

*\*These minutes were approved by the Warren County Board of Commissioners on February 10, 2021.*

The Board of County Commissioners of the County of Warren met in Budget Session in its offices in the Wayne Dumont, Jr. Administration Building, Belvidere, New Jersey on January 23, 2021 at 9:01 a.m.

Due to social distancing directives, this meeting was conducted without any members of the public in attendance. The public had the opportunity to listen to the meeting, and participate if they chose, via telephone.

The meeting was called to order by Director Kern and upon roll call, the following participants were present: Commissioner Lori Ciesla, Commissioner Deputy Director Jason Sarnoski, Commissioner Director James Kern III, County Administrator Alex Lazorisak, County CFO Kim Francisco and Deputy Commissioner Clerk Holly Luberto.

After Director Kern led the flag salute, he confirmed with the County Administrator that the meeting notice complied with the Open Public Meetings Act, Chapter 231, P.L. 1975 and all amendments thereto.

Warren County Technical School Superintendent Ed Zalewski and Business Administrator Amy Barkman were in attendance. The WCTS budget included a two percent increase to its OE and a \$250,000 capital improvement request. Mr. Zalewski began by thanking the commissioners for rescheduling the date of this presentation, as one of this family members had been affected by COVID and he had to be cautious. He then distributed a handout for review.

Total student enrollment was 450, and more than 150 had applied for the class of 2024-25 so far (surprisingly on target). The school was currently operating in a hybrid model with all academics online from home, and in-person instruction for career shops. Mr. Zalewski said most parents were happy with the model, but it was not ideal. While they had increased tutoring and student outreach, "It's been tough on the kids," he said. Some students were more adaptable than others. They purchased 110 hotspots for students. Mr. Zalewski said it was amazing how many homes lacked good internet. The school was updating all of the curricula and including online resources, as well as planning a summer enrichment program.

The Graphic Arts and Electronics programs were being phased out; teachers were retiring, and there were no ninth grade students enrolled in either program.

Electronics students would probably roll into Computer Programming. WCTS enjoyed a great relationship with the County College, with 135 students taking advantage of Dual Enrollment course offerings.

Facility improvements included bleacher replacement, a dividing wall and a refinished floor in the gymnasium; and renovations to the space formerly occupied by the county library (half was now a Health Sciences classroom and the other half a Child Development classroom).

Ms. Barkman then introduced herself, as she had come on board the prior year and this was the first budget she built herself. She said 2020 brought a Ransomware “nightmare”, COVID, and a federal audit for their Perkins grant. Budget highlights for the coming year included the unknowns of NEA negotiations, but she was estimating a four percent increase, or about \$153,000. She hoped to settle with the union before the new school year, but may have to pay retro raises. WCTS employees were on the State Health Benefits Plan. The premiums and employee contributions had been less than other options, and had been flat for a few years, but now increases seemed to be making up for those years that were flat. Transportation remained a huge expense, and Ms. Barkman expected a two percent CPI increase if they renewed the current operation, or more if they went out to bid.

With respect to capital, the “new” section of the building was now 20 years old and was due for updated air handlers in the 2003 section. Ms. Barkman recommended increased safety measures, particularly concrete barriers in front of all glass exteriors.

Mr. Sarnoski thanked them for the overview, but said he would like to see more of a vision for the future of WCTS. Tuition was discussed, as well as transportation. Mr. Zalewski noted that state aid follows the student, and WCTS is the only technical school in that state that provides transportation. Ms. Barkman estimated the school bore about 80 percent of transportation costs, resulting in \$250 increase per student, and they reduced tuition to close that gap. “That’s really where we’ve got to make this gap up,” Mr. Sarnoski said, referring to transportation costs. He added that four percent S&W increases year after year was a lot.

Mr. Kern said the county was facing significant budget stresses this year due to COVID, and no one has gotten everything they asked for. He didn’t think it was right to be the only technical school providing transportation. Mr. Kern recommended they communicate long-range plans. Mr. Sarnoski agreed, reiterating that he wanted to see a five-year plan, particularly in terms of capital, a more

proactive, instead of reactionary, approach. Mr. Zalewski said they could do that now that Ms. Barkman was on board.

