

PLACE: Meeting held via ZOOM

DATE: 15 May 2025 **TIME:** 6:30 p.m.

MEETING CALLED TO ORDER BY: Mr. Rich Bshara

I. OPENING

A. Pledge of Allegiance

B. Roll Call –

MEMBERS OF THE BOARD	PRESENT	ABSENT	LATE
RICH BSHARA	X		
CHRIS PHIPPS	X		
SHARON VAROSHAK	X		
TOTAL	3	0	0

Superintendent DiBacco, Assistant Superintendent Steve Bergin, and Dave Knapp, Board of Ed member were in attendance.

Mr. Bshara said this meeting is to explain the budget process. He said he is looking to get people to understand and hopefully get out and vote.

He said he would like to defer the Public Session until the end, allowing the public to hear from the committee first. Mr. Bshara said for the record, he has sent the detailed budget, the summary budget, and the list of cuts and proposal to all Board members. He said the information is also posted on Ansonia.org under the Board of Education budget section. Mr. Bshara said going back to last October with the original budget process, they started out with things they wanted for the district. He said that was reduced to only continue on with the things our district needs. Mr. Bshara said with just wages and benefits cost, there was about a 2 ½% increase over last year. He explained the rise in utility costs as well as Special Education and regular transportation. He said these increases added up to approximately \$2 million in increased costs for the district. He said they came in with an increase request of \$1.9 million, with the most significant piece being Special Ed. He said the first referendum was turned down. Mr. Bshara said the second time the Board of Alderman decided to keep the budget as is and it was defeated again. He said currently they are proposing a list of cuts totaling \$400,000. He said this new budget will total a \$1.58 million increase from last year. He said the list of cuts are to be discussed. He said some include no new AP Math and Science books, ELL Middle School materials, reduced basic supplies, after school program cuts for elementary and Middle School, no full-time lead security, cancel on-line subscription programs, Middle School sports, high school JV sports and equipment, building maintenance, elimination of technology upgrades.

Mr. Bshara said he would like Dr. DiBacco to speak.

Superintendent DiBacco said the cuts are not something he would like to see. He said some are things that the district truly looks forward to. He went over all the cuts mentioned and explained how useful and helpful all of the cuts are currently but he is hoping one day there will be an increase in the Excess Cost Grant funds and be able to absorb some of these cuts. He said he is trying to stay far away from staff and the people who are positively impacting our students. Superintendent DiBacco said he is only trying to cut things that are not completely necessary and as far away as the classroom as possible. He talked the further cuts that may have to happen if the budget does not pass. He said it will start impacting the classroom and student learning with staffing cuts. He said this has been weighing heavy on him as well as everyone involved. Superintendent DiBacco this is forcing the district to take steps backwards that he does not want to do.

Mr. Bshara said he is hearing people don't understand and he is willing to talk as long as the people need. He said there are amazing things happening in the district and we can thank the staff and administration. He talked about the global connections the district is a part of and said it is all from the support of the Mayor, the Board of Alderman, and the taxpayers. Mr. Bshara talked about thirty students being excepted into UCONN this year reflecting the greatness happening in the district. He said the cuts can get devastating. He talked about the district being an Alliance District and the Educational Cost Sharing. He said since 2009 the amount of money the state gives to the city has not changed. He explained in that time the district budget has gone up \$13-\$14 million. He said everything has come from the taxpayers. Mr. Bshara explained that the funds need to be approved and allocated for specific use. He gave details regarding spending and where specific increases are

necessary. He talked about the reduction of Alliance Districts that may soon be happening at the state level. Mr. Bshara said the Excess Special Education cost is the biggest piece of the budget. He said the costs have increased dramatically over the last four years. He explained how the Excess Special Ed guidelines works and the limits the funds come with. He spoke about the current grants available as well as the grants that are being removed. Mr. Bshara talked in detail about the Excess Cost Grant and the decreased and lack of increase over the years. He talked about the 72% that is typically reimbursed by the state, as well as the increase in number of Special Ed students in the district. He said more families are coming into Ansonia and a lot have special needs. Mr. Bshara said there has been a \$300,000-\$500,000 increase in those costs. He talked about the increased transportation contract and how Ansonia has been trying to cut costs. He explained the company we use is the only company in the area, so Ansonia doesn't have any room to negotiate. Mr. Bshara then talked about the current situation at the state level and how it is negatively impacting our town. He said other areas in the school budget are affected since Ansonia's Special Education reimbursement continues to get cut. He said the Board of Ed is grateful for the money it receives from the town and the schools are thriving. Mr. Bshara said the staff is amazing and it would be sad if the referendum is not passed.

