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Wednesday, April 19, 2023

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Hartford Courant

Legislature's state budget tweaks Gov. Lamont proposal, keeps UConn funding structure; nonprofits decry 'cut'

By Christopher Keating

A key budget committee voted Tuesday for a two-year fiscal plan largely similar to Gov. Ned Lamont's, but the state's nonprofit agencies and school lunch advocates say that more funding is needed.

The budget-writing appropriations committee voted 40-12 on a bipartisan basis for a 79-page spending bill that will be subject to final negotiations with Lamont over the next six weeks.

But the nonprofits that deliver state services under contracts said neither Lamont nor the committee is providing enough money at a time when the state has been rolling up large budget surpluses in recent years.

"With inflation at 6.5 percent, a 1 percent increase is essentially a 5.5 percent cut for nonprofit programs, including behavioral and developmental health, housing, community justice and other services on which thousands of human beings across Connecticut depend," said Gian-Carl Casa, a former top state budget official who is now president of the statewide nonprofit alliance. "First the governor's budget, and now the appropriations committee have effectively called for a cut in services for people with addiction needs, for those with intellectual disabilities, for people who need shelter, for children and adults with behavioral health needs, for people coming home to make new lives after incarceration, and for many more vulnerable Connecticut residents."

State Rep. Lucy Dathan, a New Canaan Democrat, said it was "disappointing not to see more" than 1 percent for the nonprofits, adding that she hopes that the number will increase in the final deal. She was joined by Rep. Robyn Porter, a leading liberal lawmaker, along with other Democrats and Republicans.

Sen. Cathy Osten, a Sprague Democrat who co-chairs the committee, said that she and co-chairwoman Toni Walker "struggled immensely" over trying to provide more money for the providers to "make up for years of neglect" with underfunding.

"Our nonprofits do essentially God's work," Osten told committee members. "We live within the confines of the spending cap."

Danbury charter school

The meeting was delayed by long caucuses over a controversial and emotional amendment by freshman Republican Rachel Chaleski for a charter school in Danbury, a swing city that has had Republican mayors and Democratic legislators through the years. Some Democrats said they were concerned about voting against the amendment because they support charter schools, but Republicans said that 400 Danbury residents attended a public hearing in February because their city had been promised a new charter school before the school was blocked.

“The amendment before us is so freaking difficult,” said Rep. Toni Walker, a New Haven Democrat who has co-chaired the committee for many years. “We need to stop isolating education into one lane.”

Rep. Antonio Felipe, a Bridgeport Democrat, said he could no longer oppose the Danbury school, saying, “I’m tired of sitting down, and I should be standing up.”

Sen. Julie Kushner, a Democrat, said she raised three children who went to the Danbury public schools but said she was not in favor of the particular charter school “because I don’t think it’s best for Danbury.”

Sen. Douglas McCrory, a Hartford Democrat and longtime educator, said that unequal education in underachieving public schools in Connecticut cities “has been embarrassing for a long, long, long time.”

In an impassioned speech, McCrory predicted that the school will eventually be built at an uncertain future date, adding, “You will have a school with God as my witness. . . . I am extremely disappointed in us, in this system, in this institution. . . . If we’re not doing what’s best for Danbury, we’re not doing what’s best for the state. I’m done.”

Rep. Melissa Osborne, a freshman Democrat from Simsbury, said she has purposely tried to work on a bipartisan basis in her first year, but opposed the school because “there is a long, long list of unmet needs in this budget” that includes non-profits and other entities.

The amendment failed largely along party lines by 33-20 with no members absent.

While saying that his budget team was still studying the detailed, 79-page document, Lamont said that the plan “appears to respect the fiscal guardrails that have been a key component of our state’s success over the past few years.” Looking ahead, he said he “will work with them to pass an honestly balanced budget that provides growth, opportunity, and affordability for Connecticut’s residents, families, and businesses.”

Despite many requests for funding, legislators say they are constrained by a spending cap that was recently extended by both chambers of the legislature as part of the fiscal guardrails that have been hailed by Republicans, Democrats, and Lamont. The guardrails have been a key factor in creating the surpluses that are continuing.

The Democratic-controlled appropriations committee offered spending plans that were relatively close to Lamont’s in many categories in the vast state budget for scores of departments and agencies that covers everything from salaries for judges to dental care for prison inmates.

Overall, the committee would spend \$50.96 billion over two years, compared to \$50.54 billion by Lamont.

Spending is projected to increase by 3.7% in the first year and 3.2% in the second year, according to the nonpartisan legislative fiscal office.

The committee is recommending \$25.08 billion in spending next year and \$25.88 billion in the second year, compared to Lamont's plan for \$25.04 billion in the first year and \$25.50 billion in the second year. The state's appropriated budget in the current fiscal year is \$24.19 billion, including \$22 billion in the general fund.

Overall, the committee recommends spending \$37 million more than Lamont in the first year and \$374 million in the second year.

In February, Lamont unveiled his new budget that includes the largest cut in the personal income tax in state history and makes further gains in paying down the state's long-underfunded pension debt.

Lamont's fiscal plan includes cuts in the personal income tax that would provide the largest relief to single individuals earning about \$65,000 per year and families earning about \$100,000 per year. The tax package will be subject to separate votes this week by the tax-writing finance committee, rather than the appropriations committee.

Lamont and other Democrats are calling for increasing the earned income tax credit, which chiefly benefits families with children. Under the plan, a family of four earning \$50,000 per year with two children who qualify for the earned income tax credit would pay no state income tax.

