

(The following is not a verbatim transcript of comments or discussion that occurred during the meeting, but rather a summarization intended for general informational purposes. All motions and votes are the official records).

SPECIAL FINANCE COMMITTEE – APRIL 8, 2025 **(BUDGET HEARINGS)**

A special meeting of the Finance Committee was held on Tuesday, April 8, 2025 in the Cranston High School East Auditorium, 899 Park Ave., Cranston, Rhode Island.

I. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at

II. ROLL CALL

Present: Councilwoman Bridget R. Graziano
Councilman Andy Andujar
Councilman Frank J. Ritz, Jr.
Councilman Michael A. Traficante
Councilwoman Kristen E. Haroian, Vice-Chair
Council Vice-President Daniel Wall, Chair
Council President Jessica M. Marino, Ex-Officio

Also Present: Councilman Christopher E. Buonanno
Council Richard D. Campopiano
Anthony Moretti, Chief of Staff
Christopher Millea, City Solicitor
Thomas Zidelis, Director of Finance
David DiMaio, City Council Budget Analyst
Rosalba Zanni, Assistant City Clerk/Clerk of Committees

III. PUBLIC HEARINGS*AND PUBLIC COMMENT:

Domenic Fusco, School Committee Chair, appeared to speak and stated that for the past fifteen years he has appeared before the City Council as a parent, a School Committee Member and now as Chair of the School Committee and each year, he has made the same request or plea, to please fund the School Department Budget. He thanked recent Councils for their support that they have given to the Schools and additional funds they have contributed the past few years. He is also deeply appreciative of the Mayor's recent increase in funding to our Schools. The School Department is the largest Department in the City and they employ nearly 12,000 employees, maintain over 20 buildings and most importantly, educate more than 11,000 students. Despite what you may have heard, Cranston is one of the rare Districts that have not seen a decline in student enrollment post pandemic, but if you look at our State and local funding levels, you might think we had. In February, for the first time in his tenure, the District issued 51 layoff notices to teachers. If we can't secure additional funding, that number could

grow and the consequences could be devastating. We are showing results despite operating on fewer resources than many comparable Districts. According to RIDE's data, Cranston students are seeing gains in both RICAS and SAT scores. Our graduation rate stands at 88.2 %, well-above the State average of 84%. Cranston East already has five students who have been accepted to Brown University. The Class of 2024 received 124 different college and university acceptances to 70 different colleges so far this year. Cranston West Seniors have been accepted to 85 colleges, including three more to Brown. Cranston High School West is fourth ranked public school in Rhode Island. Those numbers are destined to rise as more acceptances arise. Our third High School, the AES continues to thrive. Students are earning credentials to allow them entry into the LUNA's Apprenticeship Program. Attendance scores are also on the rise. All of this and we are doing it with less. Cranston spent an average of \$19,483 per student, well over the State average of \$22,000 and less than Districts like Warwick, West Warwick, Johnston and East Providence. Over 80% of the budget goes towards salaries and benefits. Like the City, they are grappling with rising health costs as a self-insured District. Also dealing with rising costs for utilities. Major concern that he has is their Capital Reserve Fund once referred to as the Rainy Day Fund. Years of underfunding having left them with dangerously low reserves. His biggest fear is something major will go wrong and we won't be able to respond. He asked that the Council keep in mind that three-quarter of the School Buildings are more than 70 years old. The band aid and duct tape approach just does not cut it anymore. He understands how hard it is to find additional funds, but he knows that they are running out of road to kick the can down. We are at the end and now is the time to act. Anything the Council can do to support them will not only be appreciated, it will be a meaningful investment in our future for our students and our City.

Liz Larkin, President of Cranston Teachers Alliance and also a teacher at Park View Middle School, appeared to speak and stated that she has been employed with the School Department for 39 years and is in her 16th year as President. They have been the solution many times over. All the people present this evening have been the solution for the City for the constant financial woes. Once again, she stands before the City Council to not only encourage the Council to support the Superintendent's budget, but to fully fund the Schools. Through the 16 years of her leadership, she has over and over again repeated that the level-funding, under-funding and barely funding cannot continue. They have eliminated programs, they have eliminated curriculum, they have eliminated staff, they have watched our former Mayor, Mayor Fung, hand the keys to our School Budget over to a big box corporate Charter Achievement First, which has pilfered from our Fund One before it even begins every year for millions and millions of dollars. They have returned less, they have changed schedules, they have brought in millions and millions of dollars of Grants from their National Union, American Federation of Teachers to pay for unfunded mandates. The City leadership states that they support the Schools, but that reality is not in the City of Cranston. They have not always supported the public Schools for a very long time and Mayors and other Elected Officials have relied heavily on State Aid. That is a fact, yet they still achieve great things with all the people in the Schools. All of our Schools are flourishing. The Mayor stated that we should give our best to the citizens of Cranston. They have, they do and they will continue to give, however, it is time to give to the Schools, it is time for the community and the City of Cranston to give to the Schools, to give to their employees and fully fund them. All our School employees are the lowest compensated in the State and that is unacceptable. Your educators deserve better, they deserve equitable treatment, the same consideration given to other departments. Cranston Public Schools and her members are her pride and joy and she thanked them all for everything that they do every day. They should be supported by the City of Cranston and asked this great City Council to facilitate that support.

