

The special meeting of the Board of Education of the City of Vineland was held Tuesday, April 26, 2016 at 6:35 p.m. at the Wallace Middle School, 688 N. Mill Road, Vineland, New Jersey, pursuant to notice with Mr. English presiding and the following members present: Ms. Acosta, Mr. Bordley, Ms. Codispoti, Mr. DeWinne, Ms. Rios and Mr. Sbrana. Absent: Mr. Jennings and Mr. Pagano.

Also present: Dr. Gruccio, Superintendent, Mr. Frey and Mr. Frangipani, Assistant Superintendents, Mrs. Haley, Board Secretary and Mr. DeSanto, Board Solicitor. Absent: None.

Mr. English announced that in compliance with the New Jersey meeting law commonly referred to as "The Sunshine Law," the Vineland Board of Education has caused notice of this meeting to be sent to the following, announcing time and place thereof, agenda, etc.: The Daily Journal, the Atlantic City Press, Clerk - City of Vineland, and Administrative Office Public Bulletin Board.

Flag Salute:

Mr. English introduced, Mrs. Helen Haley, Business Administrator, to present the 2016-2017 Budget.

Mrs. Haley thanked everyone who came out tonight for the budget hearing and said she will present background on the current budget process. She said several meetings were held with the Finance Committee to discuss the 2016-2017 budget. On January 21, 2016 a balanced budget was presented to the Finance Committee and the budget presentation was held on February 29, 2016. The budget was submitted to the county for their review on March 22, 2016 and they reviewed it from March 28 through April 15, 2016. Mrs. Haley said the next step is for the Board to vote and adopt the final budget, which will be done at a special meeting on May 4, 2016. She said the parameters of a budget are revenue minus appropriations equals a balanced budget. Mrs. Haley said the revenue side is comprised of state aid, local tax levy, local non-tax revenue, other extraordinary aid and special education Medicaid initiative (SEMI), use of fund balance and use of capital reserve/maintenance reserve. Our state aid has remained flat and this year we received an additional \$112,730. Mrs. Haley said the local tax levy that we are proposing is an increase from last year of \$443,321, which represents a 2% tax increase. She said state aid represents 80.9% of the revenue side of the budget and the local tax levy represents 13.4%. Mrs. Haley said appropriations is the expenditure side of the budget. Appropriations have exceeded revenue due to increases in salaries, health benefits, charter schools and technical school tuition. The estimated shortfall in the beginning was \$8 million.

Mrs. Haley said often people will refer to the shortfall as a deficit. She said a deficit is if you overspent your budget, which we did not do. Mrs. Haley said a shortfall is a projection for the next year when expenses increase but state aid stays flat. She said the biggest piece of our budget is salaries and benefits. Mrs. Haley said we sought to meet the budget goals with the least impact on students and in doing so we have reduced 57 positions. She said the positions were reduced through attrition/consolidation and represents a \$3,697,675 reduction in the budget for salaries and benefits. Mrs. Haley said we have 14 new positions that are mostly tied to special education that is an increase in the budget of \$875,485 for salaries and benefits. She reviewed the non-salary reductions/increases and the capital outlay projects. Mrs. Haley said we will be purchasing 16 buses through a lease purchase. She said the buses will be financed over 5 years with an estimated 2% interest rate and an annual payment of approximately \$257,000. Mrs. Haley said our general fund tax levy increased by \$443,321 which represents a 1 ½ cent increase in the tax rate on the average home assessed at \$159,276. She said if senior citizens qualify they can freeze their taxes at the level they are at currently. Mrs. Haley thanked the accounting department, central administration, board finance committee and everyone for their feedback/ comments for helping to create the budget that we have.

Mr. English asked Mr. DeSanto to give a quick review on the budget process from this point forward.

Mr. DeSanto said we are required to conduct a public hearing on the budget that was approved by the county superintendent. He said at a public hearing the public is permitted to ask questions regarding the budget during public comments and the Board is permitted to respond during Board member comments. Mr. English asked Mr. DeSanto if a Board member has a specific issue that they would like to address before the budget is sent to the county, is tonight the time to express and discuss it. Mr. DeSanto responded yes as he understands the procedure any changes that are proposed to the preliminarily approved budget must result from this public hearing.

