

PARK RIDGE BOARD OF EDUCATION

SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

Date: May 6, 2025

Public Started: 7:00 P.M.

Public Ended: 8:45 P.M.

High Little Theater

I. Roll Call

T. Monahan	C. Amitrano	R. Fisher	J. Pierotti	N. Agoos	R. Browne	D. Bradler
X	X	A	X	X	X	X

Also Present:

R. Gamper R. Wright A. Zartarian

II. Pledge of Allegiance *was led by Board President, David Bradler.*

III. Open Public Meetings Statement was read by Board President, David Bradler.

This is to advise the general public and to instruct that it be recorded in the minutes that in compliance with Chapter 231 of the Public Laws of 1975, entitled the "Open Public Meetings Act," the Park Ridge Board of Education on April 24, 2025, caused to be posted at the Office of the Board of Education located at 85 Pascack Road, Park Ridge, New Jersey and on April 24, 2025, sent to The Record, 1 Garret Mountain Plaza, P.O. Box 471, Woodland Park, NJ 07424-0471 and The Ridgewood News, 41 Oak Street, Ridgewood, NJ 07450-3805 and on April 24, 2025, delivered to the Office of the Municipal Clerk of Park Ridge and the Park Ridge Public Library a meeting notice setting forth the time, date and location of this meeting.

IV. 2025/2026 Budget Presentation

Dr. Gamper and Mr. Wright gave a PowerPoint presentation on the 2025/26 Budget. Dr. Gamper pointed out that the budget being proposed was not the 0% increase but one with a 3.25% increase.

Dr. Gamper reviewed the district mission statements. He then commented that the budget being presented maintains all present programs and services for students, continues to focus on smaller class sizes, has capital money for building improvements and provides for the needs of all students.

Mr. Wright then gave a financial review of the Budget. He spoke about the use of funds being similar to prior years. Mr. Wright then reviewed the main areas where the budget has increased/decreased over the prior year. The first area discussed was salaries. Mr. Wright stated

that the increases were a result of contractual obligations. He indicated that there were no new positions but there was one reclassified position that was previously outsourced. Next, Mr. Wright reviewed Benefits. He pointed out that costs had risen by 22.3%. He provided an example of this increase by stating that Family benefits in the previous year were \$3,704.10. In the upcoming year, they increased to \$4,530.92. He also pointed out that due to changes in how employee contributions were taken out, the district is receiving less money to use as an offset. Mr. Wright then spoke about the increase in Capital Projects. Mr. Wright explained that since the projects are funded by Capital Reserve, they do not impact taxes. Mr. Wright then reviewed several other areas of the budget. With Special Education, he pointed out that while the budget remained relatively the same, the district needed to use Federal Grant funds to keep costs down. He also pointed out that Tuition and Transportation costs are rising much higher than inflation costs pointing out that a recent tuition cost rose over 10%. Operations for the district, which represent the maintenance of the buildings and grounds, remained flat. Mr. Wright explained that the district has a contingency fund in case of an emergency. Finally, Mr. Wright explained that both Administration and school supplies remained relatively flat for 2025/26.

Mr. Wright then discussed the tax levy and the CAP. He explained that there were certain waivers which would allow the Board to increase the budget past 2% and still be considered under CAP. He then pointed out that the district had chosen to take the Health Benefits waiver. He explained that the need to do this was being driven largely by inflation and a 20% hike in benefit costs. He pointed out that the Board elected not to utilize all of this waiver, keeping some of it as banked CAP for use in future budgets. He also pointed out that the district is electing to use additional Fund Balance to further offset budgetary increases. Mr. Wright then reviewed the cost control measures which the district has in place. He pointed out that the district participates in numerous cooperatives for purchasing, provides incentives for employees to waive benefits and runs in-house Special Education programs to control outside tuition costs. Mr. Wright then recapped the 2025/26 Budget. The tax levy would be increasing by 3.25% which would result in an increase of \$294/yr to the average homeowner of a house assessed at \$475,000. He qualified this by saying that the amount is somewhat inflated due to a sharp drop in Assessed Valuations in town a few years ago, which should correct itself once the Sony property is developed.