The tax cuts, Lamont says, would not be possible without fiscal prudence — calling for a continuation of the policies that were enacted in the historic, bipartisan 2017 budget deal that was crafted when Republicans had more influence due to the 18-18 tie in the state Senate that has since changed to a 24-12 advantage for Democrats.

UConn

One of the most controversial issues has been funding for the University of Connecticut.

Lamont called for combining UConn's operations into a single block grant, but the budget committee is recommending separating the money in decades-long fashion by offering separate amounts for the university and for the UConn Health center in Farmington.

The committee would provide \$215.8 million for the university in the first year, along with another \$111 million for UConn Health. Lamont had combined the numbers together in his proposal.

The UConn budget issue reached a fever pitch in February as hundreds of UConn students protested at the state Capitol — both at a rally and during a public hearing. But Lamont said they were operating under “misinformation” because he has not cut the university's budget.

The state's contribution to UConn, Lamont said, is not decreasing this year. Instead, the university would be losing federal money from the coronavirus pandemic that was scheduled to expire at the end of the current academic year in the same way that one-time federal funding for other programs has also expired. The boost in federal funding, he said, is ending because the pandemic has subsided and is not as much of a problem as in 2020 before a vaccine was developed and distributed around the country.

Lamont and legislators dismissed well-publicized statements by UConn president Radenka Maric that she might pull the men's and women's basketball teams out of the XL Center in downtown Hartford if UConn does not receive the proper state funding.

State statistics show that the top 15 highest-paid state employees all work at UConn, and 66 of the top 90 also work at UConn. The university has the highest total payroll of any state agency, including large departments like corrections and transportation, as well as the entire judicial branch, according to statistics released by the state comptroller.

Day care increases

Besides the tax cuts, Lamont is pushing for increases in day care funding so that parents can return to work after the birth of a child.

“Our commitment to day care in this fiscal year kept more of our centers open, provided up to \$70 million in wage support payments for child care workers, and \$25 million to subsidize 1,300 additional slots for infants and toddlers,” Lamont recently said. “Our proposed budget increases child care rates in the state’s largest child care program — Care 4 Kids — by 10% a year for each year of the biennium.”

But Katherine Lantigua, CSEA SEIU Local 2001 Childcare Council President, said more is needed.

“Care4Kids providers have been working for almost a year without a contract with zero health care benefits, making an average of \$8.50 an hour,” Lantigua said. “While the administration has been working with us cooperatively to address the poverty-level wages for providers, both the governor’s budget and the appropriation committee’s budget fail to provide adequate funding for a pathway to health care. ... Connecticut has fallen behind on health care and, as a result, many providers simply can’t afford to keep their doors open. When our doors close, parents and children suffer.”

In addition, the state’s medical society supports the committee’s recommendation to increase Medicaid rates for primary care doctors and specialists.

“Connecticut physicians are hopeful that this is a first step toward achieving higher reimbursement rates for treating underserved residents in desperate need of primary and specialty care, since rate increases are the strongest incentive in offering better options than expensive urgent or emergency care settings, which don’t offer the continued preventive care that a physician can provide to keep someone healthy,” said Dr. David Hass, president of the Connecticut State Medical Society.

But Rep. Tammy Nuccio, the committee’s ranking House Republican, said she needs more data to justify the Medicaid increase because lawmakers will not know “whether another area needs support” without knowing the full financial picture.

School meals

During the coronavirus pandemic, a huge influx of federal funding allowed children across the state to receive free lunch in the public schools.

“We’re shocked that the appropriations committee has not proposed any funding for school meals for all, given the crisis we saw last fall when federal funding for school meals ended,” said Lucy Nolan, policy director for End Hunger CT! and spokeswoman for the School Meals 4 All CT coalition. “Meal debt soared. Kids went hungry, and couldn’t concentrate or learn. ... Providing no-cost meals for all students is the most direct way to help kids, their families and the community by improving student outcomes, and supporting families struggling with inflation and the high cost of food.”

CT Insider

CT Democrats hike spending in Gov. Ned Lamont's budget proposal

By Ken Dixon

The General Assembly's powerful Appropriations Committee began its traditional budget dance with the executive branch on Tuesday, as the panel approved a two-year, \$50.9 billion budget that would include a spending increase of more than \$400 million above Gov. Ned Lamont's proposal delivered in February.

Legislative leaders and the Democratic governor have until midnight on June 7 to reach compromises on a variety of issues, which will likely center on the proposed hikes in spending outlined in the huge document the budget-writing committee has been working on for weeks and was scheduled for a vote later in the day on the panel, where Democrats have a 37-16 majority.

The bill passed 40-12 mostly along party lines shortly after 6 p.m., more than eight hours after the meeting started. Members on both sides of the aisle voice disappointment in a small increase given to social-service providers.

While lawmakers and the governor are only \$37.3 million apart for the budget year that begins on July 1, spending would increase by \$374 million in the second year of the biennium.

While both sides are close for the first year, with \$25-billion proposals, Lamont had asked the legislature to approve \$25.6 billion for the second year, while Democrats want nearly \$26 billion for the budget year that starts July 1, 2024, after the legislature's mid-term budget adjustments scheduled to start in February of 2024.

Lamont was diplomatic. “I appreciate the Appropriation Committee’s hard work to deliver a document that appears to respect the fiscal guardrails that have been a key component of our state’s success over the past few years,” Lamont said in an early afternoon statement. “We’re reviewing the details of the legislature’s spending plan, look forward to meeting with them to discuss their proposals, and will work with them to pass an honestly balanced budget that provides growth, opportunity, and affordability for Connecticut’s residents, families, and businesses.”

