

**CITY COUNCIL PUBLIC HEARING
MUNICIPAL BUDGET
JUNE 16, 2008 – 6:15 P.M.**

Chairman Lahey called the public hearing to order at 6:20 p.m. with all members present with the exception of Councilor Willette, who arrived later.

Jack Burke 49 Canobieola Road stated that the public hearing on the municipal is not in accordance with the city charter. He read from Section 5, submission of the budget where it says on Section 5-2 Action. “Public hearing – the City council shall publish in one or more newspapers of general circulation in the city, the general summary of the proposed budget as submitted by the Mayor by a notice stating; Item 1 the times and places where copies of the proposed budget are available for inspection by the public so that they know they have a chance to read and ask pertinent questions. Two the date time and place when a public hearing on said proposed budget will be held by the city council.” The eagle tribune notice does not specify the time and place where copies of the proposed budget are available for review by the public and noted that the school department notice did comply. He referred to section 5-3 referencing the Capital Improvement Program. Its says under submission, the Mayor shall prepare and submit annually to the City council a five-year capital improvement program at least 30 days prior to the final date of submission to the operating budget. In this year that Capital Improvement Plan was due to the Council on May 19th 2008. There’s also a long list of what’s included in the Capital Improvement budget for which Council doesn’t have a Capital Improvement budget. They do not know what the city is planning to do for the next five years and Council is going to vote on this budget. There is no plan, just a budget and then throughout the year, we allow supplements to keep adding to it, instead of looking at it, how much money are we spending and where are we spending it. For example, since he knows there is a lot of discussion about what happens with police and fire this year, he submits that he DPW is inflated this year. A one percent reduction in that budget would fund either a patrolman or a firefighter in the city to make a difference in someone’s life. Looking at the electricity budget, out of the entire budget process, for elder affairs its been held level. For fire service, its been allowed .04% growth but for DPW, it’s a 66% growth from \$240,000 to \$400,000. The water fund is only going to grow at 12%. He understands that the DPW budget accounts for all of the buildings in the city but why is that elder services and the fire department and the water department are growing at less than 1% or 12%. DPW is growing at 66% and we have to close firehouses.

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Michael Hughes, 22 Strongwater Road, retired teacher (29 years plus at Methuen High School where he taught a lot of history courses there as well as US History and other courses), a member of the Methuen Historic commission for over 20 years, Chairman for a few years, the first chairman for the historic district commission and helped write the ordinance, which established the Searles/Tenney/Nevins Historic district. Mr. Hughes said he is now Chairman of the Mayor's commission task force to find a permanent home for our city archives and historical collections, written a few articles on Methuen history for newspapers, and given many, many historical tours of the town. It is his understanding that a member of the City Council is thinking of making a proposal to eliminate the position of Historical Planner from the upcoming budget. He asked the City Council not to do that. The elimination of the position would be a mistake and a step backward in positive forward progress that the city is making in economic development. Many people don't see the connection between preserving our city's history and economic development but the state does. A few years ago, the State of Massachusetts mandated that every city and town have a Historic Commission. One of the reasons was to preserve the history of the city and town because it was important. Historical uniqueness is good for business and if you neglect it, you develop problems. The best example around here for the connection between historical preservation and economic development is Newburyport. A lot of people say Methuen is not Newburyport; Methuen's not even going to be Methuen if we continue to neglect this. He spoke about the Methuen Historical Commission. The members are appointed by the Mayor, non-paid volunteers, half of the present commissioners are retirees. In the last twenty years, it has become virtually impossible for the members of the commission to keep abreast of all the changes in the state laws in the local ordinances that affect the historical aspects of development. There is increased paperwork and a lot of technical demands now that have become more than we can deal with. This position of historic planner, held by Lyn Smiledge, who is the planner, has become absolutely invaluable to this commission. This commission doesn't have a big budget. The Methuen Historical Commission is very unique because it is in charge of the city archives, memorabilia, and artifacts, many of these donated by citizens of Methuen. The city has this vast collection, right now its being housed in the basement of the Masonic Temple and they are looking for a permanent place to put these records, to put these valuable documents. Part of Lyn Smiledge's job as historic planner is to be the curator or caretaker of this inventory and some of its very, very valuable. When citizens inquire about some information about their families, for example, or their house, how historic it is, or whatever, she's the one that gets them the information. She is the one that maybe even takes them to the collection. She also has to make sure that everything is cataloged to make it easier for research. He was just told tonight that three different authors have contacted her about acquiring information from Methuen that they want to put in their books, and this has just been within the last week. In order to get that to them we have started a process of cataloging all this on computers. She has to make sure that a lot of these items, some very rare items, especially the paper goods, the documents are preserved because they are decaying. That's part of her job. She also does a lot in public relations. She was just out at the dedication of the new bank in town. There was a little exhibit from our collection in there, a little history of the bank. Her most invaluable contribution as far as he is

