

THE BUCK STOPS HERE!?

Why are our taxes so high?

Because the Buck stops with NOBODY in Fairfield!

We may have many bus stops, three train stops, and even a rest stop for cars on I-95, but . . . there is apparently nowhere in Fairfield's government where "The Buck" stops.

It seems none of our town's leaders is able or willing to accept responsibility:

- For the relentless increases in town spending and taxes over the past 15 years at rates two to three times greater than inflation; or
- For making the tough decisions about which services we can continue to afford as generous public employee wages, pensions and benefits continue to drive our spending and taxes higher and higher.

Where Might We Expect the Buck to Stop?

SUPERINTENDANT OF SCHOOLS?

In his budget proposal, Superintendent David Title said that he "attempted to balance the needs of our highly regarded school system with the financial capabilities of our town." He then proposed a \$7.2 million, 4.9% increase in the school budget, and attributed the increase primarily to large increases in what he called "fixed costs," which he defines as pensions and health insurance for school employees. However, these personnel costs are, of course, "fixed" only if one presumes that staff cannot be cut either through improved productivity or by cutting programs and services.

BOARD OF EDUCATION?

The chairman and a majority of the members of the BOE (a body of nine unpaid volunteers) apparently feel they are responsible only for providing the best possible education to Fairfield's students, and if it costs too much, that is a problem for someone else to address. Accordingly, after long deliberations, and after considering a much more substantial reduction, the BOE reduced Dr. Title's proposed budget by only \$342,417 (two-tenths of one percent).

BOARD OF FINANCE?

The BOF (another body of nine unpaid volunteers) deserves enormous credit for having improved the town's financial integrity by imposing discipline and transparency in the management of its capital spending and long-term liabilities. However, it has not imposed the same discipline on the town's annual operating budget in the understandable belief that the Board of Selectman and the Representative Town Meeting (i.e., the town's executive and legislative branches) should decide what services the town should provide. Moreover, because its authority is limited to cutting specific line items in the budget, it has no way of knowing how any cuts would be implemented and what their ultimate effects would be. Thus, on the critical issue of what services the town wants and can afford, the BOF has deferred to the BOS and the RTM. However, if no other town body will address the continuing unsustainable increases in spending, the BOF may be forced to do so to protect the long-term financial well being of the town.

REPRESENTATIVE TOWN MEETING?

Despite several strong advocates for spending restraint, a majority of the RTM's 50 unpaid volunteers apparently feel they should not make major cuts in spending because, like the BOF, their authority is limited to cutting specific line items without knowing how any cuts would be implemented by the BOE and/or the First Selectman, possibly in ways that would generate the strongest possible outcry from the public. Thus, the RTM has made only modest cuts. Last year, after an initial

effort to reduce spending by 2% across the board, they ended up with a reduction of only \$1.1 million (four-tenths of one percent); the year before they reduced the total budget by only \$960,180 (again, four-tenths of one percent).

BOARD OF SELECTMEN?

Since two of its three members are, as usual, from the First Selectman's party, the BOS generally supports his budget recommendations. In the new budget, the FS is paid \$131,438 plus benefits, and the Selectmen are each paid \$11,330 with no benefits.

FIRST SELECTMAN?

As the town's Chief Executive Officer, the FS has broad powers, including the authority to change just about anything in the budget that is not a legal obligation like debt service. In his recent presentation, FS Tetreau stated that his objectives were "to maintain the services that our residents need and expect at a cost we can afford" and "to restore our Town's financial stability." But, notwithstanding unrelenting tax increases at 2.5 times the rate of inflation since at least FY1999, he then proposed a budget for next year that would **raise our taxes 6.4%, which is more than three times the inflation rate.** He blames this huge increase primarily on what he calls, "Cost Drivers," which he says are "multi-year commitments" like Debt Service, Health Insurance, Workers' Compensation Insurance, etc. that "can be modified or reduced over time but not necessarily in the current year." In other words, the huge tax increase is not his fault, even though most of the "drivers" are predictable costs that should have been anticipated and could have been offset with cuts elsewhere in the budget.