The committee proposal includes multi-million-dollar cuts to the state Department of Revenue Services, and multi-million-dollar additions to the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection, including the State Police. Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, co-chairwoman of the committee, said that

savings was found in avoiding filling some state worker vacancies. "You'll notice that when you get into the budget that we have cut positions that have not been filled," Osten said.

"We have not made everyone happy this year," Osten said, stressing that she believes that when the tax-writing Finance Committee meets on Wednesday, there will be a balanced budget document.

"We spent more than the governor on targeted areas that we believe are important to the state of Connecticut and its residents," Osten said, stressing that K-12 and higher education are among the funding focuses. Osten said she wishes more money were available for non-profit social service agencies, who shortly after the meeting began, complained that they were getting only a 1-percent budget increase at a time when inflation is around 6.5 percent.

In reaction, Gian Carl Casa, president and CEO of the Connecticut Community Nonprofit Alliance, said the budget essentially amounts to a budget cut for agencies that support the state's need for behavioral health and other social service programming.

"It is beyond disappointing and defies understanding that with a current-year surplus of more than \$3 billion, the budget being considered by the Appropriations Committee does not include a meaningful and much-needed funding increase for services provided by Connecticut's community nonprofits," Casa said in a late-morning statement.

"First the Governor's budget, and now the Appropriations Committee have effectively called for a cut in services for people with addiction needs, for those with intellectual disabilities, for people who need shelter, for children and adults with behavioral health needs, for people coming home to make new lives after incarceration, and for many more vulnerable Connecticut residents," Casa said. "Who will tell the men, women and kids who need these services that despite the state having billions of dollars in surplus, there isn't enough for them? Who will tell the dedicated and under-paid nonprofit staff? Who gets to tell them other choices have been made?"

"We know that almost everybody is going to want more," Osten said, warning of the state spending cap and so-called fiscal guardrails to keep spending down. "All the advocates will want more."

"This bill is our budget in response to the governor's budget which was made back in February," said Rep. Toni Walker, D-New Haven, committee co-chairwoman, stressing that Republican leaders were full partners on the committee. "We all had a voice at the table and we made sure of that. And I think what we're all learning is how to collaborate and compromise because there are some things in here that we all don't like and there are some things we do like."

Walker said that so-called lapsed funding in personal services accounts, where the state has not filled vacancies, is glaring. "The number of positions in state government is horrific, that are unfilled," Walker said. "The number of people out in Connecticut that aren't getting the services that they need because they cannot contact somebody, is very clear. We must do better. We must change the way we hire people in the state of Connecticut, for the state's purposes and operations."

"There are going to be things in here that people are going to love and people are going to hate," said Rep. Tammy Nuccio, R-Tolland, a top Republican on the panel. "There's a lot of need we have in the state right now and I want to be sure that the budget we're putting forward is going to address that."

"Arguably, we found Connecticut in a very different and I will say more-sound fiscal state of affairs," said Sen. Eric Berthel, R-Watertown, the other top GOP member of the committee. "And that has actually forced this committee to be a little bit more thoughtful and deliberate about how we're spending the people's money. We would love to have a bipartisan-supported budget when it ultimately gets to the floor of both chambers."

The committee proposes spending \$210 million more than Lamont for the state Department of Education over the biennium, and slightly more than the governor in the budgets for higher education.

The committee's budget does not include the estimated \$90 million that social service advocates want to have free breakfasts and lunches for all school children.

The meeting began at 10 o'clock, when budget summaries were released and after brief summaries were offered by the Republican and Democratic leaders. A recess was then announced so legislators could go over the budget in closed-door caucuses to discuss details and prepare further issues for discussion.

Dr. David Hass, president of the Connecticut State Medical Society, said the budget proposal appears to be a first step toward higher reimbursement rates for physicians who treat under-served communities. Lamont proposed \$6.4 billion for Medicaid, while the committee would add about \$100 million more. The committee recommended \$9.2 million in the first year of the biennium and \$18.3 million in the second year to support a Medicaid rate increase for specialists and physicians.

"By devoting the resources to update Connecticut's Medicaid rates for physician reimbursements, the Appropriations Committee's proposed spending plan is intended to help Connecticut's Medicaid beneficiaries access the high-quality healthcare services, they need when they need it," Hass said in a statement. He said that rate increases "are the strongest incentive in offering better options than expensive urgent or emergency care settings, which don't offer the continued preventive care that a physician can provide to keep someone healthy."

CT Mirror

Promoting an honored restaurant, Lamont plays marketer-in-chief

By Mark Pazniokas

Coracora, a one-time McDonald's transformed by a Peruvian family into a finalist for this year's James Beard Award as outstanding restaurant in the U.S.

"We haven't celebrated a national championship in over a week," said Lamont, who traveled to Houston and Tampa earlier this month to witness UConn and Quinnipiac win national collegiate titles in men's basketball and hockey.

On Tuesday, he only had to go to a shopping center off New Britain Avenue in the Elmwood section of West Hartford, where Macarena Ludena is executive chef at the restaurant her parents, Hector Ludena and Luisa Jimenez, opened in 2011. It is now owned by Macarena and her sister, Grecia.

The celebration came as the restaurant industry, which says it still is recovering from the losses sustained during the COVID-19 pandemic, is lobbying Lamont and lawmakers to reject a bill that would shift labor costs from tips offered by patrons to hourly wages paid by restaurants.

