

MIDDLETOWN LEADS

WHAT IS MIDDLETOWN LEADS?

Middletown Leads is a weekly newsletter intended to connect the Middletown community by providing information about the civic undertakings of the Town.

SECOND PUBLIC HEARING – MAY 29, 2019

At the 2nd Public Hearing, conducted on May 29, 2019, there were a few questions related to Civic Appropriations. One appropriation was removed because the organization had failed to submit its application.

As a result, several recommendations were made for increases to certain organizations. Those recommendations were referred for consideration at the June 3rd Town Council meeting.

By far again, the most attention was directed at the Middletown School Department. The Chair of the School Committee presented a brief PowerPoint which was intended to show how the administrative and non-union bonuses actually saved the department money.

She did concede that, in 2 of the previous years under review, administrators also received salary increases. Questions were asked about allocated funds that were sometimes called *Performance Bonuses* and at other times *One Time Stipends*. Note was taken that the allocations were awarded in Executive Session and were not always reported out in public session.

Discussion continued relative to the line item in the Capital Improvement Program for Technology Replacement. It was recalled that, when the School Department made its initial investment in technology in a process that councilors continue to regard as under a cloud of questionable practice, there was discussion about the anticipated need for a recurring line item. The Technology line item was listed at \$260,000.

In answer to a question about the cost of technology, it was stated that the district spends \$226 per student per year on technology.

FY 2020 BUDGET ORDINANCE

Following the closing of the Public Hearings, the Town Council voted on the appropriations for the FY 2020 Operating Budget. Minor adjustments were made to individual requests.

The School Department had asked for a 4% increase; however, the recommendation regarding the School Department was adjusted by a reduction of \$1,060,428, effectively providing a zero increase.

It should be noted that state law precludes reductions in school department budgets; it does not regulate the amount of increases – other than to limit them to a maximum of 4%.

A zero increase means that the Middletown School Department will have to review its anticipated expenditures and make sufficient cuts that will balance its budget.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT SYLVIA'S AFTERTHOUGHT

Council President Sylvia ended the Budget Hearing with a reminder to council members as well as to all Middletown citizens:

“This council has spent hour after hour discussing the East side of town. It would seem we need to assess if we are treating all areas of the town - all residents - equally, including the West side of town. It's time we realize that we are *one* town, not just the East side.”

PREVIEW

The Town Council received a letter from Newport Superintendent Colleen Jermain requesting an opportunity to speak to the Council at its June 3rd. meeting in regard to the possibility of unifying all or part of the Newport and Middletown School Districts.

The state's School Facility Report identified issues that need to be addressed, among them the poor condition of Rogers High School.

The topic of school regionalization or high school consolidation has been in the air since 2009. For a couple of years, the island school administrators among others, had met regularly to discuss their common issues and explore the possibility of working together for the benefit of the students in all 3 communities. Eventually Portsmouth withdrew from the process.

Discussions continued at the municipal level until Middletown formed an exploratory committee consisting of Town Council members, School Committee members, a prior Town Council President, and a retired Middletown School Superintendent. Recommendations were made to participate in further discussions with a larger committee, expanded to include Newport representatives.

These discussions led to a non-binding referendum on the 2016 Presidential election ballot which resulted in approval in Newport but a rejection in Middletown by a vote of 54.6 % to 46.4 %, close enough to keep the subject alive.

Last year's action by the state in reviewing school facilities resurrected the issue. The condition of Rogers High School and the need to replace a failing building brought the issue to the forefront, especially in light of the size of the potential reimbursement. It was generally conceded that Newport was unlikely to approve a bond for a new school without Middletown's participation.

As a result, a member of the Middletown Town Council made a motion to initiate discussions with Newport relative to collaboration. There was no second to the motion and no action was taken.

A year later, the Newport Superintendent has again raised the issue and requested consideration of conducting discussions. It remains to be seen if the Middletown Town Council will agree to talk.

FOOTNOTE

Editorial essays appear occasionally at the following website: <https://middletownleads.blogspot.com/>