



Town of Ridgefield

Approved Board of Finance Meeting Minutes Tri-Board Meeting with Board of Selectpersons and Board of Education

Tuesday, November 18, 2025

Approved Final

I. Call to order

Mike Rettger called the Tri-Board meeting to order at 6:30 PM on November 18, 2025 in the Town Hall Annex Large Conference Room. Board of Finance Members Mike Rettger, Dave Ulmer, Greg Kabasakalian, Andrew Okrongly and Joe Shapiro present.

Others Present:

Board of Selectpersons: Rudy Marconi, First Selectperson; Maureen Kozlark; Sean Connelly.

Board of Education: Tina Malhotra, BOE Chair; Jonathan Paradiso, Sean McEvoy, Christine More, Wyatt Lipman, Rachel Marino, Kathryn Graf, Angela Rice, Scott Sigel.

Town Officials: Kevin Redmond, Controller.

RPS Staff: Dr. Susie Da Silva, Superintendent of Schools; Jill Browne, Director of Finance; Cory Gillette, Assistant Superintendent; Dr. Elizabeth Hannaway, Assistant Superintendent of Special Education; Karen Dewing, Director of Personnel; Joe Morits, Director of Facilities.

II. Public Comments

Emily Fernandez, Ridgebury Road, disagreed with the use of Chromebooks in elementary schools. She advocated establishing a separate technology budget for RPS. Ms. Fernandez submitted written comments.

Isabel Nichols, Old Branchville Road, said she moved to Ridgefield for the quality of education. She cited data supporting the view that, at the current range of spending for schools, for each increment of extra spending, the amount of the increase in home values exceeds the additional cost of funding schools, and offered to provide research in support for her position.

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III. BOF FY27 Planning Discussions and Presentations

Board of Finance Remarks

Mr. Rettger began his presentation by noting the it would cover the results of the 2025 fiscal year, the outlook for the 2026 fiscal year, and finally some information about capital spending. Utilizing slides, he presented a financial overview reflecting the views and observations of the members of the Board of Finance, based on discussions at a special meeting the previous week.

He reviewed the 6-year history of changes in the mill rate along with changes in inflation, noting that for the most recent year the rate of increase in the mill rate exceeded the rate of inflation, after having increased less than inflation for the prior years. He also presented exhibits showing financial results for the prior fiscal year, growth in town and school district budgets compared with inflation for the past six years, the recent history of changes in debt service costs, and initial estimates of key financial inputs to the calculation of the tax mill rate for the coming fiscal year. Key parameter changes included a 16% year-over-year increase in debt service cost, an expected growth in the Grand List of 1%, a significant reduction in investment income due to declining interest rates, and the potential changes in the senior tax credit recently proposed. He then presented a summary showing the expected mill rate change that would result from budget increases ranging from 2% to 4% in the next budget. The analysis showed that the mill rate would increase by approximately 0.8 percentage points more than the underlying budget percentage increases due to the impacts of debt service costs and the other financial parameters.

Mr. Rettger noted that the Board of Finance has discussed how to approach the coming budget, and all members felt that it was important to offer specific guidance on its view for budget growth at the beginning for the planning process this year. After reviewing the potential range of outcomes, the consensus of the Board of Finance is that year-over-year operating budget changes should target a range of 2.50% and 3.00%, which would result in a mill rate change of 3.33% and 3.85%.

Mr. Rettger concluded his remarks with several slides showing the recent growth in capital budget requests compared with prior periods and with inflation.

Board of Education Remarks

Ms. Malhotra provided an overview of key budget drivers for the school district and expressed the importance of avoiding a failed referendum. She thanked the boards for their hard work and for working effectively and positively with the BOE. She complimented the RPS administration and their hard work. She noted that fiscal responsibility is taken seriously by the BOE.

Dr. Da Silva commented on short-term and longer term planning considerations. She recommended viewing a video and slides whose links had been provided to the BOF members for more context about the budgets and how budgets will continue to grow. Dr. Da Silva then reviewed the academic and staffing considerations, including the completing the planned third year introduction of the elementary school world language program; the effect of the enrollment bubble in Scotts Ridge Middle School; the continued need to manage social, emotional and behavioral

needs of students; staff for the coaching support model in elementary and middle schools; and security needs involving both people and facilities to keep a safe learning environment. She also noted the continued impact of special education growth, including the requirement to expand the pre-K program, costs associated with AHS Post high school Transition Program and the increase in the RISE cohort.

Dr. Da Silva then discussed operational items and capital factors shaping the work of RPS as well as the facility needs that continue to influence future planning. She noted that the English learner population is rising both in number and complexity, and that pre-K growth requires additional space.

Dr. Da Silva explained that the operational cost drivers including increases in materials, supplies and consumables; utility costs; special education costs including increasing costs of outplacement due to rising tuition costs and transportation costs; increased cybersecurity expenses; negotiated contracts; transportation; and School Resource Officer vehicles. She also identified capital needs that will arise for the RHS auditorium and the RHS boys' locker room. Dr. Da Silva noted upcoming building tours intended to give members of the three boards context for the facility needs and planned improvements.

Board of Selectpersons Remarks

Mr. Marconi spoke regarding the Town's budgets. He first explained that the BOS will be selecting a committee to discuss the long-term PD and FD building needs. He expressed concerns about the PD building condition and noted the impacts of addressing the most immediate of those concerns in next year's budget, such as basement-level flooding at the PD. He described in some detail the spending needs for the two buildings if there is not construction to replace the existing buildings.

Mr. Marconi discussed some details about the upcoming needs of the Town in its operating budgets. He noted that one contract has been settled and another is being negotiated, and he anticipated the increase at approximately 3%. He noted that the BOS will be looking at the senior tax credit recommendations and considering the effect of implementing all the recommendations on the time frame proposed as well as considering adopting changes in pieces.

Mr. Marconi then addressed short and medium term capital needs, identifying many specific items. He noted that there is a plan to completely rebuild Ridgebury Road, with a cost of over \$8 million. He explained state grants already obtained as well as additional state grants sought which if realized would total around \$7 million, in order to limit the impact on the taxpayers of Ridgefield.

V. General Discussion

The members of all three boards asked and responded to questions and added their comments to the remarks that had been presented. Mr. Paradiso, in his comments, stated that the BOE will approach its budget with a similar level of scrutiny and look for opportunities for cost savings and efficiencies but without a number in mind. He also stated that when the voters approved the school roofs project and the Prospect Ridge School project early this year, that encompassed debt service

to pay for those projects, he did not think it was the expectation of voters that RPS operating budget would need to be pared back because of the anticipated debt service costs of those projects.

In addition, questions regarding the Board of Finance's suggested target were raised by Ms. Rice and Mr. Lipton, and specific comments were made by Ms. Malhorta, Mr. Marconi, Ms. Marino, Ms. More, Mr. Connelly and Ms. Kozlark.

VI. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn at 8:05 p.m. by Mr. Rettger, seconded by Mr. Okrongly. All in favor.

Respectfully Submitted by,
Mia Belanger

NOTE: This meeting was broadcast over the Town's live stream facility. A video copy of the full meeting can be accessed at the Meeting Videos page on the Town web site ridgefieldct.gov.