“This is not easy,” Lamont said at the restaurant. “You know, we went through an awful lot, and Coracora and each and every one of you went through an awful lot over the last three years.”

Lamont developed a close, if at times contentious, relationship with the industry in 2020 after initially issuing a broad closure order, then working with owners on the terms for reopening in phases, as well as providing financial assistance to help offset lost revenue.

The state Department of Economic and Community Development extended a \$37,000 bridge loan to Coracora.

“We’re so thrilled to have been able to do that for this restaurant, and for so many other small businesses around the state,” said Alexandra Daum, the deputy who took over as commissioner of DECD in January after the departure of David Lehman.

Daum said she was happy to help Coracora to celebrate and publicize a nomination that already has resulted in more reservations since the finalists were announced on March 29. The winner will be named at a ceremony in June.

“A big part of our mandate is to market the state and represent the state to the outside world. And it’s important to us to represent the whole state. We have so many different cultures represented in Connecticut, and sometimes people think of Connecticut as stuffy or a certain way that we used to be. We’re not stuffy,” Daum said. “This is really cool.”

DECD has an annual tourism marketing budget of \$4.3 million, though it had more money for marketing through funds from ARPA, the federal American Rescue Plan Act.

Scott Dolch, the executive director of the Connecticut Restaurant Association, mingled with Lamont and Daum before sitting down to a celebratory lunch at a restaurant that offers empanadas, ceviche, paella and other dishes that Grecia Ludena called “Peruvian comfort food.”

Dolch said he did no lobbying, though the governor said he was well aware of the minimum wage bill and a second measure of concern to the industry — legislation that would set a standard for predictive scheduling in the retail, hotel and restaurant, and nursing home industries.

The Lamont administration has signaled support for a predictive scheduling law but only if the parameters are narrowed.

As currently written, it would apply to retailers that employ at least 500 workers, plus restaurants that are part of national chains, whether owned by franchisees or major companies. It would require compensation for hourly employees whose shifts are canceled with less than a week's notice.

"We're going to have to reach a compromise there," Lamont said.

The minimum wage bill would end the separate rules for tipped workers.

The hourly minimum wage currently is \$14 and goes to \$15 on June 1 under a law signed by Lamont in 2019, but the minimums paid by restaurants will stay where they've been for four years: \$6.38 for wait staff and \$8.23 for bartenders.

Restaurants are required by law to make up the difference if the tipped wage and tips fall short of the \$14 hourly minimum.

At a public hearing on the bill, proponents offered no data on how frequently wait staff are shortchanged.

In response to a query by CT Mirror, the Department of Labor said a dozen of the 503 wage-and-hour complaints in the first three months of 2023 involved the tip credit or minimum wage for tipped workers. With limited staff, it currently takes four to six months before a complaint is investigated.

"I think this piece of legislation is trying to fix a problem that doesn't exist," Dolch said. "Our servers aren't asking for this. You're not seeing servers up at the public hearing and testifying."

Proponents of the bill said the delay in investigations may discourage complaints.

CT Secretary of the State asks for \$25M to replace ballot tabulators

By Andrew Brown

Connecticut's top elections official is asking to borrow roughly \$25 million this year to replace the state's aging voting equipment to prevent election-day breakdowns and speed up ballot counting in larger municipalities.

Stephanie Thomas, who was elected to her first term as Secretary of the State last year, testified in front of a panel of lawmakers earlier this month and presented a plan to purchase 3,040 new ballot tabulators for local election offices.

Those tabulators are the backbone of Connecticut's current election system. The machines, which are used at every polling place throughout the state, are responsible for processing and recording the choices that voters make on their paper ballots.

The tabulators in use now were put into service more than 16 years ago, and the original manufacturer of those machines is out of business.

Thomas said the age of the equipment and the dwindling number of spare parts for the machines has made it increasingly necessary for the state to purchase newer technology.

“I think that any state that cares about its population should be investing in the very foundation of our democracy,” she said. “Nothing happens without fair, accurate, safe elections, and to not invest in both the human capital and the technology, I think we’re shooting ourselves in the foot.”

In past years, Thomas said, election officials in Connecticut bought up used tabulators from other states so they would have a ready supply of spare parts if the ballot counting machines broke down. But cannibalizing older machines can only last for so long, she said.

“Each passing year, there are fewer of these available anywhere else in the country,” Thomas said.

“It’s not that we’re in a dire situation right this second, but the writing is on the wall,” Thomas told the CT Mirror. “The last thing we want to do is wait until there’s a total failure before we start to replace them.”

Thomas, a Democrat, is not the only person to call for the state to replace the existing tabulators.

Dominic Rapini, the 2022 Republican candidate for Secretary of the State, also recognized the need to replace the state’s voting equipment. It was one of the few things that he and Thomas could agree on.

During a debate last year, Rapini called the tabulators the “core” of Connecticut’s election system. He said the equipment was vital public infrastructure, just like the state’s roads and bridges. And he argued the state needed to invest in newer tabulators to preserve the reliability of the state’s elections.

“My plan is to make sure we have the next generation of tabulators,” Rapini said. “I believe the taxpayers of Connecticut have to pay for that so that we have an even distribution of these new machines. I think lawmakers owe it to Connecticut to make that happen.”

Without that investment, Rapini argued, the machines would continue to create problems in voting precincts throughout the state.

Secretary of the State Stephanie Thomas shown here before the election in a debate with candidate Dominic Rapini. Mark Mirko | Connecticut Public

In recent elections, some local administrators have encountered problems with feeding paper ballots into the older machines.

