



THE CITY OF POUGHKEEPSIE NEW YORK

PUBLIC HEARING

Monday, December 5, 2022 5:30 pm

Common Council Chambers

Welcome to the scheduled meeting of the Public Hearing in the City of Poughkeepsie. The date is December 5, 2022 and the time is 5:34 pm.

THIS HEARING IS FOR THE PURPOSE OF RECEIVING COMMENTS ON THE proposed 2023 Budget for the City of Poughkeepsie.

Councilwoman-At-Large Brown called the meeting to order at 5:34 pm.

I. WELCOME

II. ROLL CALL: 6 present, 2 absent (Arrived after roll call: Councilmember Deichler, Absent: Councilmember Johnson)

III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: Five (5) minutes per person public comment.

1. Nick Kalogris – 14 Maryland Ave.
2. Constantine (Gus) Kazolias – Noxon St
3. Linda Bartee – 73 Garden St
4. Darrett Roberts – 148 Franklin St
5. Naomi Brooks – S. Grand Ave. – submitted written comments*
6. Laurie Sandow – S. Grand Ave. – submitted written comments*
7. Guy DeSantis – 279 Church St

*** WRITTEN COMMENTS INSERTED BELOW:**

Naomi Brooks
S. Grand Avenue
December 5, 2022 Public hearing on City of Poughkeepsie 2023 Proposed Budget

Good evening. In preparing comments for tonight's public hearing, I went on the city website to look for budget documents and to read the minutes of Common Council meetings discussing the proposed budget.

I found a 288-page proposed budget document, and a 10-page presentation stating Dr. Martinez and Mr. Nelson were presenting this to the Finance Committee on November 4, 2022.

I was not able to find any record of Common Council presentations or discussions on this budget. Coupled with the fact that I have no background in finance or accounting, this lack of additional information squarely places my comments in the "not sure of how to read all of this and what it means" category. I will do my best.

Actually, my first comment would be that money needs to be budgeted to have a website that is substantially easier to navigate and has frequent updates. This happens to me time and time again – trying find all types of city information on the website is the opposite of what website designers like to call an "intuitive interface".

But here's the really big numbers.

We have a proposed budget of almost \$110 million. About $\frac{1}{4}$ of that, \$26 million, comes from property tax. The properties represent \$3 billion in equalized value, a term I don't quite understand. On p. 24 of the budget, it lists exemptions to those taxes. The largest exemption was for 7 hospital buildings, representing property worth 8% of that equalized value. I understand that the IRS usually views hospitals as tax-exempt. The next largest exemption, however, was for Industrial Development Agency tax breaks to 18 properties, representing 4% of the total equalized value. That's about \$1 million dollars of uncollected property tax income spread over 18 properties. In contrast, what is listed for the individual property owners? The tax breaks given to roughly 400 veteran-owned properties and to 100 owned by seniors account for $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1% of the equalized value, or about \$130,000 of tax breaks spread over 500 exemptions.

The total tax breaks given to 500 of our residents with the greatest need don't even equal the single salary of our highest-paid city administrator. The total tax breaks given to 18 properties by our IDA would cover the salaries of all 8 of our department heads. It feels like small *increases* and even smaller *breaks* are squeezing individual properties owners, while the larger owners and developers are being given great incentives.

Official Minutes of the Public Hearing of December 5, 2022 for the purpose of receiving comments on the proposed 2023 budget for the City of Poughkeepsie

This whittling away at the smaller pieces of this enormous budget pie shows up all throughout the budget. Yes, we will add 5 firefighters, thank goodness, but on p. 26 of the budget, it looks like we are losing 8 public works positions. Public works takes care of city buildings, streets and parking lots and their snow removal, parks, garbage, engineering, and more. Their operating expenses account for \$12.5 million of the budget – about 1/8 of the total. Want to know how much of that is budgeted for a recreation supervisor? \$30,000. How about city beautification? \$5,000. It is astonishing how that small group of Public Works staff works as hard as they do with the barest of budgets. I am betting that each Common Council member easily fields as many questions and complaints about street repair, snow and garbage removal, and parking lots as they do about crime and housing. Please make it easier for us to live here and enjoy the city by appropriating a larger percentage of the budget to Public Works staffing.