As the only elected official involved in the budget process that devotes full time to his/her position, the FS has **a critical leadership role** in our town government. Unfortunately, after almost two years in office, Mr. Tetreau has not even acknowledged that the town has a serious Affordability problem, and based on the budget he submitted, he is apparently not able or willing to make the tough decisions about which services should be cut to prevent taxes from continuing to rise at an unsustainable rate. Instead he wants to pass the buck by forming a citizen committee that will review services and make recommendations about which ones can be reduced or eliminated. Another regrettable example of poor leadership is that the FS – the person who is responsible for negotiating with the town's unions to put new hires on defined-contribution (401a) plans instead of defined-benefit pensions – recently chose a defined benefit pension for himself and his chief of staff; as the Fairfield Citizen said, Mr. Tetreau's "actions speak far louder than his words about cutting costs."

What Happens Next?

If history is any guide:

- Between now and May 6th, town officials, department heads and the ~70 well meaning volunteers on the four town bodies (BOE, BOF, RTM and BOS) will once again sit through many long meetings as part of the annual budget ritual **without first establishing how much we can afford to spend** – as each of us must do at home, and as every business must do in the private sector.
- Long hours will be spent poring over and discussing several hundred pages of numbers that do not provide **the breakdown of costs by service that would actually allow them to consider which services should be reduced, eliminated or revamped.**
- Some token reductions will be made in the proposed budget;
- Everyone will feel that they have worked hard and accomplished something;
- Hope will be expressed that it will be possible to better manage and control future tax increases; and
- ***Fairfield taxpayers will be hit with yet another big increase.***

Is There Any Hope?

Maybe this time, it will be different. After all, on the explicit grounds of Affordability, BOE members **Pam Iacono** and **Tim Kery** proposed much bigger reductions than the two-tenths of one percent that was eventually approved, and there was encouraging, initial support for a larger reduction from other members, including **Jessica Gerber, Perry Liu** and **Jennifer Kennelly**. **Mr. Kery** also proposed that the BOE transition over the next few years to a limit on annual increases of "2% or the rate of inflation," a suggestion that Chairman Dwyer agreed to put on the board's agenda for its spring strategy meeting.

Meanwhile, at the joint BOS/BOF meeting after FS Tetreau presented his proposed 6.4% increase in taxes, BOF Chairman **Tom Flynn** responded by calling upon all town boards to consider the impact of unrelenting increases in spending on the affordability of our town, and said there was an urgent need to decide which services should be cut to reduce the tax burden; and BOS member **Cristin McCarthy Vahey** said that we need a different conversation about the town's budget, similar to the multi-year planning process for capital expenditures.

What Can We Do?

"Passing the Buck" is not an option for us taxpayers, but here is what we can do to try to **Keep Fairfield Affordable and put our town on a sustainable course for the future:**

1. **Demand change** from our town's leadership.
2. **Sign up online with Fairfield Taxpayer** (www.fairfieldtaxpayer.com), speak up on the issues in our Forum, and encourage our neighbors and friends to do the same.
3. **Show up at key town meetings** – particularly the BOF Public Budget Comment Session on Saturday, March 23rd at 9:30 am at the Senior Center.

4. **Send e-mails to our elected representatives** urging them to do what is necessary to **Keep Fairfield Affordable.**
5. **Support Fairfield Taxpayer's efforts** to reduce town spending through a public referendum, if necessary, after the RTM approves a budget in early May.

If enough of us come together, maybe, just maybe, we can make a difference and put Fairfield on an affordable and sustainable course for the future.

Fairfield Taxpayer is a new, non-partisan organization dedicated to
KEEPING FAIRFIELD AFFORDABLE.

Please visit us at www.fairfieldtaxpayer.com to become better informed and, we hope, to add your support to our online discussions. Join hundreds of your neighbors who have already chosen to:

SIGN UP - BE HEARD - MAKE A DIFFERENCE.