Dr. Gamper then reviewed areas that are supported by the 2025/26 budget including Full Day Kindergarten, Elementary Spanish and French for K-6, Interscholastic sports for grades 7-12 and appropriate support for the special needs' population. Dr. Gamper also highlighted the 1:1 Laptop program indicating that there would be a refresh for the 2025/26 school year with students and staff getting new machines. He also highlighted the Senior Internship program with Pascack Valley and the OWL House transition program. Dr. Gamper concluded by speaking about upcoming Capital projects including an HVAC replacement project using ROD grants and the Little Theater renovation.

V. Hearing of Citizens

Hearing of Citizens will be restricted to three minutes per person for a total of thirty minutes for comments on non-agenda items only. The Board bears no responsibility, nor will it be liable for any comments made by the public. Please be advised that all comments are maintained as a matter of public record.

Mr. Brickman – Spoke in support of the Budget. He asked the Board members to let people do their jobs. As a parent and taxpayer, he promoted the importance of a strong school system. He advocated for staff to be paid appropriately pointing out that they are not “living large.” He wanted the focal point to be on taking care of the children. Having clubs, sports, and small class sizes are important. A strong school system will boost home values. He criticized those Board members calling for cuts stating that they are being misleading about their intentions. Stating that a district is underperforming and asking for a zero % increase makes no sense. The current budget proposed calls for a modest increase. He felt that the actions of those Board members looking to cut the budget were to sabotage the school system. He pointed out the importance of electing the right people to the Board.

Ms. Fredricks introduced herself as a professional singer/actor. She relayed her experience in a play (Arsenic and old lace) with Mr. James Gandolfini commenting on what a nice person he was. She mentioned that she had petitioned the Board to have the theater renamed after him. She relayed how the theater teacher at the time recognized his abilities and encouraged him to participate. She believed he discovered his love of acting in this theater and became one of the greatest actors of our time. She commented that he may have never found his vocation without a safe place to test it out. Because of this, she felt that theater was important and urged the Board to not take away funds for these types of programs.

Jacob Brickman, a student, commented that Extracurricular activities were very important to him. He spoke about having severe anxiety and how participating in the Mock Trial program and theater helped him. He credited Ms. Dow for encouraging him. Through theater, he has made strong friendships. He felt getting rid of programs like these was disgusting. He commented on how rewarding the experience has been. He mentioned that he applied to twelve colleges and was accepted to all 12. He credited his participation in the Extracurricular activities as the reason. He questioned how many Ivy League schools you would get into if you took away programs like this.

Mr. Verlander referenced an article in US News saying that NJ was #1 in the entire country when it came to education. He spoke about his son who graduated. He commented that he enjoyed a wide variety of activities. He played sports and formed long lasting friendships. He commented that the extra-curricular activities nurtured his talents and helped him define his interests. These programs are meaningful and was concerned if students were not given an opportunity to experience them. He spoke about the shared joy of watching your child participate in an activity like a concert or sport. He thanked all the Board members who want to pass the budget. He felt that cutting the budget would be detrimental to the culture and take years to come back from. He questioned those that wanted to cut these things out as to why they are even on the Board. He asked them to search their soul and examine their conscience. He reminded them that they have responsibility to the students. They should not be working on an ulterior motive. He encouraged them to resign and make room for someone who cares.

Ms. Brickman, a parent of two kids, stated that she has been a Para for the last 4 years at Park Ridge. She pointed out that everyone is here. The community is telling you to vote yes on the budget. There is a Board member who is a no show. This Board member snickers at board meetings when being spoken to. At the last meeting, he sat with a scowl and arms folded. She asked how this was helpful. She commented on statements made by this Board member that the Board is failing and throwing money at a problem does not help. His metric is that success means

getting into an Ivy League school when he himself is not in an Ivy League school. She spoke about looking at how local schools do with placement. She commented that of the over 1000 seniors, less than 1% will attend Ivy League schools. His parameters are not based on reality. She found it interesting that this Board member, as a student was on the Mock Trial team and did well. She mused that apparently it was OK to have access to such programs as a student but not good enough for current or future students. She urged the Board members to represent all of them.