Public Comments: Louis Russo, President of VEA, Teacher and Vineland Resident
Mr. Russo said we believe that the proposed budget, as approved by the majority of the Board, is inadequate in delivering a thorough and efficient education. He said we are moving our district away from a quality education to a bare bones education, which is detrimental to the students and community.

Mr. Russo asked why we are projecting a quarter of a million deficit in our food services. Mrs. Haley said that is a cut and we are not budgeting for it. Mr. Russo asked what the district is going to say to parents when they call and ask why their child does not have a librarian today or cannot utilize the library. Mr. English asked Mr. Russo if he anticipates a lot of questions coming. Mr. Russo responded yes. Dr. Gruccio said when you are looking at an 8 million dollar cut you have to cut things that are difficult. She said we did not want any of these cuts. Dr. Gruccio said the librarians are not losing their jobs and there will be access to a librarian on a part time basis. She said we have one that will service the four middle schools. Mr. Russo asked on the weeks there is no librarian available, what will we tell the public. Dr. Gruccio said we will do the best we can. She feels if we are here for the right reasons and do what is necessary for our children they will not lose out. Mr. Russo asked why we are taking away services such as the mailings on progress reports and what will be done to get parents that information if they do not have internet access. Dr. Gruccio said the parent could stop by the school or the information could be sent home with the child. Mr. Russo asked if parents will be receiving a notification that they will no longer receive mailed progress reports. Dr. Gruccio responded yes. Mr. Russo asked if the district has any plans to provide parents internet access at a reduced rate who cannot afford it. Dr. Gruccio said we having been working with Comcast. She said for \$10 per month they can have access and the library is also available.

Shonda Johnston, Vineland Resident and Teacher

Ms. Johnston expressed her concern on the large amount of money being spent on Charter Schools. Mrs. Haley said she agrees with Ms. Johnston. She said we put a number in the budget for Charter Schools that we feel is reasonable but the danger is it could be higher. Mrs. Haley said we do not have a say in this, we receive the memo and have to pay off of it. Mrs. Haley said on October 15th everyone takes a count and the schedule would be adjusted up or down. She said there would be another count in June which has historically been a little less then what was projected and we would receive the overage back. Mrs. Haley said we have to do creative things to keep our students and let people know that this is a good place to be. Ms. Johnston asks when a student matriculates into the charter school do we have to release the student identification number so they actually receive the funds that follow that particular child. Mrs. Haley said she does not know but when we do our ASSA in October it is based on student counts and documentation. She said everything is reconciled and audited.

Ms. Acosta thanked Ms. Johnston for her comments because it has been one of her concerns. She said any person who lives here can put a proposal for a charter school together and it is up to the state whether or not the charter school will come to fruition. Ms. Acosta said she does not believe you can compare what the Vineland Public Schools offers in terms of the curriculum, support, activities and socialization. She thinks as a district we need to stay competitive and let everyone know that we have the best schools here.

Dr. Guccio said charter schools are completely out of our control. She said they are approved by the state and people would need to write to the Governor to make a change. Dr. Guccio said we are a public school and take all children, believe in all children and do our best to address all children whatever their needs may be.

Ms. Johnston applauds the district for counting all of their demographics. She said we need to have a voice, stop being politically correct and just tell it like it is. Ms. Johnston said charter schools are a business taking money from the public in the area. She said the only reason they are here in Vineland is because we have the largest and most successful school district in the state.

Jackie Huster, Librarian at Wallace Middle School

Ms. Huster said our middle school students will be greatly impacted by the reduction of a full time certified librarian. She said we as educators see the impact of not having computer teachers and our students do not know how to keyboard. Ms. Huster expressed her concern that the middle school students are getting the short end of the stick. She asked if anyone has a plan. Dr. Guccio said there will be an aide in each school to help. Ms. Huster said the aide is not a certified librarian. Dr. Guccio said they can check out books.

