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## Forum: Bridgeport school board members seek positive dialogue

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Bridgeport Board of Education Chairperman John Weldon.

On Feb. 5, the Bridgeport Board of Education held a special meeting to discuss and possibly act on a series of Community Conversations related to Bridgeport Public Schools' projected 2019-2020 budgetary shortfall, currently anticipated to be in the order of magnitude of \$21 million. In the end, a vote was taken to cancel the remaining forums, which has resulted in a degree of concern from some that the public has been shut out of the BOE's budgetary process. As the five board members who voted in favor of canceling the remaining forums (John Weldon, Jessica Martinez, Sybil Allen, Hernan Illingworth and Chris Taylor), we wanted to provide some perspective to why we took the action we did.

To begin, the forums were never designed to be an opportunity for the public provide input to help develop the budget, or determine the district's financial priorities — that responsibility rests with the superintendent of schools, in collaboration with her executive level staff, and they've already completed that work. Rather, the objective in holding the Community Conversations was to inform the public of the budgetary shortfall issues we face in the coming year, while simultaneously engaging City Council

members on a district-by-district basis, so that they could come to understand the importance of funding our projected deficit from the perspective of the people who elected them. They were never designed as forums for people to help develop the budget, or determine the district's financial priorities.

Over recent weeks, some board members expressed concern with respect to the consistency of the message that had been communicated at the four Community Conversations held thus far, as well as with that message having certain undertones of negativity and hostility toward the mayor, the City Council and even the superintendent herself, instead of that message being one of collaboration and partnership. When that happens, it's time to have a candid discussion about what we really want to accomplish, which is why we called a special meeting on the topic. In having that discussion, which included weighing the superintendent's views (which included her concurrence that the forums had somehow developed a negative undercurrent with an inconsistent message) a majority of the board determined not to continue advocating for increased funding in this manner. Irrespectively, that does not mean it won't be done in another way that continues to engage the public.

To be clear, the Bridgeport Board of Education does not want to deny anyone a platform — we just want our message to be clear, consistent, even-toned and, above all, positive. Over the coming weeks, we will try to find a way to accomplish that objective. In the meantime, to those who felt their voice was being taken away, please don't think that. We do appreciate the interest so many in our city have in transparency and civic engagement and we will do our best to make sure all supporters of Bridgeport Public Schools has a voice.

*John Weldon is chairman of the Bridgeport Board of Education; Jessica Martinez is its vice chair; and Hernan Illingworth, Chris Taylor and Sybil Allen are members of the Bridgeport Board of Education.*