Anthony Melillo, 33, Harvard St., School Committee Vice-Chair, appeared to speak and stated that the School Committee respectfully asks that it seriously consider additional funds and financial support. The School Committee each year faces significant challenges in balancing their budget while maintaining a high-quality education that our students deserve. Several key factors contribute to that challenge: unfunded legislative mandates, transportation costs, contractual obligations, rising fuel costs, out of District costs, Special Education costs and aging infrastructure. Our teachers rank 19th in pay compared to other Districts such as Warwick, East Greenwich, East Providence, Cumberland and North Kingstown making it difficult to attract and retain educators. Despite these challenges, they remain committed to delivering the best education possible. He thanked Mayor Hopkins for \$2,234,000 and his efforts, however, as the second largest District in the State, Cranston must provide adequate resources to retain qualified teachers and staff ensuring the highest education for our students. The Mayor's proposed \$2.3 million increase represents only a portion of the \$3.9 million requested. The School Committee budget already includes over \$2 million in savings and reductions. Deeper cuts will only erode and jeopardize Cranston's quality of education system. He asked that the Council please consider the negative consequences of further cuts to a great system and hopes the Council will be able to find in the budget additional funds to allocate to the children of the Cranston Public Schools. He urged the City Council to support our Schools.

Keith Catone, School Committee Member, appeared to speak and stated that last week the Mayor proposed \$2,279,000 increase to the City's appropriation for the Schools. That is 2.3% over the current appropriation. School Committee budget proposed an increase of \$3,971,075, which is 4.0% increase over this year's appropriation. To the Mayor's credit, the \$2.28 million increase is the largest from the City in fifteen years. Because it is the largest increase in the last fifteen years, it is not enough to fund their needs. Due to the chronic underfunding of the Schools, it does not meet their needs. The School Committee's balanced budget already has a built in assumption of \$2.4 million in savings, which is another fancy way of saying cuts. The Mayor's budget proposal would increase that number to \$4.1 million in cuts in the budget. There is no fat, no fluff, no flex in this budget. They have no Rainy Day Fund to speak of because it was used in FY2024 to balance the budget due to the chronic underfunding. The per pupil expenditures will continue and still lag behind our peers in the State and the State average. We will still struggle to pay our teachers, Administrators and other staff what they deserve and we will continue to need to search for ways to make cuts, including increasing class sizes and limiting our cutting services without the proper funding. The Mayor's presentation also states that the State has to step up to provide more funding for our Schools as well. He completely agrees and we need to help our State Delegation understand that they need to fight to improve the education funding formula so that Cranston gets its fair share and the support they need to serve their students' population that is increasingly complex in its educational needs. He just learned this week that the State systematically undercuts economically disadvantaged students in a way that mathematically withholds at least \$4 million in additional State funding from Cranston Schools. Hundreds of millions of dollars is withheld from the whole State. Every single District would get more if there was proper counting over the last fifteen years and the City has increased its contributions to the School Department by a total of \$12,865,730, an average of approximately \$858,000 a year. That is a 15% increase over fifteen years. In that same period, the State has increased its total to the Schools by over \$49 million over \$3.2 million a year, which represents an increase over the last fifteen years of 166%. He understands that raising revenues might mean increasing City tax rate and people that he talked to say that they are willing to pay more in taxes if they see it come back to them in City services.

Jeff Deveanne, 7 Jasmine Court, Cranston resident, father and taxpayer, appeared to speak and stated that \$2.9 million sounds like a lot of money, but it is not even close to enough. He urged the City Council and the Mayor to do more for the Schools. He also urged Cranston residents to consider if they want Cranston to be a place where the Schools have to be taken to the financial brink where alarm bells have to sound on the School budget when there are people in this City who run to the Schools for photo ops, run to the Schools to celebrate the accomplishments of the Schools, but they are nowhere to be found when it is time to give out the money. He would like Cranston to be the kind of City that honors its Schools, that treats the Schools like the pillar of this City that they have been and the pride of this City that they have been and not a political stepping stone or photo op. He asked that the Council please do what they can, what they know is the right thing for the Schools.

Kathrn Crowley, 290 Meshanticut Valley Parkway, School Committee Member, appeared to speak and stated that she would like to speak from experience and what can happen if you do not fully fund our Schools now. Unless we pay the teachers a competitive raise, they are going to leave Cranston. She speaks from experience as the former Superintendent in East Providence. East Providence was second from the bottom. East Providence is up there now and it took her eight years to get it there and Cranston is below East Providence. You have a lot of outstanding teachers and unless we provide a competitive salary for them, we are going to lose them and that would be a shame. A lot of the elementary schools' conditions are in trouble and you have to consider that. It scares her as a School Committee member that the Rainy Day Fund has next to nothing left in it. As an example, she heard the Bain elevator is broken. The Cafeteria is on the second floor. How do we get handicap children to the second floor to eat lunch? She would like an answer to that question. You can't level fund the School District for two years and expect to make up for it in one year by giving them more money. Another volatile line item is Special Education Out of District Placement.. There is no control over that. You have to provide for that. There is not enough in that line item as well to support that. That is a dangerous line item. You need to fully fund this budget.

Eliane Boucher, 43 Magnolia St., mother of two Cranston students and present President of PTO at Dutemple, appeared to speak and asked that the City Council fully fund the Schools. The teachers and staff have been doing more with less. Lack of adequate funding has also put pressure on the parent groups like the PTO to fill the gaps. This places additional financial burden on the families who are already facing increased financial pressure due to inflation. She asked that the City Council recognize that our teachers and staff have proven that they can do more with less, but now we should let them do more with more. Our students deserve to see what this District is capable of when it is fully funded.

Janice Ruggieri, 45 Overhill Rd., appeared to speak and stated that for fifteen years she has either stood before the City Council at meetings or been in the audience for budget hearings. She is present this evening to challenge the City Council to look at the City budget and look at other departments and find funding that might be cut and moved over to the School Department. As an example, in the Fire Department, there is a line item for "Uniform Cleaning" for \$278,000. The Police is \$231,600 and they are not required to provide receipts. There is also a line item in their budget for "Uniforms" for Fire and Police for \$205,000 and \$150,000 for total of \$864,600 for "Uniform Cleaning" and "Uniforms". From an Overtime perspective, there is \$4.5 million in the Fire budget for Overtime and \$1,963,600 in the Police budget for Overtime for total of \$6,463,600 just for Overtime. From a

planning perspective, she is also looking at why the City is planning on spending \$600,000 on computer infrastructure if in three years there is a line item to replace Fire Headquarters to the tune of \$20 million. She challenged this City Council to look at the entire City budget and see where there actually might be some fat to be cut, not the School's budget.