During the August primary in 2022, for instance, some of the tabulators used to count votes in Middletown broke down because of the excessive heat, causing the paper ballots to get jammed up.

The aging tabulators also encounter issues when the paper ballots get wet or when absentee ballots are crinkled or folded.

Giselle Feliciano, the Democratic Registrar of Voters in Hartford, said even small drops of water from an umbrella or someone's rain coat can cause the paper ballots to jam up in the older machines. That, in turn, requires poll workers to manually record the ballot in the system.

In Hartford, Feliciano said her office maintains roughly 52 tabulators. They have a primary machine and backup for 24 different polling locations throughout the city, she said.

Feliciano said the city has a good company to service that equipment, but she said it is time for the state to consider buying a new generation of ballot tabulators.

"I'm pretty sure I'm not the only registrar that would feel or say the same thing: It is due time," she said. "It is time that the state provide this."

Wearing masks and gloves, volunteers at Hartford City Hall open absentee ballots, making sure they are signed and stamped, and put into a machine to count. Yehyun Kim / ctmirror.org

Thomas asked state lawmakers to approve funding for around 3,000 traditional tabulators, which allow Connecticut voters or election workers to feed ballots in one at a time.

But she also asked the legislature to approve more than \$2.6 million for 40 new medium and high-speed tabulators, which are capable of scanning and recording hundreds of ballots in a much shorter time frame.

If the legislature approves the request, Thomas said those high-speed tabulators will help some of Connecticut's larger towns and cities to report results more quickly on election night.

The high-speed tabulators, Thomas said, would be particularly helpful in municipalities that receive a large number of absentee ballots, which cannot be counted until election day.

The absentee ballots, which are either mailed in or dropped off, often arrive creased or folded, making them harder to process on the older machines. And currently, the ballots can only be fed through the tabulators one at a time.

Scanning the absentee ballots through the older tabulators can be so laborious, Thomas said, that some local election officials opted in recent years to count those ballots by hand instead.

Chris Prue, the president of the Registrars of Voters Association of CT, said he worries that more towns and cities will be forced to resort to counting by hand if the state puts off financing for the new tabulators much longer.

"Without this much needed funding towns across, CT may see a decrease in speed in which results from election day will be available," said Prue, who also serves as the Democratic Registrar of Voters in Vernon. "Election officials will be forced to hand count tens of thousands of paper ballots without functioning tabulators."

Thomas said the high-speed tabulators her office reviewed allows stacks of ballots to be loaded into the machines and scanned automatically. And they can function even if ballots come in crumpled or folded, she said.

The newer tabulators also include more advanced security, Thomas said, and the machines provide election workers with a digitized record of the results, something the older machines don't do.

That will allow election workers to share results with her office on election night, Thomas said.

Thomas said her goal is to have new tabulators in place for the next presidential election.

But there is still a lot of work to be done between now and then. Thomas said she wants to provide state lawmakers with demonstrations of how the newer tabulators work before the legislature votes on her request.

If the funding is approved, the state will need to solicit offers from several election equipment manufacturers. And Thomas's office will need to train local election workers and educate voters about how to use the new technology.

CT News Junkie

Disability Advocates Say They Have Received No Meaningful Response To Legislative Access

By Christine Stuart

It's been weeks and disability advocates say they haven't received an adequate response from legislative leaders about their complaints regarding access to the legislative process.

Since January the CT Cross Disability Lifespan Alliance has been urging legislative management to address what they say is a long-standing pattern of noncompliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. They say a number of individuals have had trouble accessing public hearings, which are now over.

They even filed complaints with the Department of Justice, but as of Tuesday have not had a meeting with legislative leaders or the director of Legislative Management Jim Tamburro.

The alliance wrote three letters to Tamburro before filing complaints with the Department of Justice. Tamburro did respond to one of their letters on February 17.

In his response Tamburro said "We have communicated with all committee clerks to remind them to contact our facilities team should they require additional assistance with accommodations."

He said moving forward they are removing the 10 day advance request for sign language interpreters. He said they also contracted with a local architect and engineering firm who are experts in ADA compliance and accessibility to conduct a study of the Capitol Complex.

During one of the incidents this year, five individuals who are deaf or blind wanted to testify and arranged for accommodations with the clerk to testify early in the day, but when the hearing started the sign language interpreter for the individuals had not arrived. When she finally arrived she signed for the first two, but then left saying she wasn't hired for all five. A kind person who was not certified as a sign language interpreter accompanied the other three.

Molly Cole, coordinator for the Cross Disability Lifespan Alliance, said Tamburro's response is inadequate because they have yet to meet with the group.

A spokesman for Senate Democrats declined comment Tuesday.

She said all they want is for Legislative Management to put one person in charge of all of this and train the clerks on a common protocol to handle these situations.

Cole said after filing complaints with the Department of Justice on March 24 the group sent another letter asking for a meeting.

"This request was acknowledged but, again, did not receive a meaningful response," according to a press release.

The group plans to gather at the state Capitol today at 11 a.m. to hold a press conference about the matter.

CT Examiner

Failure to Fund Danbury Charter School Sparks Rift Among State Legislators

By Emilia Otte

A failed amendment to the state legislature's proposed budget that would have added funding for the Danbury Charter School has created a rift between legislators, with some arguing that the amendment went against the normal budget process and others saying they needed to support the Danbury community.

The proposed budget includes \$9.7 million for three new charter schools: the Norwalk Charter School for Excellence, which was approved in 2018, Capital Preparatory School in Middletown and Edmonds Cofield Preparatory Academy for Young Men in New Haven, both of which were approved in March of this year.

