

## Opinion

# How Greenwich spends its \$373M

By Bert Metter

### The Budget

Follow the money. If you want to know how things really work — and what they're worth — money usually tells the story.

It's money time now in Greenwich. Property and personal taxes are due this month, so everyone will have to dig down and fork up. The town's budget — about \$373 million — has been drawn up and approved. \$373 million worth of spending decisions have been made. Who really made them? How did they decide? What did they get for their effort? What do you get?

The budget process in Greenwich, as in Hartford or Washington, involves the clash of two forces. On one side is the universal desire to keep your tax bills low. On the other is the universal demand for more and better services. Even standing still takes big chunks of money; maintenance costs, like most everything else, are headed up.

Bills come from all directions. For example: Repairing the flooring, carpeting and tiles in town schools: \$2 million. Parts for the town's auto fleet: \$399,000. Electricity for the town's libraries: \$332,000. Manning the

town's fire departments on holidays: \$447,000. Waste removal services for the Department of Public Works: \$6.1 million. Health care costs for town employees: \$39 million. A study about handling storm water throughout the town: \$750,000.

And so it goes. Item after item. Are some cost figures too high? Too low? Can some be put off to later? Will delays end up costing more? Are any departments overstaffed? Understaffed? Which projects affect public safety? Which cuts will bring the most screams of pain. How much debt should we take on? It's not easy.

How do the other guys do it? Has Washington mastered the budget process? Has Hartford? How about Stamford, Westport, New Canaan?

Certainly not Washington. The U.S. budget is deeper under water than it's ever been. Yearly interest on the national debt (\$400 billion) is more than the yearly cost of the war in Iraq. We're borrowing more and more from foreign governments, especially China. And the budget process is screwy. Thousands of pet projects (earmarks) costing billions are slid into the budget by individual congressmen with no oversight whatsoever. Basically, it's a mess.

In Hartford, the budget

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is balanced — by law. The law was passed in the early '90s when Connecticut had its back to the wall and was forced to begin the state income tax. But politics still reigns. Connecticut has a part-time legislature. This year, it meets for just three months. So, all budget work and a slew of other bills are crammed into just 90 days. Hovering over this haste and hustle are thousands of lobbyists. Advocacy is, of course, democracy in action. But this is a long way from parents of Hamilton Avenue School students or the Friends of the Greenwich Library. Lobbying in Hartford (and Washington) is big business, fueled by big money. And it is not aimed at the general good, but at specific interests, some good, some not.

The track record for the Greenwich budget has been good. The debt level has historically been low and short term. The town has generally operated on a pay-as-you-go

basis. But dark clouds are gathering. This year, many big expenses are converging — a new school building, a major new downtown structure for the police and fire departments, much infrastructure work. This is forcing the debt level up as the economy and home values head down.

The tax rate, which has been consistently low, is also inching up. It has been increasing at a somewhat higher rate than the consumer price index. This year's budget has required many tough decisions. So what's the verdict?

One meaningful comparison, of course, is with similar nearby towns such as Westport, New Canaan, Darien. Greenwich has a lower median tax rate than they do. And Greenwich's tax rate per \$1,000 of home value is just about the lowest in the state. Town services, overall, are highly rated. Good services, fairly low taxes — not bad.

How was this managed?



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The budget must pass through the first selectman and a board of a dozen Greenwich citizens. This group, elected, and called the Board of Estimate and Taxation, does much of the work. They hold hearings (open to the public), wrestle with the numbers, query department heads and try to wring out costs. This goes on for six months.

The budget then goes to the Representative Town Meeting. The budget is divided into sections and various town committees do their own budget reviews. Then the group as a whole votes, knocking out whatever they feel is unjustified.

Light shines on all this. There are no quick moves in dark shadows, no armies of professional lobbyists, no flood of earmarks.

There are debates, arguments and tradeoffs painfully reached. The level of scrutiny-per-dollar towers above what you'll find in Hartford or Washington.

What's the bill to the town

for this gritty labor? There is none. The 12 members of the finance board and the 230 members of the Representative Town Meeting are elected, but unpaid. Really unpaid. There are no company cars, no meal or mileage allowances, no lobbyists doling out favors. Volunteers do the work.

When you plow through a budget — millions in Greenwich, billions in Hartford, trillions in Washington — the truth is clear: Everything has a price tag, usually a big one. But Greenwich has a system that works well and doesn't cost it anything. Not a penny. That might not make you feel better as you fill out your tax check this month. But it shows there can be something good in everything, even taxes, at least in Greenwich.

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