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Fairfield Taxpayers mission: Keep town desirable and affordable

By Kendra Wingate Apr 28, 2015



From left, Bob Stone, Bud Morten, John Levinson and Urb Leimkuhler. (Photo by Kendra Wingate)

The Fairfield Taxpayer Committee offers a forum for concerned taxpayers to join in the effort to retain the town's desirability and affordability. This nonpartisan community group is on a mission to preserve Fairfield by way of keeping its taxes and spending below the rate of inflation. The group does not presume to dictate which services should be eliminated or reduced, but rather welcomes a community-wide debate, allowing the town to identify those with the "least pain for the fewest number" in an effort to control spending and taxes.

Understanding the rate of inflation, the Board of Education and School System costs, the rising costs of wages, benefits and work rules for active public employees and more, the Committee hopes to identify opportunities for greater efficiency and supports making tough decisions regarding which municipal and educational services can possibly be reduced or eliminated.

"We hope that successful efforts to control labor costs and to increase our commercial and industrial tax base will allow us to expand both municipal and educational services (longer term)," agreed the Committee. "Making good decisions under much more challenging general economic conditions than have applied for most of the post-war period, will require much greater engagement on the part of all Fairfield residents, which in turn will require much better information and analysis about costs and benefits of the services currently provided."

Gaining important information and analysis; historical spending and taxes relative to inflation, historical debt levels, and rigorous benchmarking against what other towns are spending, in a strictly non-partisan objective way, is suggested, in order to inform and engage Fairfield residents on the issues at hand. In an attempt to provide a place where all interested residents can come together and exchange ideas and opinions with not only each other, but with elected officials, this group was formed in early 2012, with a mission to preserve the town of Fairfield as a desirable and affordable community, which resonates with all residents.

"I believe the more we have our citizens active and engaged in our community the better for all," said First Selectman Mike Tetreau. The Fairfield Taxpayer Committee (FTC), when the Fiscal 2016 Budget was proposed by the First Selectman, "applauded the fact that the proposed tax increase was only 1.64%, which is close to the inflation rate for the first time in many years, perhaps only coincidentally because this is an election year."

Also noted and applauded, the First Selectman, in the State of the Town address, called for the creation of the Town's first strategic plan, which has reportedly included \$100,000 in his proposed fiscal 2016 budget for this purpose.

In Fairfield, according to the FTC, increases in spending and taxes at 2.5x-3.0x the rate of inflation over the last 16 years has created a serious affordability problem that is hurting property values and is forcing senior citizens, among other property owners, to leave. Trusting that until a strategic plan is put firmly in place, addressing a way an optimal balance between services and taxes can be achieved, the town should not allow its tax rate to increase more than the rate of inflation (barring truly exceptional/unavoidable circumstances).

"The town, we really feel, needs to have a document that drives its activity and its governance, for a longer period of time," explained Urb Leimkuhler, FTC member. "It's something we feel we've been lacking in not having."

As proposed total spending (as opposed to the tax rate) in the Fiscal 2016 budget at \$291 million (up 2.1%) is above the 1.6% inflation rate, driven in part by a proposed 3.3% increase in the Board of Education budget (to \$161 million) which is 55% of total spending and is the largest BOE spending increase in six years. Include the \$24 million in school costs that is not included in the BOE budget (principally the debt service on school buildings) and the total becomes \$185 million, representing 63% of the total spending. The big increases in the proposed BOE budget are for staff salaries and benefits, which together represent 79% of the total BOE budget, or 93% of the total \$5.1 million increase.

"I want to applaud First Selectman Mike Tetreau for being able to put forward a budget that is very fair and reasonable and agreeable with all the taxpayers. Its 1.6% tax increase includes increased services and restoring services. I'm very pleased," said Heather Dean, Chairwoman of the Democratic Town Committee. "As far as the Board of Education, we have an outstanding education system in Fairfield and it's one of the reasons why many people move to Fairfield and it's an investment, a part of the fiber in the fabric of Fairfield.

"It's my understanding," continued Dean, "that they have restored quite a few programs with the budget. Dr. Title and Phil Dwyer also have to be commended for doing a really stellar job with a tight budget to get done what they are getting done. The Fairfield DTC collectively wants to re-elect our First Selectman Mike Tetreau, who has done a fantastic job leading and spearheading Fairfield for the last four years and we are supportive of his campaign for re-election for the next four years."