More detailed discussion ensued regarding the air handlers. Ms. Barkman said five were in dire need of replacement, estimated to cost \$130,000 including architectural fees. Mr. Lazorisak asked what else was included in the \$250,000 request. Ms. Barkman recommended a security vestibule and blinds on all the windows. Mr. Lazorisak said she might want to look into reflective coatings as an alternative to blinds. All acknowledged everything was taking longer now, due to COVID.

Wrapping up the capital discussion, Mr. Sarnoski suggested focusing on the immediate need (the air handlers), resulting in the capital request being reduced to \$130,000. He thought the security measures could be deferred, since the students were not in the building full time and approvals were taking a long time. He asked them to work on a long-term security capital plan.

“Come see us,” Mr. Zalewski said, especially when the kids were present. Mr. Lazorisak broached the topic of a Warren County career day for WCTS students, with career potential for welding and pre-Engineering students, and those interested in working in Building & Grounds. Summer help was always welcome in our Planning and Engineering departments. He was going to have the Personnel department get involved.

This portion of the meeting concluded at 9:44 a.m. The group took a short break, returning at 9:52 a.m.

Mr. Francisco went over the most recent changes to the overall budget. The County Engineer’s OE increased by \$50,000 for outsourcing, but it should balance out because the department had five vacancies that would probably remain unfilled this year. He added \$20,000 to Planning’s OE for Highlands plan conformance. In capital, the \$200,000 traffic study line item Mr. Dech requested was reduced to \$50,000. There was an insertion of \$50,000 for technological upgrades to the commissioners’ meeting room, and there was to be a COVID-19 line item with \$250,000 as a contingency in case reimbursements did not arrive as hoped.

Mr. Francisco distributed the Net Valuation Table from the Tax Administrator, which showed an increase of \$180,960,012 in ratables over the prior year (a 1.62 percent increase). The commissioners accepted Mr. Francisco’s suggestion to keep the library tax rate flat, which resulted in an increase to the levy.

The Open Space tax was being reduced by half a penny and the County Purpose Tax was going up a quarter of a penny. The overall tax rate was still lower than in 2019, with no borrowing. This in spite of having started the budget process \$1.2 million behind, due to increases for pensions and state hospitalizations, and other challenges.

Mr. Lazorisak said department heads have done a good job of keeping their OE in check over the years. The county had moved out of the State Health Benefits Plan to being self-insured a couple of years ago, which seemed like a wise move. It appeared SHBP premiums had been kept artificially low, as the Technical School recently found out. There might be prescription plan savings at the end of the year.

Mr. Sarnoski said, “My philosophy is, we don’t budget for this year, we budget for the future, for the next five years.” He thought this was a very responsible budget that was beneficial to the taxpayers. Ms. Ciesla said, “There’s a lot of good planning here and that’s important.” She learned planning in good years helps you get through the bad years. “Exactly,” said Mr. Francisco.

Mr. Kern agreed, and said every budget process was difficult, but working together with his colleagues on this board, and with cooperation from all departments, took us where we needed to be. All while confronting a pandemic. According to the governor’s office, Mr. Kern said Warren was one of the counties doing the best job handling COVID challenges. Mr. Lazorisak said, “It’s planning ahead, thinking ahead, being ahead. You’re absolutely right.”

With new reporting procedures and staggered staffing, Mr. Francisco asked for a little extra time, so budget introduction was slated for the board’s second meeting in February.

A list of personnel requests including recommendations was distributed for review. Unclassified personnel would be addressed after the budget passed. After clarifying a few details, the commissioners accepted the recommendations as proposed.

There were no public comments, nor questions from the press.

On motion by Mr. Sarnoski, seconded by Mr. Ciesla, and there being no further business before the board at this time, the meeting was adjourned at 10:22 a.m.