Ms. Sharon Voroschak, Board of Ed member, said the staff have not received pink slips in five years and that is something she wants to see continue. She said it is very important to the students as well as the community.

Mr. Bshara talked about the staff retainment numbers have been excellent since the wage structure has improved. He said it also has been drawing great staff to the district.

Mr. Chris Phipps, Board member, said he is interested to hear the comments and concerns from the public.

Mr. Steve Bergin, Assistant Superintendent, said the lack of state reimbursement is the key to our district suffering.

Mr. Dave Knapp, Board of Ed member, asked Mr. Bshara if this next vote gets rejected, what will happen to the budget.

Superintendent DiBacco told Mr. Knapp the next step would include staffing. He said it makes him truly upset since the district is outstanding and has made such progress. Superintendent DiBacco spoke about some of the positive things happening in the district because of it.

Ms. Ocasio-Gonzalez, Board of Ed member, said she agrees and she feels that if people can't see it than they don't actually see how this will impact them. She said other districts do not have the great things that we have in this district. Ms. Ocasio-Gonzalez said as a Board member, mother, and Ansonia resident, she is here for this. She said the money is used for what is necessary and she does not think the people are understanding. She wanted to stress the importance of the teachers and staff for these students. She said it is very important for the public to get out and vote.

Mr. Phipps said he wanted to clarify that if the budget gets rejected, this will mean the budget gets brought back to the current year's budget. He said the district would essentially be starting the next school year with a \$2 million deficit.

Mr. Bshara said if this fails there will be another vote. He said if nothing gets passed by July 1, the budget will revert to last years.

II. PUBLIC COMMENTS

Nancy Monaco said she said she is hoping we can learn from the student advocates who spoke at the prior meeting and learn from them and maybe take that to the state. She said the state is underfunding Ansonia. She explained the false narrative that is being put on social media, and said Ansonia's students deserve more. She asked if the state reimbursement amount comes in over the 73%, what the plan is for funding. Mr. Bshara explained the dynamic of our town and how reimbursement isn't the same for everyone. He also said if the reimbursement amount Ansonia receives is greater than expected then the request would be reduced. He said a discussion with administration and the Board would be had to reinstate any cuts and return any additional funding to the city.

Mr. Bshara thanked Valley Indy for streaming and also getting this out to the public.

Mrs. Voroschak said she agrees with what Nancy said and included, she as well as Dr. DiBacco have been advocating to the state. She said every city and town in the state and they are not being heard.

Bev Tidmarsh, 77 Westfield Ave., she said she wanted to commend the Board members and administration for allowing the transparency. She said most in the community don't have a clue as to what the budget is spent on. She said the district has done a great job for the students. She said she felt the need to comment that if taxes go up it is money well spent.

Mat Hough, President, Ansonia Federation of Teachers, said he currently Ansonia is getting the full amount of ECS funding. He said it may not be enough but based on the current formula, the district will be fully funded. He agrees there is some confusion with that. He also said Mr. Bshara explained very well, but it continues to be difficult when spending is limited. Mr. Hough said there are groups meeting everyday at the state level. He said the problem now is they can't agree. He thanked everyone for the support and hard work.

Mr. Bshara talked about the funding formula and spending stipulations. he said also, the problem is the city has gotten zero increase in many years.

Beth Lynch, City of Ansonia Clerk, said she sent the section of the charter pertaining to non-adoption of the budget and what happens if it does not pass.

Mr. Bshara read that part of the City Charter regarding the non-adoption of the budget. He thanked Beth Lynch.

Thomas Egan, 253 Main St., said he reviewed the budget and cuts that are direct hits to the kid's future. He talked about a few of the cuts and his opinion of the negative impact. He said he thinks cuts can be made on the other side before the school cuts are made.

Mr. Bshara said it should be noted the Special Ed portion cannot be cut due to state requirements, so the regular side of education will be cut.