Spending on town services is also projected to rise to 5.4%, even more than the 3.3% increase for the B

OE and substantially more than the 1.9% average increase over the last six years. "It has increased because compensation to public employees who provide these services have escalated to the extent it has," said Bud Morten, FTC member. "The cost of public employees has escalated in this country as a whole over the last 30 years. The Bureau of Labor Statistics most recent report states public employees currently make 44% more than private sector employees and most of that difference is in benefits (pension and health care)."

"We are concerned about much more than just keeping taxes down," said Leimkuhler. "We are concerned about this whole range of issues that affect affordability as well as desirability and we are also interested in engaging with the entire town, in getting as many people engaged as possible."

Core values and beliefs cited include: strictly non-partisan affiliation, only wanting the best qualified, least ideological and most diligent public officials who are focused on the most important town issues, the group does not endorse candidates but rather positions on issues once the research has been done as they claim to be extremely diligent, thoughtful and analytical, they trust informed voters will make good choices and by therefore informing and helping residents understand town issues, empower them to form their own opinions.

"We have an orientation of things in terms of issues we are interested in," said FTC member John Levinson. "We end up with an opinion on those issues, but they are based on thoughtful, factual analysis. There is value in what we do for a very broad group of people and thoughtful data based analysis is one aspect of what we do. Having an opinion is another and then providing a forum for people to dialogue amongst themselves, debate the issue's, we will engage and answer questions and their ability to express themselves to the public officials, is what we have opened up for people."

The Fairfield Taxpayer members strive to “apply the knowledge and skills we have acquired in our professional careers to do excellent, in-depth, objective research on the important issues affecting our town.”

Current formative key objectives include restricting future spending and tax increases to levels no greater than that of inflation, renegotiate wages, benefits and work rules for public employees so labor costs are no greater than they are for comparable work in the private sector, require school and town administrators to provide budget breakdowns by service and by student, so the people and their elected representatives can make well informed decisions about which services they want and can be afforded, begin each budget cycle with broad agreement on how much can be affordably spent and end each cycle with a clear explanation from every town body of why the approved budget is affordable for the taxpayers, create a long term strategic plan for the town which addresses the need for more nonresidential commercial development in order to ease the burden on residential owners, and to include a rolling five-year plan for spending and taxes, demand strong leadership from our State Representatives to reduce unfunded state mandates which increase local property taxes and to reform the Town Charter requiring any increase in taxes greater than the rate of inflation be approved in a town-wide referendum.

“I think this group has done an excellent job of educating the town,” said resident Bob Stone. “You might not agree with their conclusions but at least they are the facts. They are the first group that has actually done this — they have brought things to the forefront that people may have been thinking about or didn’t understand, but now do. If people would listen objectively to what they’re saying, people can discuss it rationally and get things done. This is a great town and we want to preserve it for future generations.”

Informing residents has proven not only to be beneficial, but also to have made a difference. Approximately two years ago, Aquarion Water Co. proposed a 23% rate hike over a 3-year period. Fairfield residents sent more than 650 emails stating arguments and their outrage to the State of Ct Public Utilities Regulatory Authority resulting in a near zero increase by Aquarion. Additionally, Aquarion is passing on much of the savings from a new tax break to its customers.

Additional concerns include high density housing, affordable housing, Fairfield’s not being named to the SafeWise List (Ridgefield topped the list, Weston earned the #2 spot and Darien the 3rd), keeping senior citizen residents and controlled spending.

The Fairfield Taxpayers are well known to most, if not all, town officials and meet with them on a regular basis, as well as with each other on a weekly basis and encourages the community to join. “We are nonpartisan, everyone is welcome at our meetings,” said Morten. Members have varying backgrounds including investment research, actuarial analysis, communications, graphic design, project management, general management and more. “Perhaps our greatest strength as an advocacy group is our commitment to rigorous peer review by this demanding, talented and experienced group of people, of any positions we adopt and of anything we publish, in Fairfield Taxpayers name,” concurred the committee.

For more information visit www.fairfieldtaxpayer.com.

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