Stephanie Culhane, 6 Brettenwoods Drive., Johnston, appeared to speak and stated that she has stood before the City Council and before the City now she thinks since 2006 or 2007 and served on the School Committee in 2008. People move to a City because they have great Schools. Young families want to invest in a City for the quality of the Schools. She wants to continue to be proud and wants her children to continue to be proud of our City. We can only do that if it is funded and do not have to make cuts. These teachers took -0- for three years. There is not another City Union that took three zeros but these teachers did to help save the City and to save the Schools and she is proud of every single one of them and you should also be.

Nina Voccio, 23 Harwood St., parent of three Cranston students, appeared to speak and asked that the City Council consider that fully funding our Schools really means supporting our most vulnerable student population. It means ensuring that the students who need it desperately get access to the services they need. She urged the City Council to fully fund our Schools because the kids, like hers, really count on it.

Chminta Modi, 168 Park View Blvd., parent of a first grader at Rhodes Elementary School, appeared to speak and stated that he did some research and found that Cranston has the lowest tax rate in the State at 1.361%. Everyone else is increasing taxes. To say to not increase taxes and not fund teachers and tell them to be competitive at the same time is sort of asking best of all world. He did a quick calculation and if someone has a \$500,000 house and you increase the property tax from 1.36% to 1.4% that is \$100 a year. That is going out for dinner one night. He thinks we can all afford that. Increase the taxes and make education funding whole, make the Schools better, make them functional, make our playgrounds more functional. To say that we cannot do better is tone deaf right now.

Jenneane Lunn, 1291 Narragansett Blvd., retired public School teacher from Vermont, appeared to speak and stated that being present this evening and hearing all the passion people have for their public Schools makes her really happy that she moved to Cranston. She is in support of the School Committee budget and would like to see it fully funded. She is very concerned right now because we may not possibly have a Department of Education and possibly have big cuts in Medicaid and that is more money our Schools stand to lose. Everyone has to work together to make sure our Schools are fully funded at the level the Superintendent and School Committee support. Even though she mainly is living on Social Security, she supports raising taxes to fund the Schools. She feels that the Schools are the heart of our democracy.

Lev Pablo appeared to speak and stated that what he cares about is the people. For all the support that the City Council has given the Schools, for the heroic efforts of our School Committee and Administration and all of the teachers, he would like to say thank you. At the same time, he thinks it is vitally important that our students get the kind of education so that they can make their way in the 21st Century. As he has learned more about this issue, he has learned how underfunded our School Department is. He has learned how the City has level funded the Schools for a number of years. He now understands that that cannot continue. How are we supposed to deliver the education that our students need and deserve to build our City for the future if we can't provide them with what they need? He fully supports the budget that was put forth by the School Committee. We have to find the money.

He is willing to pay higher property taxes. Maybe what needs to be done is look at the entire budget of our City to see if we can cut back in certain areas, raise property taxes a little bit and all of a sudden, we have \$3.9 million. He thinks the City Council can do it, he thinks they should do it. He thinks he and everyone in this room and everyone in the City would benefit from that.

Karen Rosenberg, 46 Bow St., appeared to speak and stated that she saw the statistics about the pre pupil spending in Cranston versus other Rhode Island communities. She heard how underpaid the teachers are here. She does not have kids in the School system, but she feels like teaching the kids is really important, paying teachers and other School staff a reasonable wage is important. It is embarrassing on how far behind Cranston is to other communities. She too, as a Cranston taxpayer, is willing to pay more so we can do the right thing by the kids in the City.

Paige Chafee, 15 Lantern Lane, History teacher at Cranston High School West, appeared to speak and stated that she is working in a classroom with no heat and leak in the ceiling when it rains. We need to fully fund our Schools and keep up with our facilities. We cannot keep doing more with less.

James Muro, 105 Concord Ave., parent of two School students and his wife is a teacher in Cranston, appeared to speak and asked that the Council show the students and the amazing teachers their support and show the State how to handle this and let's be leaders and not followers. Let's fund these Schools.

Meg Johnson, 145 Villa Ave., mom of two Cranston students and Co-President of Edgewood Highlands PTO and educator, appeared to speak and asked that the City Council fully fund our Schools. These people deserve to be funded.

Katie Kelly, 1122 Narragansett Blvd., Vice-President of Edgewood Highlands PTO and mom of a Kindergartner, appeared to speak and asked for the Schools to be fully funded. While the Police are asking \$400,000 for a SWAT vehicle, a group of moms are spending what very little free time they have away from their kids to help teachers fund things like field trips, buy books and even painted their own school because they were told it was not a priority. She hopes that the Schools become a priority and it is time we start putting our money in the right places provide the right funding for our Schools and in turn our futures.

Allana Cotrell, 100 Bartlett Ave., parent of a Cranston student and educator in another School District, appeared to speak in support of fully funding the School budget.

Sara Lou, 191 Maplewood Ave., mom of a Cranston student, appeared to speak and echoed a lot of the statements made by prior speakers. She stated that our teachers are doing an extraordinary job with what they have been given. Investing in public education is not about buildings, it is about dignity, it is about opportunity, it is about showing every child in Cranston that they matter regardless of their Zip Code. She asked the City Council to fully invest and fund our Schools.

- ***SCHOOL DEPARTMENT, SCHOOL HEALTH INSURANCE***

Superintendent Jeanine Nota-Masse and **Joseph Balducci**, Chief Financial Officer, appeared to speak.