My last comment has to do with the lowering of the deficit. Although the Mayor reports that a \$13.2 million deficit in 2016 has been reduced to \$2.8 million in 2022. We have received, and so far have spent, \$10.43 million in ARPA funds – almost the exact amount that the deficit has been lowered. The State Comptroller has pointed out that our city is the most fiscally stressed municipality in the state. In a previous report, state auditors chastised our balancing of our budgets on one-time revenue such as sale of city property. I would also say that ARPA money is one-time revenue, and we should not be using it to announce how good our current city administration is at reducing the deficit. We still have a below-investment grade rating, which means we borrow money at higher rates and we don't attract bond investors who are averse to risk.

Please spend more time talking with city staff and with your constituents about this budget and its implications before closing the public hearing and approving the budget.

Laurie Sandow comments, Common Council 2022 Budget special meeting, December 5, 2022 — Pg. 1 of 2

Once upon a time, though in very recent memory—in other words: not so many years ago—the members of this Common Council used to hold a series of public meetings about the City's proposed budget. Those meetings were staged primarily for two purposes:

Official Minutes of the Public Hearing of December 5, 2022 for the purpose of receiving comments on the proposed 2023 budget for the City of Poughkeepsie

1—for Councilmember grandstanding, and

2—to cover up the ignorance of certain Councilmembers who were clueless about how to read and understand budgets.

But at least those meetings confirmed that the Council was reviewing the budget at all, and doing it in public.

—On October 15, 2022, Mayor Rolison delivered a 288-page, 2023 Preliminary Budget for the Common Council's deliberation and action. At the time of release, it was reported that the Administration would make a Budget presentation in November. I find no record of that other than Dr. Martinez, Commissioner of Finance, Friday, November 4, Budget Presentation to the Council's Finance Committee.

So here we are today, two months since the preliminary budget was first delivered to the Council, and instead of public examination, the Council is covering their dereliction of duty and ignorance by holding tonight's so-called Budget Public Hearing, without ever having put their own comments and concerns on the record, nor workshopping the issues with their constituents.

And I'll just add that the hooey that Council Chair Brown just said about how this public hearing is an important part of the Council's process? No, an important part of the process is you, the Council and its members, speaking to the public, workshopping the issues with your constituents, and not the other way around. We don't collect a paycheck to do your work.

Official Minutes of the Public Hearing of December 5, 2022 for the purpose of receiving comments on the proposed 2023 budget for the City of Poughkeepsie

Laurie Sandow comments, Common Council 2022 Budget special meeting, December 5, 2022 — Pg. 2 of 2

Every member of this Common Council was sworn into office by reciting the following oath: “I do solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States, and the Constitution of the State of New York, and the Charter of the City of Poughkeepsie, and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of the office of Councilmember of the City of Poughkeepsie according to the best of my abilities.”

Every member of this Common Council currently stands in violation of their sworn oath of office. Not only that, they receive support in these violations from the City’s Corporation Counsel, Rebecca Valk who, rather than stressing and overseeing their elected obligations, advises the Council that they’re safe from violations; that if the public is unhappy, the public’s remedy is to take money from their own pockets and file an Article 78.

I show up at meeting after Council meeting without being paid a dime. Councilmembers often arrive late, leave early, and/or don’t show up at all, yet collect full paychecks for work they’re not doing, meetings they’re not attending, and representation they’re not providing.

I won’t be commenting on the Budget tonight, except to express my disgust and contempt for the den of self-dealing electeds who have built an opaque wall—through caucus meetings, consent agendas, non-responsiveness to FOIL, and otherwise—regarding any work they’re doing or not doing in this City’s and in their constituent’s behalf, thereby undermining the health, welfare and interests of all City of Poughkeepsie residents.

Official Minutes of the Public Hearing of December 5, 2022 for the purpose of receiving comments on the proposed 2023 budget for the City of Poughkeepsie

Laurie Sandow comments, Common Council 2021 Budget special meeting, November 9, 2020 — Pg. 1 of 2

In a City of more than 30,000, if you were one of only 20 members of the public reported to be in attendance during a so-called, unidentified “peak watching period” of the November 2nd Common Council Zoom meeting, you might have heard the Chair announce tonight’s special meeting on the City’s Proposed 2021 Budget. But if you left the meeting after public comments, as many people do, then you missed the announcement entirely. Was an announcement of tonight’s special meeting ever posted to the Common Council Facebook page that Chair Salem, alone, controls? Of course not.