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concerned to the commission, is her ability to get grant money for the commission, therefore the city. The last two and half years she successfully applied for and gotten the city over \$67,000 in grants for projects that the city didn't budget for or couldn't budget for. An example would be a teachers' workshop that he was involved in – he taught some teachers from Methuen and other people about the history of Methuen to be used in their classrooms or anywhere they wanted to. That would have been impossible if it hadn't been funded by a grant she got from the Castle Fund. It doesn't make sense to eliminate a position, which brings this kind of money into the city for the purpose of caring and preserving our city's heritage.

Monica Pitman, 25 Heather Drive Chairman of the Council on Aging, referred to a packet that she previously distributed to Council. She spoke of her personal experience with began in the early 1970's when her mother was living by herself and participated in the Senior Center. She met many wonderful people and made a lot of new friends. She took many day trips and even ventured a day trip to Hawaii. It kept her vivacious and needless to say healthy and happy. At the same time, she was working part time and they needed volunteers at the senior center to fold the monthly bulletins, which is a task they always have. At her mother's request, she went and has been there ever since. The center is a godsend to all seniors. It helps people who are depressed and very lonesome. It's a place for seniors to go to socialize; particularly individuals who have no children or their children live some distance away. Companionship and socialization are the best medicine anyone could. She's the second generation to utilize the center.

Kathleen Corey Rahme, 73 East Street, spoke regarding the Historical planner position, noting she was on the Council the first time it was ever voted in and it had been a part time position and when it was moved from part time to full time. She happened to have been a beneficiary of the wonderful program open to every citizen and teachers to learn about the history of Methuen. The educator was Mr. Michael Hughes. Everyone who attended received valuable information. Methuen has a beautiful unique character. We stand out among the cities and towns in the Merrimack Valley. When we acknowledge that we have a beautiful gem known as the city of Methuen and that we have decided to put forth someone to preserve and oversee such a beautiful gem, we can move forward and maintain our property values and the appeal that draws people to our city. Given a benefit cost analysis of this position, we (the city) would benefit greater than the cost to secure such a position.

Jim Robertson, 2 Wilson Street, gave his thoughts on where the money should go in this budget, first being fire and police, which is a necessity. He urged the city council and Mayor not close any stations because response time is a big factor in the fire and police. They have to get there and it means whether a house is going to burn down or be saved. Second are youth programs for Methuen and the need to keep the youth programs going, basketball, baseball, softball, so the kids won't be out in the street getting in trouble. Third, try not to cut any positions or manpower from DPW because they are the people who keep the city going every day, fixing the water breaks, cleaning the parks, etc.

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The Clerk read a memo from Gerald McCall, 165 Hampshire Road, Methuen (copy attached for the record)

Councilor Pappalardo stated that she was the person questioning the historical planner position. She had the opportunity to speak to Lyn Smiledge to get a little more information on what she does do. But her question was are we going to keep maybe a historic planner or somebody else if we're going to close down fire stations. That was her actual statement because she doesn't want to see public safety on the back burner in order to preserve the history of Methuen. There won't be any history to preserve if it burns down. She appreciates all that is being said. She loves Methuen just as much as anybody does. We have a wonderful history here. She thanked Lyn for the opportunity to speak with her. Ms. Smiledge does bring in money for grants, about \$65,000 in the last year and half and she does do a lot of work with the Historic commission. Again, her statement was she doesn't want to see fire stations shut down to keep other positions. We did get over that barrier.

