Meeting Minutes - DRAFT

Town of East Haddam
Black Birch Golf Course Feasibility Study Committee
Initial Regular Meeting

Date: March 16, 2026
Location: Municipal Office Complex, Meeting Room 1

1. Call to Order, Pledge of Allegiance, & Attendance

The meeting was called to order by First Selectman Todd Gelston at **7:03 PM** at the Municipal Office Complex, Meeting Room 1. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Study Committee Members Present:
Steven Longobardi, Donald Lorusso, Jeff Miller, Mike Morris, Alan Ponanski, John "Jef" Wolter, Daniel Zimmerman

Study Committee Members Absent:
None

Additional Attendees:
Todd Gelston (First Selectman)

2. Introduction of Members

a. Introductions - Each member spent a few minutes introducing themselves and their interest in serving on the Feasibility Study Committee.

b. Appointment of Chairman – Alan Ponanski was nominated by Jef Wolter and was elected unanimously as Chairman.

c. Appointment of Secretary – Jeff Miller was nominated by Donald Lorusso and was elected unanimously as Secretary.

3. Explanation of Process

a. First Selectman Todd Gelston Presentation - Todd Gelston stated the Committee has been formed with seven members and a Chairman and Secretary elected, so had fulfilled

the first objective of the Feb. 18 BOS resolution (see attached resolution). He highlighted the "charge" or mission of the Committee:

- To evaluate, within 90 days of the initial meeting, the feasibility ("pros and cons") of the Town purchasing the Black Birch golf course (and any associated parcels) in order to restore it to use by residents and visitors to East Haddam.
- The Committee will determine the fair market value of the Property and identify any alternative uses (other than a golf course).
- Judge the impact to the Town's finances and economic development of public vs. private ownership and golf course vs. alternate uses.
- Estimate the budget, funding sources and time needed to restore the golf course to public use.
- Estimate the amount of water needed to operate a restored golf course year-round.
- The Committee will reach out to Town departments and commissions, including EDC, P&Z Commission, Inland Wetlands and Watercourses, to assist in analysis and decision-making.

b. General Discussion

Chairman Alan Ponanski then started a discussion of the Committee's work schedule and the many issues to be considered. He proposed meeting weekly through the 90-day study period in a public meeting at Town Hall. There are many previous reports, studies, meeting minutes, and an appraisal regarding Black Birch golf course. The Chair will assemble the most important documents in binders for each Committee member. Mr. Gelston suggested the documents be uploaded into the Town's Dropbox account and the members be provided access to that. Jef Wolter added that an ownership map of the Black Birch area and the Banner Estates condo Declaration should be included.

Steve Longobardi said he obtained from Town Planner Jim Ventres a copy of the 2025 golf course appraisal, a notated map with parcels, and docs related to the golf course. He will distribute to the members for inclusion in the Dropbox.

The Committee agreed on the Dropbox and a weekly meeting on Tuesdays at 7:00 pm in Town Hall meeting room #3. The Committee's discussion had a focus on the following issues.

Complexity – Jef Wolter stated that the Town undertaking the restoration and operation of a golf course is very difficult and costly, requiring uncertain funding and the services of

many professionals including engineers, agronomists, arborists, Just the issue of ADA compliance is complicated and could cost millions to address.

Market Value of the Golf Course – Chairman Ponanski referred to the 2025 appraisal completed by Leisure Appraisal and noted that regardless of the Seller's asking price a municipal government cannot pay more than the opinion of market value based on an appraisal. The Committee declined to speculate publicly at this point on a purchase price the Seller would accept.

Funding Sources – It will not be easy to secure funding for acquisition of the course, or the capital improvements to re-open it, or the working capital and equipment to operate it. First Selectman Gelston said that other immediate town capital requirements, like a new fire station and new library, will mean little of no bonding capacity.

Taxable vs Tax-Exempt – The Town's commercial tax base needs to be increased to reduce the burden on residential properties. The current golf course owner pays about $65,000 per year. Town ownership would be tax-exempt and preclude future increases in the assessment.

Public vs. Private Ownership & Management – Secretary Jeff Miller asked if it would be better for Black Birch to be purchased by a private owner/operator. The Town could facilitate the purchase by an experienced private golf management company and assist with necessary local and state approvals, and perhaps grant funding from public and private sources. He cited Triggs Memorial owned by the City of Providence and managed for the past 35 years by FCG Associates under a net lease. The course, designed by Donald Ross, fell on hard times, but FCG has invested millions of private capital to improve it and manages it as a first-class golf operation. Triggs is now ranked #14 on a recent list of the best public courses in America. Miller spoke with one of FCG's partners last week and he is interested in learning more about the Black Birch opportunity.