Richard Greenfield, Landis Math Teacher

Mr. Greenfield asked if there is a plan as to what is going to happen to the sixth grade teachers at Landis. Dr. Guccio said as one grade level leaves each year we are going to be making decisions as to where to place the teachers. She said we are going to try to do our very best to make sure the things that those teachers learned will carry over into another school. Dr. Guccio said we will be working on this with Dr. Rossi to see who would be best to keep together.

Board Member

Comments on

2016-2017 Budget: Mr. English asked each Board member if there is any line item that they disagree with in the budget.

Ms. Acosta said her main concern is staying competitive in light of the new schools that are opening. She expressed her concern that our children do not have their own computer to work on in the schools and are sharing them between classrooms. Ms. Acosta believes if we are going to get children ready to face the future we need to invest in them and make sure that every classroom has a laptop or Chromebook. She said we need to create innovative programs to be able to help our children succeed. Ms. Acosta said we cannot continue year after year cutting and putting band aids on things. She believes that most people want to provide their children with the very best that they can.

Dr. Guccio said as part of our strategic plan we want to insure that every child has technology in their hand. She said 50% of all of the students in the district have access to technology every day. Dr. Guccio said our plan allows us to move forward and our goal within the next year or two is for every child to have access to some type of computer.

Ms. Acosta said that she knows that technology is a priority for our administration. She said lets invest in our children now and not wait.

Mr. Sbrana said he appreciates the time put in by Mrs. Haley, her staff and administration in constructing a document of this magnitude. He said that he knows we face continued financial challenges that will worsen in the future. Mr. Sbrana said that is why we need to pursue alternative sources of funding like sponsored programs and advertising. He feels it is important to have a printed calendar as well as one online. Mr. Sbrana said maybe this is one of the areas that we can get money so there is no cost to the district to print this important document.

Ms. Rios said she agrees with Mr. Sbrana as far as the calendar. She said maybe we can do the calendar in district to keep the cost down or have it sponsored by businesses monthly as we do with the bus advertisements. Ms. Rios said she agrees with Ms. Acosta that we need to encourage technology. She said the Policy Committee approved bring your own device to school and we need to promote it so students can use their own device in school with no cost to the district.

Ms. Rios said Mr. Suppi, a district educator, presented a couple ideas at our last meeting about sponsoring certain sports in the district and charging the parents for the sport. She said maybe we could look into having summer programs, which are limited in our city. Ms. Rios thanked everyone for coming out to the meetings.

Mr. Bordley said he does not think anyone on this Board wants to cut positions. He said that he fought for a higher tax rate because he feels it is necessary. Mr. Bordley said the biggest problem is the state and he feels they are unrealistic on what they support in the schools. He said the 2% tax increase is a responsible number to the taxpayers but a hardship to our students. Mr. Bordley said that is why he wanted a higher tax increase. He said we have incredible programs and hopefully we will get sponsors to help improve the arts in the district. Mr. Bordley said his children attend Vineland schools and they are proud of their schools. He said we have to keep a positive face and keep moving forward with what we have.

Ms. Codispoti thanked everyone and said that she respects each person who came up and gave their opinion. She said we are all here for the students and district. Ms. Codispoti thinks we have great businesses in the community that may want to sponsor the district calendar. She said we have wonderful programs, students, teachers and staff members. Ms. Codispoti feels we are doing the best that we can right now.

Mr. DeWinne thanked Ms. Johnston for speaking because she brought to light some things that people do not know about. He said we have a great special education program in the district and there are a lot of people wanting to come to the district because of it. Mr. DeWinne said he believes the state is promoting charter schools and our hands are tied. He said the county technical school is going to open and will be a big fiscal drain to the budget. Mr. DeWinne said he is proud to be a k through 12 graduate of Vineland. He said Vineland has great programs and staff. Mr. DeWinne said our revenue is down \$2 million and the costs continue to climb such as health benefits. He said he does not see things getting any better as far as an increase in aid. Mr. DeWinne said Dr. Gruccio is our educational leader and he tries to not get involved. He said that he did not want any tax increase but agreed with the majority to a 2% increase. Mr. DeWinne said he agrees with Mr. Sbrana and would like to bring back the district calendar.

