School in 2003. The member reminded everyone that the funding went back to Hartford because a parcel could not be found. Concerns about whether or not the parcel would be large enough for the new school without short changing the students were discussed.

There was a question about 95 million in the Capital budget being set aside for property acquisition. It was pointed out that currently Harding has 400 more students than what it was originally planned to have. The new magnet school would have the capacity for 1,000 Bridgeport high school students. Discussion followed about the details of the student capacity for the schools and the Tier Two List with 26 projects. One member wished to know who determined which projects were approved. Council President McCarthy said that the Council has not formally received the Capital budget at this time, and that currently, the budget was the Mayor's recommendations. The Council may approve a list of projects, but then the Mayor is authorized to go out for bond market for the actual project funding.

Council Member Marty McCarthy joined the meeting at 7:02 p.m.

One Board member asked whether the Board had prioritized the projects before it went to the Mayor's office. The member went on to say that it would be important for the Board to do this so that the Mayor would know what was important to the Board before he makes recommendations. The BOE Chair agreed and said that this kind of dialogue was important, particularly in regard to Harding High School. It currently occupied 8.2 acres, but the State wants new school facilities to occupy 30-40 acres.

Rep. Grogins explained that right now in the legislation, most of the plans are being scaled back and that she and Rep. Caruso could sponsor legislation regarding this. Rep. Caruso said that he had been an advocate for a higher density for many years. He then said that he disagreed with the Mayor regarding the use of brownfields for schools. They should be used for increasing the tax rolls. He added that the old Barnum school had the third floor used for a gymnasium, which was an intense use of the land.

Rep. Caruso said that he had concerns about the several new schools, which were very large and harder to maintain. It is important to embrace common agendas but it is impossible to do until all the facts are on the table. The State is anteing up a lot of money for the education. He said that he was not convinced that money was the answer, since there were 18 schools with 70% of the total student bodies are failing. Bridgeport receives the largest portion of the UCE funding, but the schools are still failing. He said that there are issues that need be addressed by the Board and to have a round table discussion, it is important to really look at why the students are still failing.

Dr. Ramos said that the system that is built will yield the results projected. Dr. Ramos said that if people who have the means are sending their children to private schools where the class size is 6 or 7, it says something. Bridgeport and New Britain were always on the edge of the MERs. Discussions followed about the details of this. Rep. Caruso asked why the City was not receiving an accounting of how the funding is spent. He said that this begs the question as to what is happening with the school system. Dr. Ramos said

that as the No Child Left behind moves to 100%, then all the schools in the State will be failing. Rep. Caruso then listed two of the schools, Tisdale and Battalla, both of which are brand new. Dr. Ramos pointed out that the building was new, but it is what goes on in the building is what matters. Rep. Caruso said that the bottom line was that there were students that were failing. He said that in the business world, with an 18 school/70% failure rate, the CEO would be gone. He said that while everyone was supportive on building new school buildings, but the students are still failing. Rep. Caruso pointed out that the BOE had given back a large sum of money back to the City, which indicates that there is something wrong.

Rep. Caruso said that the larger question is that there are 70% of the students failing and that it is important not to be political. Dr. Ramos said that how the superintendent becomes the focus of the discussion was beyond him. He pointed out that there were signs around the room about the schools failing. Rep. Caruso said that he was upset that Bridgeport students were failing. He said that the operational audit needed to be done and the 18 schools need to be looked at for the reasons why the students are failing.

BOE Chairwoman Bellinger reminded everyone that the purpose of the meeting was to talk about helping the schools short term and long term. The Mayor is not going to be raising taxes, and there is a need for creative thinking to help the schools.

Council Member Curwen said that he would like to thank the Superintendent for calling the meeting because this was discussed more than two years ago. He said that he was glad that the Council and the District was at this junction now. He added that Rep. Caruso's concerns were being duly noted and that the Council members were also concerned. The brownfields don't generate taxes. While the State pays 75% of the school building costs, the 25% of the City's portion also has the debt service. Bridgeport is the hub of supplying most of the social services for the surrounding area. The Budget Committee funded the operational audit five years ago, but the BOE never followed through. Council Member Curwen said that everyone became involved in the boards and committees to make things better. One thing that hasn't worked is pitting the Board of Education against the City.