Megan 103 Rockwood Ave., said she had a question regarding the city budget. She asked what the questions regarding the budget being too low or too high on the questionnaire.

Mr. Bshara explained the question is essentially asking only if you vote "No" to the budget then you should be choosing if it was too low or too high. Mrs. Bshara said he agreed it might be confusing.

Stacey Esposito, 46 Hoinski Way, asked if there is anything residents can do to prevent the cuts to our students on this next proposal. She said we are taking away from the city when we cut from our students.

Mr. Bshara said he thinks the simplest answer would be to have more "yes" votes. He said it would be great to get more people out to vote.

Mr. Phipps said there was some confusion where voters thought the budget was too low. He said we are submitting the new budget with cuts made. He said going forward these cuts are going to happen, since the presented budget did not pass. He said the only way would be to present the original budget with no cuts and have it get voted in.

Mr. Bshara said we need to do whatever we can as soon as possible with the minimal number of cuts. He said he will hope the state will help with funding in the near future.

Christine Davis, 12 Ford St., she said she has been a teacher in Ansonia for 27 years. She said in this day and age we should move to social media where they can have a presence. She said family members and students over 18 should be encouraged to vote. Mrs. Davis said the best way to invest in a city is to put money into education. She said resources should be put into schools, sustaining programs and making the schools greater than they are today.

Nancy Monaco, said she thinks the solution is advocacy at the state level so that the funding comes through. She said everyone should not be ok with underfunding the kids. Nancy thanked the Board, and said they need everyone else to do at that level. She said she thinks it's the false narrative that they think the state is doing what they need to, and they are not.

Mr. Bshara said he agrees they can be better supported by the state and it is not always best for all municipalities.

Ms. Diane Stroman, 66 High St., said it sounds like we are preaching to the choir. She said the goal should be how to get out to those not on line. She said she feels the seniors see a tax increase and they panic because they don't know the unknown.

She asked if they knew the dollar amount of the increase and the impact to the residents. She suggested the ask PTO to help advocate. Ms. Stroman said she thinks residents are afraid and they need to be educated. She commended the teaching staff on the great job they do with students.

Mr. Bshara said the Board members have to be careful and cannot advocate. He said this discussion was held in hopes the public gets informed.

Megan, 103 Rockwood Ave., asked if door-knocking or phone calls are able to be made so people can get the information. She asked if it was possible to get a flyer explaining the details.

Mr. Bshara said it is acceptable as long as you are not affiliated with the schools. He said he will ask about the one-page sheet with details. He also said there is information on the website.

Nina Phipps, 60 Rockwood Ave., asked if they anyone knew if the cuts the city plans on making could potentially bring the amount down to avoid another referendum.

Mr. Bshara said he does not think so. He said they will discuss further at the Board of Aldermen meeting and that is where it can be asked.

Mrs. Phipps asked if there is a way to get someone down to the senior center to explain. She said her family is still willing to make the increase payment even though their children are no longer in school. She said this may also be the case if details were explained to others.

Edwina Figueroa, said she went to vote with her student and she was very confused. She said the students hear cuts are being made and want to vote, but it is confusing for them and others. She said her daughter is going to the capital with school and will be bringing up the funding from the state.

Mr. Bshara said he will pass the information along and hope something can help the voters.

Mr. Phipps asked if the question about the budget being too high or too low can be removed.

Mr. Bshara said it is part of the charter and has to stay. He thanked everyone.

III. DISCUSSION & POSSIBLE ACTION RE: BOE BUDGET

Motion: Approve the recommended cuts to be submitted to the Aldermen.

	MOTION	YES	NO	ABSTAIN
MR. RICH BSHARA, president		X		
MR. CHRIS PHIPPS	X	X		
MS. OCASIO-GONZALEZ		X		
TOTAL		3		

Superintendent DiBacco thanked everyone for their support.

Motion: to adjourn the meeting at 7:56 p.m.

	MOTION	YES	NO	ABSTAIN
MR. RICH BSHARA, president		X		
MR. CHRIS PHIPPS	X	X		
MS. OCASIO-GONZALEZ		X		
TOTAL		3		

Respectfully submitted,

Cassie Venson

Cassie Venson

Recording Secretary

Date: 5/20/2025