Superintendent Nota-Masse stated that she is humbled and grateful for all the people who are present this evening supporting our Schools and our kids. Our Schools are truly a source of pride here in Cranston. We want to maintain a quality School Department for the families without crippling our City, however, underfunding is beginning to really take a toll on the quality of education that we can offer. Public education is a long-term investment and when we fail to adequately support it, we risk shortchanging not only the students in our classroom but the future of our entire community. Our buildings do need improvements, they are falling apart and we are putting very expensive band-aids just to get through the year. We are at a crossroads if we want to continue to provide an enriching and comprehensive education to all our students, we do need the City Council's support. We need an investment in the teachers and Administrators who give their best every single day, who often work with limited resources and facing ever-growing expectations from State and Federal mandates, which often come without financial support. Without the proper financial support we are at risk of losing some of our most talented professionals to other Districts or industries that can offer better wages and resources. When teachers are overworked and underpaid, it becomes harder to keep them in our classrooms and ultimately our students suffer. We must also offer robust programs that engage students and help them both academically and personally. Her Administration works every day to be a good steward of taxpayer money. We want to have vibrant schools that provide opportunities for all our graduates, however, without necessary funding, these programs are on the verge of being scaled back or eliminated completely. The time has come for us to act decisively. They need the funding to ensure our Schools are fully staffed with talented educators, that our students have access to the programs they need and that our staff is fairly compensated for their hard work. They are not just demands, they are needs and they are essentials to the continued growth and success of our entire community. Unfortunately, much of our spending is beyond our control. Costs from the State for pensions, healthcare, claims, outside tuition, etc. are just examples of costs that we cannot control or in some cases even predict. On behalf of the teachers, Administrators and students of Cranston, she asked that the City Council prioritize funding for our Schools. Together we can provide the resources and support necessities to help our students thrive, our educators remain in our classrooms and our Schools continue to be a source of genuine pride for every Cranstonian and all of us.

Chair asked if there were any questions from Committee Members.

Councilman Traficante stated that the year 2010 was not a pretty scene for the members of the School Committee at the time. It was not pretty because of the lack of appropriate local funding for education back then. The School Committee at that time was faced with, by the way of a Court Order, funding only those programs that were must have and eliminate those who were nice to have programs. The result was three consecutive years cutting all cultural art programs, cutting all after school activities, cutting all Middle School and High School sports programs, laying off several teachers and increasing class sizes to name a few. As a former educator, he does not want to experience that situation again and is sure the members of the School Committee do not want to see that also. Our 11,000 students were the big losers in that particular situation and he knows that the City Council will make every effort to eliminate that kind of a situation. He asked for clarification, in the 2025-2026 budget assumptions by the Administration. He stated that the total appropriation for the Cranston School Department for FY2026 is \$187.7 million, an increase of \$7.7 million from FY2025 adopted budget of \$180 million. That statement is deceiving and incorrect. He asked if that is correct. Mr. Balducci stated that looking at current year budget 2024-2025, it is being understated on the City side by approximately \$3.4 million. The reason for that is when this body adopted the 2024-2025 budget in early May, the State did not complete their budget process until mid-June so when the General Assembly adopted the Statewide

budget to include education aid coming to all Districts, Cranston was a winner. We received approximately \$3 million more than what the Governor had projected. That never made it into the City side of the budget so when we look at year over year, the current year budget is understated on the City document. It is understated by approximately \$3.4 million. Once that gets added in, then the increase would be approximately \$2.3 million as proposed by the Mayor and then approximately \$1.9 million as proposed by the Governor. Right now, it stands at approximately \$7 million. When you remove \$3.4 million, that is the true increase year over year.

Councilman Trafficante stated that he is very concerned about the current year's budget because it might spill over into next year causing a further problem for the School Department in addition to the \$3.9 million that they are asking for. He questioned where we stand in the current budget and will the School Department possibly finish in the black or will there be a deficit in the forthcoming year. Mr. Balducci stated that every year they have to make some assumptions on some internal savings so in the year they are in, that number was as high as \$3 million, but as he mentioned, they were lucky enough to get some additional State Aid, but that did not erase the entire deficit because they were hoping for approximately \$1.9 million from the City and they received approximately \$200,000 so that left a budget gap of approximately \$1.7 million that they had to make up as the year went on. Then the State adopted this year's budget on June 27th. The School Department thought they were ok and they had to deal with the \$1.7 million problem, but last minute they gave back some givebacks to the retirees, COLAS, that were taken years ago and they thought it was going to affect municipalities and School Districts in the budget that we are discussing this evening. The problem is that overnight, he was notified that the pension rates went up for the year that we are in and when he recalculated the obligation overnight, it went to \$1.2 million in the hole. Taking that \$1.2 million, \$1.7 million that we have to try to find and are having difficulties, he can stand before the Council today and state that we are not going to run a surplus and he has never said that in the fifteen plus years. He does not have the final figure yet, but we are in dire straits this year. As it has been mentioned, unfortunately, our buildings are in disrepair. In developing next year's budget, we are already starting from a negative position and we try to put funds back as much as we can, but when you have contractual obligations, fixed costs, unfunded mandates, there is no room to adequately fund this budget.

Councilwoman Graziano thanked everyone who came out this evening. She asked what the effect on the Schools would be on the \$2.4 million that the School Department is looking to potentially cut, which is not included in the \$3.9 million. Superintendent Nota-Masse stated that in order for them to realize that kind of savings, it has to come in staff and over the past several years with underfunding or limited increases in funding, we have tried very hard to avoid cutting staff or doing things that they think directly impacts kids. The first year that they were underfunded they started looking at utilities and things that really do not hit kids directly. That is year one, we are in year three. There is no other way that they can meet those demands of millions of dollars without cutting staff and that is where kids are impacted. They are a people business. For them to meet their kind of demand they are laying off 51 teachers. She does not know how many of those people will be called back, which results in cuts, which results in higher class sizes. Councilwoman Graziano asked if there has ever been any discussion to try to reduce the overall building cost to do some type of solar to reduce some of the costs. Mr. Balducci stated that they partnered with the solar farm located outside of Cranston and that generates approximately \$150,000 net savings to the District. They have taken advantage of every single lighting project that Grid and Rise has made available over the years and they partnered with a company called Silent Sherper and what they do for us is monitor the usage month over month and they actually advocate and represent us with the utility companies and they will tell us when natural gas is at an all time low and we should lock in for a year or six months and that is the same for electricity.