Councilor Willette said he was informed last week that effective July 1st, Mr. Privitera was going to be released from his position. His position is designed to enforce the residency requirements for students to attend the public schools within our city. Councilor Willette said he is very upset about that. He asked the Superintendent to comment. Any alternative would not be as effective as what Mr. Privitera does. He effectively enforces the residency requirements for the City of Methuen. The School Committee on an annual basis takes a vote not to participate in school choice. If there is a change in that policy, it should be voted on at that School committee meeting. Other than that, he's been very effective over the years and people in that prior capacity have also been very effective and enforcing the residency requirements, they've pinpointed literally hundreds of students from outside the community who illegally have attended Methuen Public schools. They've been given a forceful warning to not participate in the school program and have since left the public schools. It's a huge cost savings for the community and again we take a vote every year as the school committee does not to participate in school choice. He is concerned about that and asked the superintendent to elaborate on this position.

Superintendent Jeanne Whitten agreed that Mr. Privitera has done very good work in the past. However, this year they were forced to make some decisions where they have to save some dollars for the taxpayers as well as look at their budget a little differently and what they did was to eliminate positions that were not directly connected to teaching and learning. With a position such as that they reorganized in such a way to have maximum efficiencies and found other ways to get that job accomplished. There is someone else on our staff, the director of transportation, who will take on that role. There will be no additional costs, no additional monies in his salary. As part of his actual workday, he will do that work along with working with Dr. Kelleher who's also taken on this work as the Director of Pupil Services. She handles residencies as well. With those two pieces in place, she is confident they will get the same results they've had in the past, hopefully better results and save the city some dollars relative to that particular position. Looking at cutting positions or saving dollars, they always start at the outside, the place

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where teaching and learning are not affected and that's how the decision came to be made.

Councilor Willette said he doesn't understand how we are saving money if we're not enforcing out of town students coming into our community. That's a front line position, a very effective position, of going to the homes verifying residency, going to the bus stops. He asked if the person replacing this individual is going to be doing the same exact thing, going to the homes, going to the bus stops, verifying residency.

Superintendent Whitten said they have a better process in place because of Dr. Kelleher's work as well. In addition to that, Mr. Fowler will be the individual in the field. The transportation coordinator position's there is very busy times of year, the beginning of the year when setting up the bus schedules and the end of the year when rethinking for the following year. However, there are parts of the year when it's very quiet. She called this a not fully employed individual this year. In order to fully employ all their staff, Mr. Fowler can pick up this work.

Councilor Willette totally disagreed and noted he is fully prepared to vote against the School department budget this evening. This is a person that has the training to go to the homes, to go to the bus stops, to confirm residency and he can't understand if we're talking about saving money wouldn't it be the best thing to have all three individuals working together in concert to make sure that out of town students are not going to Methuen Schools.

Superintendent Whitten said she could accomplish the same goals. However, if at the end of this year, we are as successful as we have been in the past, they can take another look at it. She believes they can do the same good work they have done utilizing the system they are putting place for the fall.

Councilor Willette said he hears all the time that there is crowding in the school system that we have to adjust and hire additional teachers. But, this frontline person who verifies residency is not going to be employed effective July 1st. He cannot understand that and he served on the School Committee for four years. Be vigilant about this or not be vigilant, take a vote to participate in school choice or not to participate in school choice. Make that decision but at the same time, this person here was doing his job. And it was a part time position. It wasn't a full time position.

Superintendent Whitten twenty hours, that's correct.

Councilor Pappalardo said she had a couple of complaints in regards to that issue and it was brought to the Superintendent's attention regarding the school buses on Haverhill Street, children being dropped off New Hampshire plates, cabs, taxis, (Superintendent Whitten agreed) and she would like to see some improvement on that, which she hasn't seen yet.

Superintendent Whitten said she doesn't have the data in front of her but when they discussed it fully at School Committee meeting, they did have some figures relative to the year, the number of cases that were investigated, the number of students that left the district, the number of students for whom this was not an issue because the investigation didn't prove anything. If Council would like to see the information she will share it with them. Dr. Kelleher has it and she could send it out to Mr. Lahey for distribution to the Councilors. They've done very good work regarding the kind of issues you're speaking of.

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Councilor Pappalardo asked if they went out because she was told they were suppose to go out and obtain license plate numbers. She doesn't know if that's happened.