Mr. English gave an overview on points made by his colleagues. He said that he is in support of bringing back the district calendar. Mr. English thanked everyone who spoke. He said we do not want to cut anything but things will continue to be cut. Mr. English said we are all in this together and nothing changed with the cuts except the tax increase percentage, which will not hurt the students' education.

The public hearing was closed at 8:16 p.m.

Public Comments:

Lee Burke

Mr. Burke said he was part of the five year strategic plan and there has not been any discussions held beyond this fiscal year to implement any part of the plan. He feels this Board has taken a big step by instituting a 2% tax levy. Mr. Burke said he knows negotiations are supposed to be confidential but as a member of the public he has to wonder just what are they asking for. He congratulated the Board on their accomplishments. Mr. Burke said he thinks there is a great difference in expenses by grade level and feels the junior school students deserve more of the resources. He said he would like to see more information on the website on fiscal matters.

Val Francisi

Ms. Francisi said at the March 9th meeting a comment was made about rumors being a Vineland thing, which brings her here tonight. She cannot pretend to know why some people start rumors and suggests going to the source to verify the facts. Ms. Francisi said there is a rumor regarding the budget that this Board wants to look into outsourcing support staff to a private company. She said while watching the Board meeting it was made clear to her that no such comment was made and the rumor was false. Ms. Francisi asked if the Board could address this during their closing remarks.

Board Member

Comments:

Ms. Acosta thanked everyone for coming out tonight. She said that every Board member has done their due diligence in terms of trying to come up with what they believe is in the best interest of the children. Ms. Acosta said her only issue with the budget is that she feels that every year we are going to continue to face a shortfall because she does not anticipate the state sending more money our way. She said that she would like to see an additional 1% tax increase in order for us to be able to invest in additional technology and programs, which may help our district go in the right direction. Ms. Acosta thanked Dr. Gruccio, Mrs. Haley and central administration for all their hard work.

Mr. Sbrana thanked Mrs. Haley for her presentation and the members of the public who came out tonight. He said we will continue to do the best we can with what we have and try to come up with alternative additional sources of revenue.

Ms. Rios said she hopes that the ideas and suggestions submitted by community members, educators and Board members are taken into consideration for the benefit of the district.

Ms. Codispoti thanked everyone for coming out tonight. She thanked Ms. Francisi for clarifying the rumor, which she has heard several times. Ms. Codispoti said we are all here for the students and district. She thanked her fellow Board members and said we do our best. Ms. Codispoti announced that the Dennis Tanner fund raiser will be held this Friday.

Mr. DeWinne thanked Mr. Burke for being involved and speaking. He announced that there will be a fundraiser held at Luna's this Friday from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. for the Dennis Tanner Scholarship. Mr. DeWinne said Mr. English has been a great advocate for the Board, district, taxpayers and students and he is proud to serve under him.

Dr. Gruccio thanked everyone for taking the time to come out. She said we truly appreciate all that our employees do. Dr. Gruccio thanked the Board and said this has been a long, difficult and exhausting process. She said none of these decisions have been easy and we always try to keep children at the forefront of every decision we make. Dr. Gruccio thanked the central administration staff for the endless hours they put into this process.

Mr. English said we heard the rumors that Ms. Francisi spoke about. He said the word Insight is a popular budget discussion among several school districts because it is helping them keep the classrooms strong. Mr. English said it is a financial piece that has been discussed in the Vineland school district and has gone to committee for general discussion. He said that things may go that way in the future but it all comes down to Board approval. Mr. English said he has built some great relationships in the six years he has been on the Board and believes in the people that are here. He said if you want it done right it takes effort. Mr. English said he thinks the budget process has been the most transparent since he has been on the Board. He said everyone was aware of what was going on and that was the goal. Mr. English thanked everyone who came out this evening along with his fellow Board members and central administration.

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned by voice vote at 8:42 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Helen G. Haley
Board Secretary

HGH:dt