Why ask a foolish question. The Council Chair’s contempt for the general public—as opposed to their private pipeline—is manifest once again. Has a single member of this Common Council put their budget questions, comments, and observations in writing and circulated them to all city residents through the Buzz newsletter or any other means? No, to that too.

Instead, tonight’s meeting is set up in such a way that, and I quote from the posting, “When public comments conclude, Councilmembers will have an opportunity to ask questions and raise discussion.” Yes, in classic Common Council style—the electeds who’ve deleted Mayor’s comments from their biweekly meetings, the electeds who haven’t and won’t say a word or reveal their own thoughts about the budget until they hear from members of the public, the Council Chair who didn’t think tonight’s meeting important enough to post to the Council’s Facebook page, never mind, for ease of public access, provide a link to the actual budget, this Council and these Councilmembers continue to collect paychecks for jobs they’re not doing, while the participation of civic-minded members of the public continues to be compensated at the rate of zero to zilch, frosted to lesser or greater degrees with aggravation and occasional false arrest.

In the posting of tonight’s meeting on the City’s website, we find this curious language (and I quote): “During the hearing, the Commissioner of Finance and other relevant parties will

Official Minutes of the Public Hearing of December 5, 2022 for the purpose of receiving comments on the proposed 2023 budget for the City of Poughkeepsie

present a narrative to their drafted and proposed 2021 budget. Following their presentation, we will offer space for public comment.”

Every member of this Common Council was sworn into office by reciting the following oath: “I do solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States, and the Constitution of the State of New York, and the Charter of the City of Poughkeepsie, and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of the office of Councilmember of the City of Poughkeepsie according to the best of my abilities.”

Laurie Sandow comments, Common Council 2021 Budget special meeting, November 9, 2020 — Pg. 2 of 2

Nowhere in the Charter of the City of Poughkeepsie will one find the language whereby the Council (quote/unquote) “offer(s) space” for public comment.

In fact, the text of Section 2.04(d) of the City Charter actually reads, and I quote:

“All meetings of the common council and its committees shall be open to the public except those that are closed pursuant to the provisions of the public officers law of the state of New York. Prior to submitting any proposed legislation to a vote of the common council at any regular or special meeting, the person serving as chairperson shall suspend the rules of the meeting upon such conditions as he or she may determine to permit comment upon such proposed legislation by any member of the public in attendance who wishes to be heard. In addition, each regular or special meeting of the common council shall include a period during which any member of the public in attendance may comment upon any aspect of city governance.”

The Charter mandates and guarantees public comment at regular and special meetings—it does not (quote/unquote) “offer space.” Yet, time and again, both oath of office and Charter mandate are violated by the Council Chair, with the silent complicity and collusion of every sitting councilmember. The Charter also guarantees that meetings of the Council’s committees be open to the public, yet the Council’s secretive LWRP (Local Waterfront

Official Minutes of the Public Hearing of December 5, 2022 for the purpose of receiving comments on the proposed 2023 budget for the City of Poughkeepsie

Revitalization Program) committee also conducts its meetings behind closed doors while stalling and obstructing the work of the City's Waterfront Advisory Committee.

Councilmembers are paid to show up at meetings, but often show up late, or not at all. Councilmembers are paid to put their comments on record, but often don't, or only after the close of public comments. In this year of pandemic and budget challenges, members of nearly every department and service in this city have taken on extra workloads and/or provided some sort of cut to staffing, equipment and salaries. In some cases, these staffing and equipment shortfalls walk the thin edge of jeopardizing the safety, welfare, and even lives of the workers making budget sacrifices. That's the case for all but this Council, with their increased salaries and ward funds, looting the City's contingency fund in service to perpetual conflict and treading water. In this very small city, Councilmembers' internal gang warfare and Ward boundary territoriality, divides rather than unites this City, setting a miserable example for the City's youth, while keeping the City and its residents underserved and stuck in the mud. I can't say I look forward to Council grandstanding tonight, but I can say that I know it's coming.

IV. ADJOURNMENT:

The Public Hearing ended at 6:29pm.

Dated: December 8, 2022

I hereby certify that this true and correct copy of the Minutes of the Common Council Public Hearing held on December 5, 2022.

Respectfully submitted,

**Donna M. DeLuca
Deputy City Chamberlain**