Councilwoman Graziano asked if it is possible to put solar on the buildings. Superintendent Nota-Masse stated that they have looked into that several years ago and they tried it at Cranston West. The issues they faced with that is the roof that will support a solar panel has to be younger than 20 years. Before they even start, you would be talking about \$1 to \$2 million, depending on the size of the building, to replace the roof and then install the solar panels. It was their experience several years ago when they did that at Cranston West that it did not manifest in a great deal of savings even after they went through the roofing project and putting the solar panels. At this point they did not see that they got the savings that they thought outweighed the cost of having to upgrade all the roofs. Obviously, the newer buildings are much more energy efficient.

Councilman Ritz asked if we have looked at doing a Bond for just School Maintenance and it could also offset the unexpected costs that mainly come from the building maintenance. Mr. Balducci stated that when Councilman Traficante was Mayor and served on the School Committee, he always stressed the need to float those types of repair and renovation Bonds every few years. A few years ago, when the voters approved approximately \$140 million of School renovations, within that sum of funds was approximately \$16 to \$17 million. While they were doing five showcase projects they knew the rest of the District was going to get that over that time. Unfortunately, when COVID hit and prices went through the roof, that cushion that they had had to be used elsewhere so they lost that opportunity. Superintendent Nota-Masse stated that if every election cycle we had small Bonds, they would be a help. They are also reminded very frequently that within the funding of the School Department is the payment of their Indebtedness. While she fully supports the Bonding, she does not want it to blow back at them that they are costing more money by having to pay for the Debt Service.

Councilman Campopiano asked if there are any programs that will suffer if the Schools do not receive this money. Superintendent Nota-Masse stated that they work really hard to maintain programming for kids. They look at curriculum offerings, especially at the High Schools by staff. If they cut staff then the number of electives or the variety of electives will be impacted. If they start getting to the point where band and sports are cut, she can't do that job and she does not believe in it and thinks that the kids in our District deserve better. If that comes to pass, someone else is going to do it because she can't do it.

Councilman Buonanno stated he hears the concerns of the people. He lives in Cranston, works in Cranston and the Council will try as hard as they can to support the Schools. He asked how much less we are projecting to get from the State. Mr. Balducci stated that State Aid is made up of three components. The core instructional value of the amount of money that the State will give every student in every School District. On top of that, they give what they call student success factors. Other key component is what they define as the State share ratio. Year over year, the State will determine, based on information received from municipalities, how rich or not rich they are. In the coming year, the share ratio is approximately 54.5%. Going into next year, that rate has been reduced to approximately 53%. Just that minor decrease it is shifting the burden away from the State to the local municipality. If they kept that share ratio at the 54.5% and then just rolled it over, that loss in revenue was approximately \$900,000.

Councilwoman Haroian thanked Superintendent Nota-Masse, Mr. Balducci, parents, School Committee for all they do for our kids. We will all work together and we support you.

Council President Marino stated that she understands the value of education, she understands the hard work of the teachers. The advocacy shown this evening not just from the teachers and other members of the School Department, but members of the community, some parents and some not parents and that shows how important public education is to the City of Cranston and how we value it. For her, she values and respects not only the advocacy shown tonight but all the advocacy shown in advance of this evening. As she has stated in before, the School Department does an amazing job doing more with less. She is grateful for the resourcefulness not only in the classroom but within the public School Department and she has taken pride as a Council Member to dedicating rolling up her sleeves each budget session as a member of this Council to find money in this budget to support the Cranston Public Schools. She has asked the City Administration and she asked the School Administration if they have any concerns or any foreseeable predictions relative to federal funding cuts that are also going to hurt the Schools in this next Fiscal Year. Superintendent Nota-Masse stated that as of right now, they have not heard of any indications that their funding will cease. If it does, they are looking at \$9 to \$10 million in federal money. That touches everything from School lunch to Career and Technical Education to IDA, Literacy Title I Programs. That would be devastating.

Council President Marino referred to State Aid relative to School Transportation and asked the differences they anticipate. Superintendent Nota-Masse stated that currently, the General Assembly has put together a Transportation Commission made up of members of both House and Parties to examine Statewide Transportation. Right now, our cost net is approximately \$200,000 for private schools. The State gives them some credit and they work off that. The Commission is looking at ways to mitigate the costs.

Chair asked if there is any reason to believe that we would get more than that \$1.9 million. Mr. Balducci stated that the Governor builds his budget off of what is known as the October 1st Student Enrollment data. Things happen between October 1st until the General Assembly is ready to wrap up the State budget so the State calls it a March 14th snapshot date. We have not been given any data yet. We are assuming that that information will be rolled into when the General Assembly makes a final decision on the budget. Right now, as proposed by the Governor, approximately \$1.9 million is being proposed.

Chair referred to “School Miscellaneous” in Revenue #1800-48501 and stated that it appears we are expecting a slight increase. He asked what “School Miscellaneous Revenue” is. Mr. Balducci stated that that adjustment in the City is not accurate because the City did not put the final State Aid where it needed to be. There were other adjustments made in our School budget that was adopted in the end of June that have not been incorporated onto the City side as well. Per his analysis and in the School District budget on page 13, which reflects their side of the Revenue categories, that area is actually being level-funded so there is no increase.

Chair referred to “Other Revenue Source” #48502 “School Medicare” there is a \$175,000. He asked if this amount is considered to be safe. Mr. Balducci stated that that increase is also not accurate because there was an adjustment they made on their side and does not properly reflect on the City side. They are level-funded in that area as well between this year and next.