Board Member Crossin said that he had argued with Rep. Caruso before regarding this and senses Rep. Caruso's frustration. He added that Rep. Caruso had raised many good issues. Board Member Crossin said that he felt Rep. Caruso was giving his criticism as a friend and that it was clear that the Board had to be more transparent. Board Member Crossin said that the BOE tried to make the Council part of the budget process. The point is to get a dialog going and to get better understanding on both sides.

Council Member Baker thanked the BOE for talking about Harding High School improvements because it was in his district and needs it. He said that he receives phone

calls from constituents about the BOE and frequently can't give the information to his constituents. He said that it would be important to take the information back to the constituents to help them understand.

Council Member Baker said that he had served on the Budget committee and after looking at it over the years, there were many overlapping items. He said that he would like to see where the District has cut expenses to save money. Having an understanding of the direction that the District is going to move towards would be helpful.

One of the members of BOE said that there was a list of the top ten states that increased the funding. Connecticut was #3, but none of the schools made it into the top ten grouping. She said that she agreed that the next civil rights issue would be education. She added that she was discouraged in that the meeting had been cancelled because there were not enough items on the agenda.

Council President McCarthy said that he expected to be hearing about the third step on audit process. He said that the first step was to have the Council approved the separation of the City and the District financially. The City had to let go of the managements of the functioning of the BOE so that it could stand on its own. There was a commitment from everyone at the table to do this. The analysis found that the Board was woefully inadequate and this has been addressed. Steps 2 & 3 were to have the analysis, which President McCarthy said he thought of as the Gibson report. The report has not been released yet, but will be doing so in the near future. He did not know what was contained in the report yet. The Council has been supportive of the operational audit and the process is now 4/5th completed.

Council Member Taylor Moyer said that District has been failing for more reasons than just the BOE, but because of the previous school administration. Unless everyone gets involved, the District won't move forward. The responsibility for the education of Bridgeport students' is everyone's responsibility. It's important to have the teachers living in Bridgeport.

Board Member Pereira said that there had been a question about where the cuts were made. She then listed the fact that she was a parent for over 25 years and been on the Board. Some of the cuts have been in the music and arts, social workers, Shop, psychologists, middle school intramural physical education, which all happened at the building level. It is important to stop cutting at the building level. Testing – over the last five years, the scores have decreased. Bridgeport used to be ahead of Hartford and New Haven, but now is at the bottom of the list. Board Member Pereira said that she felt it is important to look closely at how the system is working. She said that the issues are already identified, but it is important to correct the problem. The District does not have to recreate the wheel.

Board Member Baraka said that a fiscal audit is different from an operational audit. She said that she felt that the District needs a forensic financial audit. She added that if the new magnet school had a top of the level curriculum, what it means to the rest of the schools.

Board Member Simmons said that he knew that the Board had gotten a \$250,000 dollar grant and did not know about any contribution from the business council. The BRBC came in and took over. He said that the BOE had asked for a financial audit rather than an operational audit. The Board has not had any control, the auditors come in independently. The Board has not been involved.

BOE Chairwoman Bellinger said that she had attended the BRBC meetings. Mr. Simmons said that he was speaking about the issue Rep. Caruso was referring to at another meeting.

Council Member Curwen said that the BRBC meeting was because the BRBC put up money for the MJLM report and interviews were conducted. He said that the audit was taken over by the BRBC.

Rep. Clemmons said that he was chairman of the Black and Hispanic Caucus for the State and a speaker was there to address the funding that the President had set aside for the Race to the Top. The superintendents have to apply to the State to receive the dollars. The most immediate schools that are failing under NCLB, the bottom 50, could receive up to 3 million dollars in the group. The Caucus has undertaken a campaign to address the under achievement in the State. There are 185 schools that are in need of improvement. The Caucus has initiated "Project Learn", which will target any school that failed for three consecutive years, and this will engage the parents to play a significant role in their children's education.

Dr. Ramos said that the first application for Race to the Top, the Superintendent had signed off, but the teachers' union did not. The application was accepted, but Connecticut did not receive any Race funding. The School Improvement grants are for Tier One schools. There are stipulations tied to them.

