

OFFICE OF THE
FIRST SELECTMAN

Telephone (203) 563-0100
Fax (203) 563-0299

Email to: Bill.Brennan@Wiltonct.org



William F. Brennan
First Selectman

Susan A. Bruschi
Second Selectman

Richard F. Creeth

Harold E. Clark

Ted W. Hoffstatter

TOWN HALL
238 Danbury Road
Wilton, CT 06897

**BOARD OF SELECTMEN
SPECIAL MEETING
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2011
MEETING ROOM B, WILTON TOWN HALL**

PRESENT: First Selectman Bill Brennan, Selectman Richard Creeth, Selectman Hal Clark, Selectman Ted Hoffstatter **ABSENT:** Selectman Susan Bruschi

ALSO PRESENT: Sandy Dennies, CFO, six members of public

WORK SESSION TO DISCUSS WILTON SENIOR SURVEY

Chairman Bill Brennan called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

Background – The BOS initiated a professional survey of the Wilton senior community by NESC who presented the final survey report on May 16, 2011. A public information meeting was then held to hear comments from the public. Mr. Brennan prepared comments for tonight's meeting on background, core findings, the current senior tax relief and support programs (attached).

In the current FY budget, the BOS and Board of Finance supported tax relief to applicants, amounting to \$1,068,000 which is 33.5% over FY 10. The BOS has regularly made increases to our basic core elderly tax relief program. In addition, we created an inflation adjustment linked to property tax increases.

Looking at the Senior Survey Strategies and Tactical Suggestions (attached), there is a suggestion to "actively involve more seniors in Town Government". When looking at the major boards and commissions in Wilton, 35-45% of those currently serving are seniors (60 and older).

Over the next few years, we expect to see a further increase in the senior segment of Wilton's population. Currently, 17.5% of the population is 60+ years of age and 1.4% of our seniors are at the poverty level, compared to 6.3% in Fairfield County as a whole.

Where do we go from here? Solutions usually have a price tag. Mr. Brennan stated that we are facing an extremely difficult budget. All town departments have been instructed to prepare flat budgets for the next budget year, and in order to do that, we

will likely have to look at lay-offs. How much more can be done at this time is the issue. However, we do want to find ways for seniors to be able to stay in town. Mr. Creeth added that we are starting to see signs of inflation now which could make matters even worse.

Mr. Clark is concerned because while talking to people in town, he came across three couples in their mid-40s, with no children in the schools, and they are leaving CT because the taxes are too high. Their quality of life can be improved by leaving this state. The problem is not concentrated in one age group. The cost of living in this area, including taxes, is having detrimental effects on everyone. We need to figure out how to encourage housing development for seniors. Allowing people to down-size in this town is the only way to reduce their living costs.

Mr. Hoffstatter added that the Town budget has increased by 92% since FY 2000. That is staggering. The Plan of Conservation and Development indicates that affordable housing is needed for mixed use areas in town, and affordable housing specifically for seniors. For senior services and activities, what is happening at the Town improved Senior Center is good. We cannot afford to build a new senior center right now. But it is important to note that it is not only seniors who are concerned about rising taxes.

Mr. Brennan - The underlying premise is that additional tax relief to seniors would stem their leaving Wilton. The question is - how much would make a measurable difference? Our tax relief program has increased rather substantially in a short period of time. We don't know if it changed anyone's decision to stay or go.

Mr. Creeth – we have to continue to look harder at economies of scale, regionalization, etc. We also have to look to Hartford. 2/3 of our budget is driven by educational costs which are largely outside of our control. That's a challenge, not just for us. We should not overlook the fact that we need to talk to our state reps about what can be done at the state level to help out. In reading this report, all charts indicate that seniors are a growing portion of community. We need to get creative. Mr. Dartley suggested that we insulate seniors from tax increases related to the education portion of the budget. We have to try to think outside the box. Mr. Brennan pointed out that the issue is what can be done legally to help. For example, our tax relief program complies with state statutes. Mr. Clark agreed that we need to determine whether we have legal authority to charge people of one age group differently than another age group – that is different than senior tax relief.

Mr. Creeth – the issue we face is that we would love to give seniors more relief. Our current program costs the taxpayers over \$1 million for the seniors who applied for tax relief. He feels that the program needs to remain “needs based”.

Public Comment:

Mr. Ken Dartley – “Seniors need a foreseeable tax situation. We have to stabilize their taxes if you want them to stay here. If the seniors leave, the younger residents will have

the total burden of the school budget. The increase in the level of elderly tax relief has increased, but increased from basically nothing and is still very close to nothing. In Ridgefield, seniors on tax relief receive \$1,000 a year from the Town. That still won't prevent people from leaving. Taxes have gone up dramatically in the last ten years but they are not making any more money."

Mr. Gerry Holdridge – "The senior survey that was performed by a local group of residents came up with the primary conclusion that taxes were the biggest problem with seniors leaving town. The only suggestion from the tax relief committee last year that wasn't implemented was deferments with a 0% interest rate. The BOS and BOF decided on 3%. Deferments cost the Town nothing. Freeze taxes at the level they are, defer and raise the income limits. Another way, is to work on Hartford so that we have a tax freeze like many other states because that is something we can't do without law being changed. In Wilton, we assess land very high. We have very few land sales to tell us that land is worth that much. A 2 acre plot is assessed at \$560,000 for land alone, while a 1 acre is \$530,000 (market value) and a ½ acre lot at \$450,000 for the land. Small homes on small lots are being assessed disproportionately high. The Senior Center has had some improvements but that is only a temporary solution. We do need to meet the requirement for transportation for those who can no longer drive."

Mr. Holdridge also pointed out that tax deferrals have an effect on the tax rate. He suggests bonding that amount each year, at low interest.

Mr. Graupner – "You should be making the same speech to parents with children in schools. The BOS seems to have already figured out what to say and how to position. Every year, the school side of the budget goes up and the seniors get no benefit from that. Senior taxes should be frozen where they are right now."

Next steps – Another special BOS meeting will be arranged. Mr. Creeth would like to see senior tax relief as a separate line in the BOS budget. He will begin to draft a program model.

Having no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:50 p.m.

Jan Andras
Recording Secretary