Chair stated that education is very important to him. He thanked the Superintendent and her staff, Mr. Balducci for all the work he does, all the teachers and staff and Administration. He gave his word that he will do everything in his power to help the School Department.

Councilman Traficante questioned if the School Department has -0- in the Capital Reserve. Mr. Balducci stated that there will be approximately \$100,000 if nothing else happens between now and June 30th. Councilman Traficante asked if the Asset Protection money will be used to balance the budget. Mr. Balducci stated, yes. Councilman Traficante questioned the Rainy Day Fund. Mr. Balducci stated that balancing 2023-2024 Fiscal Year, they had to dip into that for approximately \$2.5 million. All of it was not used because they were successful and they achieved a \$200,000 surplus that year. Unfortunately, they are dipping into every source of Revenue there is. \$500,000 is left there as well to be used. With a District our size, there are insufficient resources available at their discretion to continue the attempt to balance the budget.

- ***POLICE DEPARTMENT***

Director Zidelis stated that one overview that you are going to see throughout all the departments is same situation that arose with the School Department last year arose with us relative to the surprise increase relative to pension costs. The Mayor's priorities in his budget address was public Schools, public safety and maintaining municipal services. The one statement he heard from the Mayor's budget presentation is we do not have one department in the City that is satisfied with the budget as it has been presented to the City Council. The Police Department's budget for consideration to the Council is in the amount of \$31,715,807. The proposed budget funds all the contractual obligations and all of our liabilities relative to benefits.

Colonel Michael Winqvist appeared to speak and stated that this is not a big increase in the budget. A lot of it is contractual. There are a lot of fixed costs and there are a few raises that are in the contract that are coming due very shortly. Overtime, unfortunately, cannot be predicted. What the Department asked for and what it was given was \$223,000 less than what they asked for. They also applied for a lot of Grants and, unfortunately, did not receive any. They did their best but, the money is not flowing to Police Departments like they used to do. There are currently two vacancies in the Police Department. They are in the middle of hiring and taking applications now. They are at 147 right now. They expect at least one retirement before the end of this Fiscal Year.

Chair indicated that the Committee will discuss Revenues first.

Council President Marino thanked Colonel Winqvist and expressed her appreciation for everything he and his leadership do and to the men and women in the Department for what they bring to the City every day. In terms of the budget, "VIN Verification" Revenues is tracking better than was projected for this year, however, in the Mayor's budget, there is an increase to \$515,000. Colonel Winqvist stated that when speaking to his fellow Chiefs through the Chiefs Association, a lot of the Cities and Towns are getting out of the VIN Check business because they are not getting the volume. We are lucky to be located in close proximity to the DMV so a lot of times they will send the people to us and we are open five days a week versus a few hours. He suspects that that is going to continue.

Mr. DiMaio asked Colonel Winqvist to expand on the lease agreements in the budget, such as the flock cameras and maintenance agreement. Colonel Winqvist stated that the flock cameras is a lease agreement. There are 29 cameras throughout the City. They have proven over the last five years to be an invaluable asset to the Cranston Police Department and a lot of other Cities have followed suit, including Providence, Pawtucket and others that have flock cameras now. For all 29 cameras, it is approximately \$70,000 a year to maintain that program and we are in a multi-year contract.

Mr. DiMaio questioned the reduction to “Detail Cars” and asked if \$700,000 is attainable. Colonel Winkvist stated that he does and weather has a lot to do with less detail over the winter. This is the time of year where it really picks up and that is where those cars will make money sitting on details.

Councilwoman Haroian thanked Colonel Winkvist and his team for the amazing job they do daily.

Councilman Buonanno echoed Councilwoman Haroian’s statements. He questioned what “Other Revenues” includes. Director Zidelis stated that that is any other Revenue that comes in that we do not have a category for.

Councilman Ritz questioned who does the Grants for the Department. Colonel Winkvist stated that part of a Captain’s job is to review the Department of Justice Grants that come out and submit a proposal. On occasion, they do use Ms. Andoscia and she has been helpful in connecting them with some of the Federal Delegation and trying to put them for earmark money so they have several Grants that they are hopeful for.

Councilman Campopiano thanked Colonel Winkvist and his staff for the wonderful job they do. The number one complaint is speeding and going through stop signs. He asked if the Council has to do something budgetary to assist. Colonel Winkvist stated that they have a line item for the CARE Detail which comes from the Council. They also have Federal money that comes through the State Highway Safety Program, that is Click it or Ticket, Distract Driving Details. They do write a lot of tickets and stop a lot of cars. The Department hears the speeding complaints a lot. A lot of times they put up speed collection boxes to assess the problem. There is plenty of money in the budget for that particular purpose. It is a matter of a lot of Officers do not like to write tickets. A lot do not take the Speed Enforcement Details.

Councilwoman Graziano reiterated appreciation for the Cranston Police Department and for all the work they do. She questioned if fees can be raised. Colonel Winkvist stated that the Detail rate is contractually set by the Union for the Officers’ rate. The car rate, we can raise, but we are right where we need to be if you look at other Cities and Towns. We are raising substantial Revenues.

Director Zidelis stated that every year we go through every line item and review assumptions that we made. Through all the Departments you will see very few estimates that are year to year. We try to be very accurate and conservative with our Revenue estimates.

Discussion took place on Expenditures for the Department.