Dr. Ramos went on to explain that there are four different models that a District must choose from. These involve significant changes. One model calls for changing out the principal who has been in the building for two years, another model involves changing 50% of the staff in the school, another one has a private organization come in and take over the school and the fourth model involves closing the school.

Rep. Caruso said that this was one of the first times he can remember all the elected officials talking about the students in Bridgeport. He suggestion was to have two members of the Council, BOE and the delegation come together to keep the discussion about the basic information going. He said that it would be important to have members that don't always agree on the issues. Once the financial and operational audit is done, then the group can come back together and report to everyone.

Rep. Caruso left the meeting at 8:10 p.m.

In response to an earlier comment by Dr. Ramos that the meeting should not be political, Council Member Walsh said that he felt that it was naiveté to invite so many elected official into the same room and not expect it to become political. Cooperation has to take place 12 months of the years, not just the 6 weeks of the budget cycle. Regarding an audit for the BOE, Council Member Walsh said when he worked for Waldenbooks in Stamford, there was an audit done in a year, and six months later the first changes were underway. The alternative of dragging it out is harmful. He added that the constituents tell him the BOE administration is paid too much, and they bring back retired administrators who are paid incredible amounts as outside consultants.

Council Member Martinez said that the list of failing schools brought her back 8-10 years ago when there were 3 or 4 failing schools. She taught at one of the schools and the parents, students, teachers and the administrators all worked very hard to bring the school back up to the right level. The students can't leave their problems at home, they bring them with them to school. Money is needed for social workers to work with the students and the parents to resolve these issues.

Council Member Lyons said that she had gone to Washington, D.C. and had attended as many functions as possible to do with education. One of the issues of the NCLB is the constant testing of the students. The schools teach the students more how to test than teaching them. The students are suffering through all this political stuff and repeated testing. As soon as a child learns something, they turn around and now have to learn something new. The Bridgeport students have potential. The legislation has to be changed to allow the children to go back to the basics of teaching. She said that there are people who are looking at the constant testing because the students are failing because they are being tested too much.

Council Member Lyons thanked everyone for having the meeting because it is the first one in her six years on the Council. Getting frustrations out is normal, but it is important to have people bring solutions to the table. The reason that everyone is on the various boards is because people believed each person could make a change. Transparency needs to be on both sides so the truth can come out. Because of the animosity in the past, there hasn't been much progress in the past. She then asked that everyone support legislation

Board Member Pereira said that one recommendation was to change the laws regarding the excess funding at the end of the year. She added that until there was some kind of financial audit done, people will not feel comfortable with the discussion.

A member of the public said that there would be a new paper in Bridgeport called "The Independent" would be starting and that all the problems in Bridgeport would be discussed and potential solutions offered.

BOE Chairwoman Bellinger asked if there were additional comments. Rep. Clemmons said that he would like to mention the idea of tearing down G.E. and putting the Harding High there. Chairwoman Bellinger said that brownfields would be involved. Rep. Grogins said that the State Committee chairs have to raise the individual legislation and the deadline has passed for that because this term is a short term.

Council Member Curwen said that after 15 years on the Council, he felt that there had been a lot of friction and animosity between the BOE and the Council, possibly because the predecessor had a different vision. Council Member Curwen said that he did not think separation was the answer. It takes more than just the superintendent and the Board to raise the children. He felt that the demonstration at this meeting will most likely change the opinions of some of the council members.

A member of the public came forward and said that one level of government was missing and that was the Federal level. He then suggested once the Board has things straightened out, having the Congressional representatives present. He then reiterated that he had asked the Council and the Board would sending his step granddaughter home crying or happy. It's important to remember all the little students who are depending on the Board and the Council to take care of them. In closing, Dr. Ramos said that there had been notes that would be sent out and that the group of six should start some conversations in the near future.

ADJOURNMENT

- ** COUNCIL MEMBER SILVA MOVED TO ADJOURN.**
- ** COUNCIL MEMBER VIZZO-PANICCIA SECONDED.**
- ** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 8:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sharon L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services

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