"It's important that we provide families, parents and children choices and opportunities in a variety of levels. It's important that we understand that one way is not the only way," said State Rep. Toni Walker, D-New Haven, one of the committee chairs.

But the original budget did not include funding for the Danbury Charter School, also approved in 2018.

State Rep. Rachel Chaleski, R-Danbury, proposed to amend the budget to add funding for the school.

Chaleski said the Danbury charter was approved in the same way that the other charters were, and that city officials, the Danbury Board of Education and many members of the community were in favor of the school.

“They have written letters, made phone calls, held rallies, provided hours and hours of testimony before us,” Chaleski said of the Danbury community members.

Hundreds of Danbury residents also gave testimony at a public hearing in February in support of the charter school. In a statement, Danbury Mayor Dean Esposito, a Republican, told CT Examiner that he was “incredibly disappointed” by the fact that the legislature had not voted to fund the charter school.

“To be clear, the funding for the Danbury Charter School was in the governor’s budget but was removed by a select group of politicians,” Esposito said.

Republicans and Democrats were split over the amendment, which failed 20-33. Many Democrats who cast their vote against funding the charter school said they did so “regretfully.”

Democratic co-chairs Osten and Walker said that they were in support of charter schools, but would not vote in support of the amendment because they felt it went against the normal process for approving the legislature’s budget.

Osten said she had asked Chaleski to withdraw her amendment.

“I did that because it’s in the best interest of us moving forward and getting things done. Because there’s too much at risk in this budget,” said Osten, who noted that there was \$3 million in the budget to expand seats at existing charter schools, as well as additional funding to support students already attending those schools.

But Republicans pushed back against the argument over process, saying they felt it was a democratic way of operating to bring forward an amendment to the budget.

“There are three charter schools that are being funded in this budget, and one that is not. I want to know, what is the obstacle to that one?” State Rep. Tammy Nuccio, R-Tolland, said. “This here is a town that was promised a charter school. They’ve had funding in this budget or in budgets throughout the years, and it has continually been yanked.”

State Rep. Patrick Callahan, R-New Fairfield, who also represents part of Danbury, said he was in support of the charter school.

“I’m hearing a lot of talk from my colleagues on the other side of the aisle, how they support charter schools. However, I’m going to sit here and say I support charter schools, and will show that with a yes vote on the amendment,” he said. “The Danbury Charter School has been passed over too many times.”

Several members of the state's Black and Puerto Rican caucus also voted in favor of the charter school funding, including Christopher Rosario, D-Bridgeport, Antonio Felipe, D-Bridgeport, Robyn Porter, D-New Haven, and Geraldo Reyes, D-Waterbury.

"I would like to see us move forward with the Danbury Charter School. Take politics out of it. Let's put the people first," Reyes said. "The very people that we're trying to help are the very people that come before the [Black and Puerto Rican caucus] consistently, year in, year out. And I would be hypocritical if I didn't support this."

But other Democrats said they felt the legislature needed to do more to fix the funding for all public schools before funding a new charter.

"This is a result of decades of allowing a municipality to underfund their public schools and get away with it," said State Rep. Jeffrey Currey, D-East Hartford, chair of the Education Committee. "We're going to get to a point where we're going to see a school in Danbury. That is inevitable. But we have to ensure that we are funding all of our public schools in a manner that doesn't harm any of them."

State Sen. Julie Kushner, D-Danbury, said she didn't support the charter school because she felt it was not in the best interest of the city.

"It is not easy to be in the position I have been in for the last four years, opposing a school. But I do it because I don't think it's the best educational move for Danbury," Kushner said. "This is my view and it's my view because I care about the children of Danbury and our education system, and I think we need to make it better."

Chaleski disagreed with the Democrats' objections. She also noted that the Open Choice program, which allows children in low-income districts to attend schools in suburban surrounding districts, has failed to get off the ground in Danbury.

"One size does not fit all. What works great for one child may not work for another child," Chaleski said. "This is not about funding. The funding is already in the budget. And while I appreciate the process and the comments about the process, the process hasn't worked for Danbury in six years."

As Federal School Dollars Dry Up, State Lawmakers Aren't Coming to the Rescue With Latest Budget

By Emilia Otte

HARTFORD — The state legislature released a draft budget on Tuesday that includes less than half of a requested \$357 million increase in school funding that many districts had planned to use to plug budget shortfalls left as federal COVID aid is depleted.

In February, legislators and advocates pushed for \$275 million to speed up the implementation of a new funding formula that will increase the amount of money given to many of the state's poorest districts.

The additional money, meant to come from a surplus accrued by a change in the state's fiscal policy, would fully fund the new formula by 2025.

Since then, updated enrollment data raised the amount needed to fully fund the formula to \$357.5 million. About \$163 million of this funding would be directed to public schools, \$22 million to charter schools and \$53.5 million to magnet schools, with the remaining money going to vocational agriculture and open choice programs.

The legislature's proposed budget offers to fund just \$150 million of this total.

State Rep. Jeff Currey, D-East Hartford, the chair of the Education Committee, said that money would go toward increasing funding for schools across the state, although he did not know how it would be divided up.

"Given that it is not nearly enough to cover the entire projected cost for that [bill], this is a starting point for us to build off of crafting policies to ensure that we are moving towards equitably funding all public schools, using the same formula in the same manner," Currey said.