Councilman Traficante questioned if “Overtime” of \$1.5 million is a realistic number. Colonel Winkvist stated that they asked for \$2.1 million and the Mayor reduced it to \$1,963,000, but they will make it work. Councilman Traficante questioned what “School Initiative” is. Colonel Winkvist stated that that is School Safety Program that was created by Mayor Fung. Councilman Traficante referred to Part-Time Help and asked if that is one or more person. Colonel Winkvist stated that he believes it is more than one. Councilman Traficante questioned “Departmental Expenses”. Colonel Winkvist stated that this will have to be provided. He does not have that information this evening. Councilman Traficante questioned “Maintenance Contracts”. Colonel Winkvist stated that that is for anything that is reoccurring such as computer expenses, subscriptions to Microsoft, Xerox copiers. Councilman Traficante questioned “Education Program”. Colonel Winkvist stated that this is for Police Officers who take College classes. Councilman Traficante asked how many are in that Program. Colonel

Winqvist stated approximately thirty Officers. Councilman Traficante questioned “Computer Expenses”, which is increasing every year. Colonel Winqvist stated that the Department used to have a Captain who took care of a lot of things that now they have to outsource. They had a contract with an outside vendor who handle some of the larger issues and they have a Captain that is going to handle some lower level situations.

Mr. DiMaio clarified that “Departmental Expenses” is like a catch all, normal operations in the office. You will see that throughout the entire budget. Currently, it is annualized running at \$42,000, currently annualized at \$64,000. A lot of payments that are made are made quarterly. What you are seeing now is maybe a little less than what is actually in the budget because we are only through February. So another payment will be coming in March or April.

Councilwoman Graziano asked if “Uniform Allowance” is a contractual obligation. Colonel Winqvist stated that that is contractual.. Councilwoman Graziano asked Colonel Winqvist how comfortable he is with the budget amount for “Replacement Vehicles”. Colonel Winqvist stated that he thinks they will be ok.

Councilman Andujar asked Colonel Winqvist if he thinks that the proposed appropriation for the “Explorer Program” is enough. Colonel Winqvist stated that he thinks that that is enough money. Most of that money is for uniforms. It should cover the expense.

Councilman Ritz questioned “Crossing Guards” and stated that in five years, it almost doubled and also asked how it is determined where Crossing Guards are placed. Colonel Winqvist stated that all the Crossing Guards fall under the Police Department budget. Police Department do not have anything to do with negotiating the contract. Director Zidelis stated that the contract is with a legacy company and we are trying to bid that out. As to the locations of the Crossing Guards, that was established many years ago and have evolved to increase. One of the things we are looking to do next year, in consultation with the Police and School Departments, is look at decreasing the number of sites throughout Cranston. It is something that needs to be reviewed. Colonel Winqvist stated that the School Department handles the bussing for the City and they will suggest the list and give him that list and then he will approve it.

Councilwoman Graziano stated that in the “Capital Improvement” line item, there is a proposal for a SWAT vehicle. She would like more information and why it can’t be regionalized with Warwick. Colonel Winqvist stated that we have had a number of incidents in the City that the SWAT Team must go out and handle situations. Some of them are barricaded and armed subjects. Warwick has ordered their BearCat and has not arrived. If there is an incident, we do not have the luxury of waiting to call another Police Department to come to the second largest City in the State of Rhode Island. He believes the Officers deserve to have one of those vehicles because it is a protective vehicle to save lives. We have enough calls for service that this vehicle is warranted for our SWAT Team and it is a vehicle that will last up to twenty years once it is purchased. He thinks our Officers deserve the protection.

Council President Marino asked how “Ammunition” is tracking. Mr. DiMaio stated that that is on track. Colonel Winqvist stated that they usually make a bulk purchase and that would be it and they would save money that way.

Councilman Traficante asked if we have Mutual Aid. Colonel Winqvist stated that through the Police Chiefs Association and Legislation, we now have a Statewide Mutual Agreement for both emergency and non-emergency situations.

Chair referred to line item #51108 “Severance” and stated that last year it was \$200,000 and this year it is budgeted for \$80,000. Why the decrease? Colonel Winqvist stated that less retirements are anticipated.

Chair referred to line item #52014 “Maintenance Contracts” and questioned drastic increase of over 50%. Colonel Winqvist stated that that is for the flock cameras.

Chair asked Mr. DiMaio how actuals are tracking right now. Mr. DiMaio stated \$275,000 annualized, \$413,000, but payments were made quarterly.

Mr. DiMaio asked if there are any Officers are on long-term disability now that we are paying within the payroll. Colonel Winqvist stated that there is one that has been out on IOD for years and one that could be out long-term that we just received. Mr. DiMaio explained for new Council Members why he asked this question and that is because this is what would cause Overtime to go up.

- ***ANIMAL CONTROL***

Colonel Winqvist appeared to speak and stated that we are fortunate that we do a good job adopting out pets as soon as we get them. They do a good job at the Aimal Shelter. This budget should be sufficient.

Discussion took place on Expenditures.

Councilman Trafficante asked how many individuals are Animal Control Officers in this Department. Colonel Winqvist stated that there are three Animal Control Officers and one is also a Shelter Manager and one Kennel Custodian/Adoption Coordinator. They have four total staff and two are on the road and a third is on the road if needed.

- ***HARBOR MASTER***

Council President Marino stated that we are dealing with the Administration and Police Department to rethink that position. The Charter allows the Council to appoint the Harbor Master and we are looking at potentially having an employee of the Police Department serve as the Harbor Master because the Charter does not limit who that person could be and it is something that would perhaps fit hand and glove with the Police Department.

- ***MUNICIPAL COURT***

This Department will be heard on April 12th.

- ***FIRE DEPARTMENT***

Director Zidelis stated that the current budget recognizes all expiring contractual obligations. It funds all known and anticipated fringe benefit costs throughout the Department. It meets some of the requested increases from the Department. In addition to the budget before the City Council, there is a Reserve for contractual obligations funded in a separate account that, as we go through negotiations, will complete the budget for the Cranston Fire Department for Fiscal Year 2026.

Chief Daniel Marcinko appeared to speak and thanked the City Council for their consideration for this budget.

Discussion took place on the Reserves.

Council President Marino thanked Chief Marcinko for his leadership with the Department and his years of service. She also thanked the men and women in the Department.