Water Availability and Cost – Daniel Zimmerman said that contrary to rumors that Black Birch has a great supply of water available and a partial irrigation system. Connecticut Water owns the ground water rights, but certain property owners are able to pump up to 50,000 gallons per day at no charge. Secretary Miller had an email from the golf course superintendent at Fox Hopyard that an 18-hole golf course would need a retention pond engineered to hold 7 to 14 million gallons to meet an estimated annual requirement of 5.4 to 21.8 million gallons. It is not clear how much water could be available at Black Birch from a combination of the existing pond, scattered wells, and potential new ground water

pumping. Also would an entirely new irrigation system need to be installed and at what cost? The water issues will need further investigation.

4. New Business

a. Review Goals for Committee – Goals were discussed above in the First Selectman's presentation.

b. Review of Any Handout Material

Member Jeff Miller handed out an email from Jeff Swanson, Golf Course Superintendent at Fox Hopyard Golf Club, that summarized his thoughts on restoring Black Birch (see attached email). There were no other handouts distributed.

c. Future Meeting Schedule

The Committee will meet on Tuesday, March 24th and review the previous reports on Black Birch saved to the Dropbox. It will then meet each Tuesday in Town Hall meeting room #3 over the next 90 days. Chairman Ponanski suggested a Saturday morning work session at some point and the Committee agreed. The Committee's report is due by Monday, June 15th.

d. Other

No other issues were discussed.

5. Public Comment

Patrick Burke, a resident of Banner Estates at 7 Augusta Drive and the President of their HOA, commented on the water availability and the existing irrigation system on the golf course. A large retention pond beyond the maintenance barn holds several million gallons of water and is a potential source of irrigation. There is a partial irrigation system on the course that provided water to all greens and all but 5 or 6 golf holes. Not sure of the system's condition after two seasons out of operation. Scattered wells in several locations on the course also provide irrigation. He said that Connecticut Water previously stated there would be no charge for ground water pumped for golf course use.

Kate Hughes, a resident of 81 Falls Road, said she would prefer to see the golf course preserved as open space and/or developed for recreational uses for Town residents. She is concerned about the use of toxic chemicals and pesticides and impact on neighbors if

the property is restored to golf course use. Chairman Ponanski acknowledged the risk, but said golf course treatments are safer and less toxic than they were previously.

David Carbo, a resident at 35 Wickham Drive, avid golfer, member of the East Haddam Land Trust, and 35-year resident of the Town, opposed the restoration of Black Birch and handed out a six-point sheet and summarized them:

- *Degraded and Overgrown Course Condition* – The property "no longer represents a golf course" so should be evaluated and priced as open space.
- *Equipment, Maintenance and Personnel* – The high cost of new mowers, equipment, maintenance building and employees required to operate this business.
- *Water Supply* – Connecticut Water Company owns all rights to the ground water and the above-ground water sources are inadequate to support an 18-hole golf course. Concerned about cost to access and impact on nearby residential wells, given large volume pumped out of the aquifer.
- *Irrigation, ADA Compliance, Tournament Play* – The high costs of an underground irrigation system, ADA compliance (EH libraries are not), and added parking areas needed for tournament play.
- *Competitive Edge and Image* – The image of Black Birch has been tarnished in the years before it closed due to very poor course conditions. Portland and Hebron each have 3 public courses in very good conditions about a 20-25 minute drive from Black Birch. How much investment, years of reconstruction and image building will it take for the course to be competitive with these other courses?
- *Feasibility Findings* – What amount of funding, including bond issuance, and how many years will it take to make Black Birch "a functional golf course?" Need annual operating projections. Can it be both a competitive option for golfers and a profitable operation for taxpayers.

Crary Brownell, Chairman of the East Haddam Planning & Zoning Commission, said that the site plan for 330 residential units had been approved, but the community septic had not been designed and would need to go through review and approvals. He suggested that the Committee ask Bob Casner, Chairman of the Economic Development Commission, to meet with them to discuss his ideas and prior efforts regarding the golf course. Bob is away this week.

6. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:46 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Jeff Miller
Secretary