Nathaniel, a Junior at PRHS, commented that his participation in sports at Park Ridge is important to him. Through sports, he has developed friendships and learned important life lessons. His teammates have supported him over the years and his participation in sports has been enriching. He has learned discipline and that success requires effort. He asked why would anyone want to take this opportunity away.

Mr. Bowles pointed out that the community has shown up at this meeting. There are parents, teachers and students who filled the seats. The one person who was absent is the one who is prompting all this concern. After seeing the presentation, it is clear the Board has already done the work of establishing a fiscally responsible budget. He asked the Board to do the responsible thing and reject all the ongoing distractions and vote for a fiscally responsible budget and not one that is reckless. He asked them to ignore all the distractions.

Jackson, a PRHS Jr, shared his athletics experience. He stated it was a defining part of who he was. He has developed true strength and determination. The programs offered in the school have helped him. He spoke about going through shared struggles with his teammates and how they have become like a second family. He stated that it is important to maintain school athletics.

Mr. Hollers expressed his support for a 3.25 % increase. He stated Park Ridge has the feel of a private school. They are ranked #10 in the county. If the Board approves anything less, it will damage this. He asked what the children have done to deserve less. Cutting the budget would undermine this excellence which thousands have chosen to endorse. He felt there were certain Board members who were choosing not to listen to the people of this town. They want to take away sports and extracurricular activities. He asked them to explain why they want to lay off teachers. He commented that the community is onto them now. He is proud to show support for the school, and favor of the Board fully funding the increase.

Mr. Diomede stated his son is currently the band teacher at the High School. He has written 11 faith-based books. He spoke about the teachings of which compassion is very important. He then commented that mercy and forgiveness come next. He hoped that the budget vote will reflect these principles.

Trevor Patel, a sophomore at PRHS, stated that he was very involved in the theater. He is an actor and member of the choir. He has become a better person because of those experiences. He developed leadership skills and became more compassionate. The extracurricular activities helped shaped this. He commented that he could not stress enough the importance of these programs and keeping them accessible to the student body. He asked the Board members why they should have the right to take them away. He asked the Board to think of the people they represent and pass the budget.

Mr. Koch commented that he was a graduate of the class of 2002 and head Basketball coach. He stated that athletic programs help shape lives. Participation leads to success in the classrooms. Athletes learn the importance of discipline, how to depend on others and control their emotions. They learn to handle pressure situations. Sports bring people together. He saw the Basketball court as an extension of the classroom. They develop pride in the name on the front of their jersey. He urged the Board to keep supporting these programs.

Brenda introduced herself as the President of the Golden age club. She encouraged Board members to come visit them. While she does not have much in the way of savings, she would never not vote for this budget. She commented that several people have spoken up on supporting the budget and noted that it was a modest increase in relation to what is going on these days. She hoped that the Board member who was not in attendance tonight could not cast a vote. She referenced a candidate's night where everyone who was running came to the meeting except for Mr. Amitrano. She stated that meeting was important for residents to find out what each candidate thought and for them to hear from the residents. She criticized Mr. Amitrano for not attending the event, saying no one knew his views and were unable to ask questions. She also criticized Mr. Fisher for his stance on banning books among other things. She chastised the Board members saying how dare you think of not passing the budget. She concluded that those Board members who do not support it will be held accountable for their vote.

Matthew Grant, a Sophomore at PRHS, mentioned that he was a member of Deca and the Jr, Class President. He was concerned about the threat of taking away athletics and extracurricular activities. He felt all students should have the opportunity to participate in these programs. He implored the Board to pass the budget.

Ms. Limskio, a Jr, at PRHS, mentioned that she was a member of the theater program. She mentioned that before she got into theater, she was the type of kid that would have hair in front of her face. Because of the theater community, she does not hide anymore. The theater brings life to people. She asked the Board members why they would want to deny a 12-year-old girl this opportunity for the sake of saving a little money. These programs are important for mental health. She mentioned that she was raised in a single parent household and having the program was a help for her in her fragile teenage years. She begged the Board to pass the 3% budget.