Mr. DiMaio indicated that Grants are up a little. He asked if there are any Grants coming in. Director Zidelis stated that account #49400 specifically is the FEMA Grant and the difference between the two years was the timing of putting in reimbursements for FY24-25, a lag of approximately a month worth of FEMA reimbursements being recognized by the City as Revenue from FEMA. Chief Mancini is back on schedule with the submission of those reimbursement requests.

Councilman Buonanno thanked the Chief and his Department for all they do. He stated that “Gas Petroleum Permits” has been reduced and asked how close we are to the 25 number. Mr. DiMaio stated that the issuance of the permits are probably in the 4th Quarter. Director Zidelis stated that FY24, actuals was \$4,350, but it is trending.

Councilman Traficante asked Director Zidelis to elaborate on SAFER Grants. Director Zidelis stated that this is a Firefighter Safety Grant where the Federal Government is paying 100% of our Firefighters and benefits for 11 Firefighters. It was a three-year Grant that started two years ago.

Discussion took place on Expenditures.

Councilman Traficante asked if the amount in the Overtime Account is a realistic number. Chief Marcinko stated that a year ago, we put on a class and it dropped Overtime significantly. We put on a class of 17 and through the past year we have had 15 vacancies. Overtime will drop and as people retire it climbs up again until empty spots are filled.

Mr. DiMaio asked how many Firefighters are on long-term IOD. Chief Marcinko stated he believes nine. Mr. DiMaio asked Chief Marcinko how many he feels will drop off in the next Fiscal Year. Chief Marcinko stated that it is hard to say. Mr. DiMaio stated that there are nine that are on long-term IOD that we are paying for and we have minimum manning in the City. To fill those positions, it is at time and a half. Current Overtime for eight months is running at \$3.9 million and annualized it is at approximately \$5.8 million.

Councilman Traficante referred to “Protective Equipment” and questioned why it jumped to \$20,000. Chief Marcinko stated that prices are going up and gear needs to be replaced every ten years.

Councilwoman Graziano thanked the Department for all they do and for their services. She stated that she is concerned that maybe Overtime is under budget. Director Zidelis stated that we are putting on a class of 11. One of the benefits when you bring in a new class is they do not have the accrued time so it will alleviate the Overtime. He also stated that required Overtime for minimum manning is a combination of three factors: individuals out on IOD, vacation and sick time.

Councilwoman Graziano referred to “Capital Improvement” and asked for explanation for building maintenance requirement upgrade, computer infrastructure and fire mechanics garage. Chief Marcinko stated that our mechanics are working in their Maintenance Division behind Station 2 and need equipment to safely lift the cabs to do work on the trucks.

Councilman Ritz asked what the difference is between “Uniform Cleaning Allowance” and “Laundry Expenses”. Chief Marcinko stated that “Uniform Cleaning Allowance” is contractual and “Laundry” is for Falvey Linen for house type items such as tablecloths and dish towels.

Council President Marino referred to Revenues “Miscellaneous” and the accounting for Rescue Reimbursement through Medicaid and then just any type of third party reimbursement rate, the actuals is tracing ahead with respect to the Medicaid reimbursement, but the third party rescue looks a little behind. She asked Chief Marcinko if he had any inclination that reimbursement rate is going to increase. Director Zidelis stated that through our third party billing company, there are negotiations with Blue Cross Blue Shield for increase rates. We do believe the rates will increase. Council President Marino asked if we send billing out ourselves or if we have a vendor that does that. Director Zidelis stated that there is a vendor that we use. For third party billing on the expense side is \$165,000.

Councilman Buonanno referred to “Severance” and questioned the drastic reduction. He asked if Chief Marcinko is comfortable with that number. Chief Marcinko stated that in the last year, they had 15 people who retired. He anticipates that many will retire this year.

Chair asked Chief Marcinko if he feels good with this budget going forward for another year. Chief Marcinko stated that he would love to ask for more. He received his priorities. He echoed everyone’s compliments and thanked the Department for all they do.

- ***FIRE ALARM***

Director Zidelis stated that this is somewhat of a budget in transition. One of the items is \$650,000 for computer infrastructure. A portion of this is going into Fire Alarm. This budget proposal is not what this Department asked for, but what it can afford.

Mr. DiMaio questioned Grant in the Capital Budget for \$650,000 and not \$600,000. Director Zidelis stated, yes, that is correct.

Councilman Traficante questioned to “Computer Maintenance and Repairs” costs of \$100,000 each year. Director Zidelis stated that they have a legacy system that is in need of replacement and plan on replacing.

On motion by Councilman Traficante, seconded by Councilman Andujar, it was voted to extend the meeting from 10:30 to 11 p.m. Motion passed unanimously.

- ***LAW DEPARTMENT***

Solicitor Millea appeared to speak and stated that the budget for this Department is pretty much straight forward. He does not have any Revenues. It does not have the potential to fluctuate. He has a part-time clerk two days a week. The Department consists of himself and four other members of his Department. Only thing that they tried to reduce is they have tried to reduce the Outside line item by approximately 20%. They are going to do their best to stay within the number they have been presented, but that projection can change at a moment’s notice seeing that the City is self-insured.

Councilman Traficante questioned to “Administrative Legal Expense”. Solicitor stated that it covers anything that does not have a line item. It is a kind of a catch all.

Mr. DiMaio asked Solicitor Millea if he anticipates any settlements. Solicitor Millea stated that he sees nothing on the direct horizon.

Councilman Trafficante asked what happens when there is a settlement, where does that money come from? Director Zidelis stated that we have money that goes down to the Claims Account. It is paid for with available resources from the budget.

Mr. DiMaio stated that in the past, depending on when the claim was settled, they would try to settle it within the next Fiscal year budget.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 10:36 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosalba Zanni
Assistant City Clerk/Clerk of Committees