Superintendent Whitten said Dr. Kelleher said they did receive some license plate numbers. There are some van drivers that are hired from out of state. A lot of them are at one particular school site; they come in from New Hampshire. They've followed them, had the resource officer looking at it, and had the principle looking at it. Many people have shared in this effort. There were a large number of youngsters who no longer come to our schools because in fact they are not residents of Methuen. There are others, we had a slight amnesty period in the fall, if you recall and a lot of them just withdrew because Dr. Kelleher who is an attorney, but she put some legal language in place really putting people on notice if they continue to come here illegally, she was going to find a way, she was going to press some charges. She really took a hard stand with this and that paid off because a number of families just nicely withdrew their students because of the fear of the legal situation.

Councilor Pappalardo said she doesn't think it's improved that much on the Haverhill Street area. The reason she got involved is because she received a call from a constituent and she brought a school committee member there to see the gentleman. He sees it every day. All he has to do is look out his window and sees them being dropped off. Councilor Pappalardo said she would like to see something happen there.

Superintendent Whitten said the school committee person gave her that information. She will look into it again.

Councilor Kannan "Dr. Kelleher and Mr. Fowler are not getting any more money to fill this position?"

Superintendent Whitten responded, no the residency requirement fall under the Director of Parent Pupil Services. That's part of the role that she plays. Mr. Fowler is the Transportation Coordinator as she said had time on his schedule to do this. The Superintendent said she's talked with him. He has taken this on and has committed to do this next year. The success of it remains to be seen but she has every confidence that it will be successful.

Mr. McCall asked for the cost per capita per student on an annual basis.

Superintendent Whitten said it is approximately \$9,000, taking into consideration the needs of the students.

Councilor Zanni referred to the Transportation Coordinator's position and said he concurs with the Superintendent – it's important that when you have a position of this nature at the beginning of the year, getting the bus routes squared away. There is a period of time during the course of the year that job the person could be doing something else. It is important that we could save money and have somebody doing the duties. We are getting out of the box here. He is sure school committee members have gone over this. He received four calls this year, one was the individual from Haverhill Street, which he addressed and two were on the other side. He told school committee members, two of those were taken care of, the other one is still a problem but in the long run, he thinks the Superintendent with the School Committee is making a good effort here and number one consolidating a position, saving some money, and making a position that really was part time a full time position. He concurs with Dr. Whitten.

Councilor Willette said unless these people from the main office are going to be traveling to the homes, to the bus stops, the problem is not going to be resolved because

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you had this third person who's going to be released effective June 1st, going to the homes, going to the bus stops, verifying residency. It's nice to do it from a central office and send out letters to people. It should be done in concert with this person going out to the homes and to the bus stops. But unless that person is there and he's vigilant and he's taking down license plates, verifying residency, he doesn't think its going to be effective, unless you're going to have those to people from the main office do exactly what that third person was intending to do, has been doing all along, its not going to be effective. He asked if there are assurances that those two individuals are going to be traveling to the bus stops, going to the homes, checking the license plates, doing all that front line work that the part time person was doing. That part time person verified that there were literally hundreds of students over the years that were attending Methuen public schools illegally. That was a very effective position. To remove that third person, he doesn't think it is effective to save a marginal amount of money.

Superintendent Whitten explained that Mr. Fowler would be leaving the central office, getting into his car, traveling to homes, looking at the bus stops. He will do that particular work in the field because he has the time in his full time position to do it. Dr. Kelleher is handling all the written protocol and the legal end of things. But, Mr. Fowler will be the one on the road

Councilor Zanni asked how many students, last year, were not residing in Methuen.

Superintendent Whitten said what they presented this year, they made 79 inquires and out of the 79 inquiries, approximately 40 families were prevented from coming to the Methuen Public Schools. Others left on their own or withdrew. She does have the actual numbers in her office and will share them with Council. They keep a log of all the information, all the calls, all the information that goes on. That happens down in the curriculum office. They have the log that goes back a number of years and take a look at it over time to see what the success has been.

Chairman Lahey said the Superintendent and the School Committee will reevaluate this after one year. If they find it is not successful, it could change.

The Superintendent agreed.

MOTION BY: Councilor Leone, seconded by Councilor Pappalardo to close the municipal budget public hearing. UPON VOTE: UNANIMOUS.

The hearing adjourned at 7:00 p.m.

I do hereby certify that at a meeting of which a quorum was present, the foregoing minutes were adopted by the Methuen City Council by a unanimous vote on July 7, 2008.

COUNCIL CLERK