The budget also includes \$19.7 million to continue funding towns that were scheduled to see a decrease in their state funding over the next two years, and an increase of \$7.9 million in state funding for public schools based on updated enrollment numbers.

Daniel Pearson, executive director of Educators For Excellence, which represents teachers in Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven, said the lack of assurance of continued funding after federal COVID aid runs out has caused districts to hesitate to use the funds to hire personnel they need.

"There's only so many one-time costs you can do in our highest-need districts. They were under-resourced and understaffed for a long time," Pearson said.

He added that the legislature needed to set aside the additional funding this year, while districts still had a chance to put some of those federal funds toward hiring teachers. The districts that used the money for tutoring and mental health support services need to have enough money to keep those positions in the district, he said.

"In order to maintain the success that we are seeing, we need to be able to fully fund and make sure that we fully staff these positions and make it a permanent part of education, because if not, we're going to go right back to where we were before," Pearson said.

In February, a panel of superintendents and charter and magnet school directors came before the legislature to speak in favor of the increased funding. Stamford Superintendent Tamu Lucero told legislators that her district had used the money to fund over 100 positions in the school budget, and Kate Ericson, CEO of LEARN, which operates four magnet schools in Eastern Connecticut, said that her schools were currently running at a deficit.

Union leaders also criticized the legislature's budget. Mia Comulada Breuler, a counselor at Wilbur Cross High School and executive secretary for the New Haven Federation of Teachers, said that the

Wilbur Cross building is overcrowded and underfunded. She also said one in four students there are learning English as a second language, but that the programs were not being implemented properly because of a lack of staff and resources.

“Our state is sitting on a multibillion dollar surplus and an overflowing rainy day fund that should be mobilized for equity. If we improve the working conditions in city schools, teachers will stay and students will thrive,” Breuler said. “Urban educators know how to care for and engage our young people ... but we can’t fully implement what needs to happen with our current lack of equitable funding.”

The Connecticut Education Association, the state’s largest teacher’s union, declined to offer comment on Tuesday.

Waterbury Republican-American

State Democrats look to spend more than Governor proposed

By Paul Hughes

HARTFORD – The Democrat-led Appropriations Committee is preparing to vote on a two-year, \$50.9 billion spending plan that represents a more than \$400 million increase over the \$1.1 billion increase that Gov. Ned Lamont recommended.

The spending package represents the first of the two-part legislative reply to the two-year, \$50.5 billion budget plan that Lamont recommended to the General Assembly in February. The Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee is due to vote on a tax package on Wednesday.

The Appropriations Committee released its budget Wednesday morning, and then recessed for Democratic and Republican caucuses after some brief remarks from its Democratic and Republican leaders.

“Everybody has a look at the pie now,” said Rep. Toni E. Walker, D-New Haven, the budget-writing committee’s House chairwoman.

The Appropriation Committee budget proposes expenditures of nearly \$25 billion for the upcoming 2024 fiscal year that starts July 1 and \$25.8 billion for the 2025 fiscal year. This compares to Lamont’s recommendations of \$25 million in the first year of the budget cycle and \$25.5 million in the second year.

“We spent more than the governor on targeted areas that we believe are important to the state of Connecticut and its residents,” said Sen. Catherine A. Osten, D-Sprague, the committee’s Senate chairwoman.

The beneficiaries of the proposed increases include nonprofit organizations, Medicaid recipients, public schools and public higher education, and health care.

The governor's budget plan proposes an additional \$847.8 million in spending in 2024 and \$462.1 in the 2025 fiscal year. The Appropriations Committee budget proposes an additional \$37 million in spending in the first year over Lamont's recommendation and \$374.3 million in the second year.

"There are some things that the governor embraced and there are things that the governor did not choose fund, and we may have addressed it," Walker said. "We have a lot of opportunities where the federal government has been the funder and now no longer exists, which puts another pressure on us."

Osten said the legislative budget plan falls below the state spending cap, but did not say by how much. Lamont's budget proposal is \$57.4 million under the state spending cap in the first year and \$405.3 million in the second year.

"We have not made everybody happy this year. We have stuck to the confines of the spending cap. We believe that we are under the spending cap in both years," Osten said.

The Lamont administration calculated the allowable spending growth to be \$997.9 million in 2024 and \$773.4 million in 2025.

Sen. Eric C. Berthel, R-Watertown, the ranking Senate member, commented on the state's strong financial position and referenced how the spending cap is limiting growth in appropriations.

"I think what we found ourselves in this year as we came into this legislative session is arguably we found Connecticut in a very different and I'll say a more sound fiscal state of affairs, and that has actually forced this committee to be a little bit more thoughtful and deliberate about how we are spending the people's money," he said.

The state has posted five budget surpluses, including a record \$4.3 billion surplus in the 2022 fiscal year, and this year's adopted \$24.2 billion budget is running a projected surplus of nearly \$3.3 billion, according to the latest estimates. The general fund is expected to post a \$1.4 billion surplus after the anticipated transfer of more than \$1.8 billion of certain income tax receipts to the budget reserve fund.

The Day of New London

Supreme Court's refusal to hear appeal in dredging suit seen as crucial to state, region

By Brian Hallenbeck

Connecticut interests continued Tuesday to hail the U.S. Supreme Court's refusal to hear an appeal of an appellate court's decision upholding the designation of an eastern Long Island Sound disposal site for dredged materials.

The decision is considered crucial to Connecticut's maritime economy, with Electric Boat, the Connecticut Port Authority, the Connecticut Harbor Management Association, Cross Sound Ferry and

others having expressed support for the disposal site, Attorney General William Tong noted in a press release.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had found that without dredging, the ability to launch and build submarines in Groton "would be eliminated," Tong said.

