

May 14, 2009, SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS OF THE BOROUGH OF MT. EPHRAIM

MEETING CALL TO ORDER:

Mayor Wolk called the meeting to order at 5:12 pm.

SALUTE TO THE FLAG:

All present pledged their allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America.

ROLL CALL:

PRESENT

ABSENT

Commissioner Gilmore
Commissioner Greenwald
Mayor Wolk

_____X_____
_____X_____
_____X_____

OTHER OFFICIALS PRESENT:

Borough Solicitor – Joe Marrazzo
Police Chief – Ed Dobleman
Borough Clerk – Terry Shannon
Tax Collector/Dep. Clerk – Marie Darlington
Borough Auditor—Rob Inverso

“OPEN PUBLIC MEETINGS LAW” ANNOUNCEMENT:

The Mayor announced that this Special Meeting has been advertised and notices posted in accordance with the “Open Public Meetings Act.”

PUBLIC HEARING ON THE DEFEATED SCHOOL BUDGET:

Mayor Wolk announced that the purpose of this meeting was to discuss the defeated school budget and to approve a resolution authorizing reductions to the budget. He told the crowd that Superintendent Joe Rafferty and Administrator Melissa Raywood were present to help explain the situation with the budget. With that, the Mayor opened the public hearing and introduced Superintendent Rafferty and Administrator Raywood.

Superintendent Rafferty explained that an increase in student enrollment, significant reduction in state aid and the tuition increase from Audubon High School are the largest problems facing the district. Melissa Raywood added that enrollment for the new school year is already up by 30 students. She added that special needs aid was cut significantly and is no longer funded based on the students’ classifications. Small districts are being hit very hard. Mr. Rafferty added that the State wants to put K-8

districts out of business. They want school districts to be 3000-5000. Even if we merged with Audubon we would be below those numbers. He asked if they want to do away with all the traditional things that have been there for years but did not get an answer. Melissa added that the other problem we face is the loss of fund balance. Last year we appropriated \$400,000 in the budget that was not replaced. This year, we have no fund balance to appropriate.

Auditor, Rob Inverso, explained that the original budget as introduced provide for 55% of the levy being raised this year and 45% next year. In an effort to be consistent with prior years, we have changed that to 50% this year and 50% next year. In addition, the budget is being reduced by \$87,500. The original tax increase of 33 cents has been reduced to twelve cents.

Theresa Ingram asked how much that increase will be in dollars. Mayor Wolk answered that on an assessment of \$100,000, the increase would be \$120. Theresa further asked if by changing to 50/50, weren't we just making the increase next year worse? Rob Inverso answered that yes, that would make next year's increase greater but the hope is that the economy recovers and perhaps more state aid will be available.

Dan Preziosi, 707 W. Kings Highway, asked why the meeting was scheduled for 5pm when most people were not yet home from work and if it was advertised. Mayor Wolk explained that the time was simply determined by when the Commissioners would be available and that yes, the meeting was advertised in the Courier Post. He took Mr. Preziosi's concern about the time under advisement and said it would be considered in the future. Mr. Preziosi then asked why our cost per student was so much higher than the rest of the County. Melissa Raywood answered that in fact, our costs are in line with the rest of the County and any difference can be attributed to full-day kindergarten and the tuition paid to Audubon. Mr. Preziosi then asked why the student count was adjusted. Joe Rafferty answered that, since the budget was originally prepared, they have learned that ten students were not going to attend Audubon so the student count was reduced by ten. Melissa Raywood also explained that the tuition charged by Audubon is estimated and is adjusted to actual costs two years afterwards when the district's books are audited. We then receive a tuition adjustment for the prior years and it almost results in an increase. Mr. Preziosi then asked how the tuition is calculated. Is it based on square footage? Are we sure we are not being charged for the Audubon 7th and 8th grade costs? Melissa stated that she would look into that to make sure that was not the case.

Theresa Ingram said she had attended a BOE meeting where the budget was presented and that the Audubon tuition was \$12,600. Melissa Raywood said that is correct but that there is a resource room assessment added for classified students that brings the tuition to over \$14,000. Theresa added that she read an article in the Retrospect and that, on average, the tuition being charged by Audubon was comparable to other school districts. Melissa said it is more accurate to look at the high, the median and the low. You need to make sure you are comparing apples to apples and that the services are comparable.

John McCloskey, 111 Baird Avenue, said that he appreciates the job the Governing Body did with the Budget and he thinks they have done a good job with a tough situation. He added that everyone keeps talking about “costs” but that our kids are not “costs”. We are talking about education and that should not be referred to as just a “cost”. He also stated that the town only had double digit increases during the three years that the current administration was not in office. They have done a great job and he thanked the Governing Body for their efforts. This prompted applause from the audience.

Tina DeVita Meeser, 135 Roosevelt Avenue, said she thinks the teachers in Mt. Ephraim are fabulous and also extended appreciation to the Governing Body for the job they do. We have to invest in our schools as it is important for our kids. She hears from other people that the students in the one-mile town of Mt. Ephraim are equivalent to students from Haddonfield and it is because of the great teachers and the schools.

Martin Ware, President of the Teachers’ Association, said he does not live in town but a lot of the teachers do and this is not an easy process and he appreciates the work that went into this. The school district has been hit the same as corporate America and they have had to make cuts. Many programs are in jeopardy and a full-time math teacher has already been cut. They have had a reduction in staff and two retirees are not being replaced. They have changed the benefits coverage in that any teacher hired only gets single coverage until they reach tenure. Another staff member is going from full-time to part-time. Our special education program is expanding but we cannot hire anymore employees. Class sizes are increasing. If we continue to cut programs, it is the kids who get hurt. It is very difficult all around. This is a great district because of the cooperation between the teachers and the parents. This is a difficult problem and he appreciates the efforts of all who are involved.

Donna Schepacarter, 301 Davis Avenue, said that her kids have been part of the school system since 1994. The teachers, staff and schools are great and this is part of the reason that people move to our town. All taxes go up. We have to do everything we can for our kids. To lose any of these teachers would be a shame.

Theresa Ingram asked why we don’t charge for pre-school. Many of the surrounding towns charge.

Mayor Wolk suggested that that be brought up to the School Board at a monthly meeting. Mr. Rafferty added that when you calculate the amount that will be charged through taxes to run the schools, you try to incorporate every program you can possibly offer. If the current trend continues, our financial situation may dictate that we will have to take a look at that. President Obama’s plan is to provide more financing for pre-school and kindergarten education and we will see what that brings.

Seeing no further public comment, on a motion by Commissioners Greenwald and Gilmore, the public hearing was closed.

RESOLUTIONS:

Mayor Wolk announced that the following resolution would be read and approved as a consent agenda.

RESOLUTION NO. 48-09

CERTIFYING THE GENERAL FUND TAX LEVY FOR THE BOROUGH OF MT. EPHRAIM BOARD OF EDUCATION FOR THE SCHOOL YEAR 2009-10, BY THE GOVERNING BODY OF THE BOROUGH OF MT. EPHRAIM, COUNTY OF CAMDEN, STATE OF NEW JERSEY

As there was no other business to be transacted, on a motion by Commissioners Greenwald and Gilmore, the meeting was adjourned at 5:55pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Terry Shannon
Borough Clerk