Mr. Fredricks continued the thoughts of Ms. Frederick. He said that his wife played Anita in West side story. She was able to achieve her dream. He felt if there were cuts to the theater, people with potential may never get a chance to achieve their dream. Theater and sports are essential. It is more than just talent. He mentioned that Mr. Gandolfini's experience in sports helped him with his participation in the theater. A play ensemble is a team effort. Mr. Gandolfini brought honor to our State. He came from a small town where everyone knew each other. He mentioned that he would like to see the theater renamed to honor him. He concluded by saying it was important to see to it that Park Ridge continues this tradition and approves the budget.

Ms. Anastos stated that she is the parent of two students. She felt that certain individuals are spreading misinformation and making unrealistic promises. The idea that we can have a 0 percent increase is not being honest to the community. You would strip away the very thing that makes school strong. Board members should not refuse to participate in board committee meetings. She was also critical of those Board members opposing the budget who had no children in the school district. She stated that it is was not easy to tell a child what cuts will mean and look like. She also

felt that the cuts would have a ripple effect and lower home values. She asked the Board to do what is right for Park Ridge. She urged them to vote yes to pass the budget.

William McDonald mentioned that he is a member of the theater and marching band. When he heard that these programs could be cut, he felt like the ground had dropped out from beneath him. He stated that these are not just hobbies. For some, it is the only place they feel like they truly belong. Participating in these activities has taught him how to speak up, to be bigger than himself. It is important to offer these programs, whether they are on the stage or field. He disagreed with cutting those things that make the school feel human. We are musicians, dreamers and athletes. He asked the Board members to fight for us, do not cut us out.

A parent, who has two students at East Brook Elementary, thanked the Board for the Guidance counselors in the schools. She commented that what truly matters are the kids. She asked the Board to vote yes and pass the budget.

Bertha Adel asked the Board to pass the budget. It is easy to question numbers, but those numbers represent children. She reminded them that the goal is to support the children. We need to provide them with what they need to succeed. Cutting the budget does not benefit the students. It does not provide for an environment to develop a well-rounded student. She stressed the importance of building a team. Allow them to follow the college of their choice. Activities allow students to escape and improve mental health. She was happy to see everyone show up tonight. She repeated the school motto... Once an owl, always an owl. She asked the Board members to think of the students and the impact their decisions have on them. She asked the Board to support them and believe in them. She reminded everyone that there were 2 Board seats up in November.

VI. Consent Agenda

Be it resolved, upon the recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools in conjunction with the Business Administrator/Board Secretary that the following actions be taken:

F1. The Park Ridge Board of Education approves the following budget:

BE IT RESOLVED that the Park Ridge Board of Education, County of Bergen, approves the 2025/26 school year budget as follows:

2025/26	<u>GENERAL FUND</u>	<u>SPECIAL REVENUE</u>	<u>DEBT SERVICE</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
Total Expenditures	\$ 39,493,251	\$ 489,452	\$ 776,209	\$40,758,912
Less Anticipated Revenues	\$4,498,503	\$489,452	\$263,914	\$ 5,251,869
Taxes to be Raised	\$34,994,748	- 0 -	\$ 512,295	\$ 35,507,043

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT the Park Ridge Board of Education includes in the final budget the adjustment for increased costs of health benefits in the amount of \$425,050. The additional funds will be used to pay for the additional increases in health benefit premiums.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that included in the general fund appropriations, budget line 620 is a withdrawal from Capital Reserve – Other Capital Projects in the amount of \$1,300,000 for other capital project costs. The total cost of these projects are \$1,300,000 which represents expenditures for construction elements or projects that are in addition to the facilities efficiency standards determined by the Commissioner as necessary to achieve the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

M: NA S:RB

TM CA RF JP NA RB DB

N Abs A Y Y Y Y

Mr. Bradler thanked Mr. Wright and Dr. Gamper. He thanked the Finance committee for all their hard work. He stated that Park Ridge is a great town. He has served on the Board for 7 years and has never been prouder. He works as a teacher of US History. He was happy to see people exercise their first amendment rights. He wanted the audience to know that the Board appreciates them. He concluded by wishing everyone a Happy Mother's Day.

VII. Adjournment – 8:45 pm

M: CA S: RB

TM CA RF JP NA RB DB

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Robert Wright
Business Administrator/Board Secretary