"Today's decision ends years of litigation and delay over a matter vitally important to Connecticut's maritime economy," he said Monday. "Thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in revenue rely on the ability to dredge and safely deposit materials. The Eastern Long Island site was selected after exhaustive review and public input. It's well past time to get this work underway,"

The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, allowed to intervene in the State of New York's case against the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, defended the EPA's 2016 selection of a disposal site on the edge of the maritime border between Connecticut and New York and 2.3 nautical miles upstream from the western coast of Fishers Island.

A U.S. district judge in the Eastern District of New York first upheld the selection in a July 2020 decision that prompted the Town of Southold, on Long Island, to appeal. The town also had been allowed to intervene in the case.

A 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals panel affirmed the district court's decision last September and then denied Southold's petition for a review by the full appellate court in November. That led Southold to ask in February that the Supreme Court review the appellate court's ruling. On Monday, the Supreme Court declined to issue a writ of certiorari, in effect declining to take up the case.

"This is the outcome we've been waiting for to protect southeastern Connecticut's maritime economy and the Long Island Sound region," U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, said in a statement Monday. "... The prolonged legal fight over this issue has only created uncertainty for our ports, harbors, marinas, and our region's submarine industrial base."

Ulysses Hammond, executive director of the Connecticut Port Authority, which is overseeing the transformation of State Pier in New London into a wind energy hub, also applauded the Supreme Court's refusal to hear Southold's appeal.

"This is a pivotal decision, especially to the small harbors of our municipalities, who can now proceed with dredging projects with greater environmentally protected coastal management certainty and cost control," he said in a statement.

Stan Mickus, director of public affairs for Cross Sound Ferry, added "The Supreme Court's decision is crucial to maintaining the economic and environmental viability of maritime commerce on Long Island Sound, which is more important now than ever."

EB, the Groton submarine-builder, had no comment, according to a spokesman.

In petitioning the Supreme Court, Southold said the EPA estimated that more than 20 million cubic yards of dredged material will be disposed at the site over a 30-year period, with the material "largely

originating from contaminated industrial areas around the submarine base and related manufacturing facilities near Groton and New London.”

The town alleged that use of the site, “particularly at the scale anticipated,” posed environmental risks “and the creation of a public nuisance for the hamlet of Fishers Island and the surrounding islands and marine environments in the Town of Southold.”

Final State Pier cost remains unknown

By Greg Smith

The final cost of the State Pier construction project is likely to go up again but by how much and how it will be funded remain a lingering question.

Connecticut Port Authority Executive Director Ulysses Hammond, at a board meeting on Tuesday, signaled that the answers should come within “the next few weeks,” as negotiations with the key involved players near an end.

“We have been engaged in a series of complex negotiations with multiple parties regarding the development of a fair final path forward to the project completion this fall,” Hammond said.

He said he expects to call a special meeting of the port authority’s board later this month regarding the price tag of the project, which now stands at \$255.5 million. Negotiations on the final cost of construction at State Pier, which have steadily risen from a \$93 million estimate in 2019, involve construction project manager Kiewit and offshore wind partners Orsted and Eversource, among others.

The state has already committed at least \$180 million towards the project that has been redesigned and faced permitting delays, supply chain issues and construction obstacles. The Port Authority, a quasi-public agency, has also faced increased scrutiny by the state and been the subject of investigations related to ethics, financial management and contracts.

Negotiations on costs are nearing the final stages even as Gateway prepares to begin its run as terminal operator at State Pier, which will be used initially as a staging, assembly and delivery site for Orsted and Eversource’s offshore wind projects.

About 60% of State Pier will switch from construction site to terminal in time for the expected arrival next month of vessels associated with Orsted and Eversource’s South Fork Wind offshore wind project under construction off Long Island.

Last month, Gateway parent company Enstructure said it was finalizing contractual agreements with the International Longshoremen’s Association, whose members will load and unload vessels at the pier. Gateway said it estimates in total there will be 60 to 80 employees from various companies at State Pier working on South Fork Wind.

Gateway is expected to arrive at State Pier by the end of the month.

Hammond said the obstacles that have slowed construction and pile driving at State Pier are expected to continue into the summer with dredging resuming at the end of the year.

Orsted and Eversource jointly issued a statement in response to questions about South Fork Wind, saying in part that “State Pier is expected to begin to see activity associated with South Fork Wind next month, beginning with the arrival of the first vessel carrying prep packages to support wind turbine staging and assembly at the site. In June, we expect the blades and nacelles to arrive at State Pier, which will lead to further activity supporting the project.”

Meanwhile, Hammond said there have been behind-the-scenes activities in advance of the arrival of offshore wind vessels in May. Licensed marine pilots and tugboat operators from Thames Towboat Company were trained earlier this month at the U.S. Maritime Resource Center in Newport, R.I. Those pilots will guide the incoming vessels to the pier.

The changeover to Gateway as terminal operator triggers lease payments to the port authority of \$2 million per year from Orsted and Eversource and additional funds from Gateway that are based on revenues and expected to amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars per year.

The city of New London is receiving a minimum of \$750,000 per year for at least seven years from a host community agreement with Orsted and Eversource. The city received an initial \$500,000 payment in June and expects a second payment next month.

Hammond said he remains encouraged by the progress at State Pier.

“While we still have about 40% to complete before the champagne celebration, the current momentum and commitment is promising,” Hammond said.