TOWN OF EAST HADDAM
Board of Finance
Regular Meeting Minutes
February 7, 2022
Municipal Office Complex
Meeting Rooms 1 and 2
Via Zoom and YouTube Live

CALL TO ORDER

Ms. Gionta called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

In attendance

Board of Finance Members:

Tracey Gionta, Chairman
Bruce Dutch, Secretary
Joseph Corbett
Todd Gelston
Tracey Gionta
Harvey Thomas
Rebecca Whatley

Others:

William Barney, Library Board of Trustees

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Motion was made by Mr. Dutch to approve the agenda as written. Mr. Gelston seconded the motion and it was unanimously approved. Motion carried.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. **Regular Meeting, January 10, 2022:**

Ms. Gionta called the Board's attention to the draft minutes of their January 10th meeting in their meeting packets

Motion made by Mr. Gelston to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of January 10, 2022 as written. Mr. Corbett seconded the motion and it was unanimously approved. Motion carried.

CORRESPONDENCE

Ms. Gionta advised that she had received the following email from Chet Slabinski, a town resident:

"Thank you BOF for the clear and open documentation of your policies and other information that is easily found on the town website. The year-end financial report is an outstanding view of our town!

"With the current uncertain state of the economy and looming inflation, my opinion for the coming budget year is that it we should pull back and focus primarily on town and school essentials: take care of good town employees and teachers, maintain our existing infrastructure, and responsibly complete any environmental remediations. This is not the year to ask for more dollars to be spent to increase our assets and enlarge empires.

"I strongly support the approach of responsible budgeting that includes justifying the need. This can be a year that we scrutinize what we had been doing and scrub any legacy items that have not produced desired results.

What's the old saying? "There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all. "

"Further, I urge resisting the temptation to use "new and free (ha!)" Fed money to enact more programs without our own justification of need and an exit strategy.

"As an example of these points, I noticed that one preliminary education budget item was the hiring of more staff to expand the pre-K program. The old Head-Start program failed, and now a recent study of pre-K results showed that pre-K had little and sometimes even a negative impact on those young children in this social experiment. So instead of expanding it, perhaps we should be phasing it out?

"Thank you for this mechanism to allow comment.

"Sincerely,
"Chet Slabinski
"East Haddam resident and taxpayer"

Ms. Gionta advised that Superintendent Reas had also received a copy of Mr. Slabinski's email.

Ms. Gionta advised that she did not have access to the meeting's remote question portal at this time.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Ms. Gionta advised that the representative from the town's auditors had advised she would have to reschedule her planned attendance at this meeting for the Board's next regularly scheduled meeting.

a. **Tax Collector's Report—November:**

Ms. Gionta called the Board's attention to the Tax Collector's November report in their meeting packets. The Board reviewed the report and there were no questions.

Ms. Gionta reported that she had received information indicating that the Grand List had increased by 3.21%. In response to a question raised by one of the Board members, she advised that the increase was primarily due to the current increase in the value of automobiles.

b. **Board of Finance Subcommittee Reports:**

- **Communications:** Ms. Gionta called the Board's attention to a draft article in their meeting packets which provided an explanation of the General Fund's unassigned fund balance. Mr. Gelston noted that while working on the article the subcommittee generated several of their own questions about this topic. He noted that the purpose of the article is to correct the public's misconception that the unassigned fund balance is a "slush fund".

  There was a general discussion regarding the Board of Finance's policy regarding the minimum/maximum amounts that should be carried in the unassigned fund balance as well as what constrains/controls exist regarding how the funds can be used. Ms. Gionta stated that it is stipulated in the Board of Finance's policies that the unassigned fund balance should be in the range of 8-15% of the total annual Operating Budget, in other words, it should provide approximately a two-months cushion for the town's expenses. Mr. Thomas stated he would provide the subcommittee with the written policy regarding the General Fund's unassigned fund balance. Ms. Gionta provided clarification on several questions raised by Ms. Whatley.

- **Long-Range Capital Improvements Committee:** Mr. Thomas provided an overview of the make-up of the Long-Range Capital Improvements Committee (LRCIC) and advised that the group had recently met twice to rank the capital requests related to the maintenance and/or improvement of town buildings and property. He stated that the Committee discussed how best to evaluate the capital requests for Public Works and other town equipment and vehicles. He stated that they recommended that the Board of Selectmen rank those requests using a similar system as the LRCIC uses for buildings and property.

  Mr. Thomas stated that the goal of the Committee is to identify, and rank, all the town's long-range capital requests. In response to a question from Mr. Gelston, Mr. Thomas and Ms. Gionta provided a brief overview of how the two-tier ranking system operated.

- **Financial Policies:** There was no new update on this agenda item.

FIRST SELECTMAN'S REPORT

First Selectman Irene Haines was not in attendance, discussion of this agenda item was postponed.

FINANCE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

a. **December YTD Budget Report:**

Ms. Gionta called the Board's attention to the 2021-2022 YTD Budget Report Summary in their meeting packets. She stated that if the Board members have any questions about the Budget Report, they can submit them to her and she will forward them to Ms. Varricchio to address.

b. **2022-2023 Budget Calendar Update:**

Ms. Gionta advised that the Board of Selectmen's budget workshops will begin this week and that budget recommendations from the Boards of Selectmen and Education, as well as the LRCIC, must be submitted to the Board of Finance (BOF) no later than February 24th. She noted that the Board of Finance's first budget review session will be held on March 7th.

LIAISON REPORTS

The following liaison reports were provided:

- Mr. Dutch advised that he had spoken with the chairman of the Agriculture Commission who informed him that the Middle School has a robust agriculture program and the Agriculture Commission has some specific ideas on how they would like to use some of their budget funding to support that program.

- Mr. Thomas reported that the Chairman of the Conservation Commission had reached out to him with several questions.

- Mr. Gelston stated that he had discussions with the Police and Fire Departments and he noted that their budgets are on track.

- Ms. Whatley advised that Toni McCabe, Director of the Youth & Family Services, had informed her that their $125,000 state grant had reached the end of its 10-year cycle.

OLD BUSINESS

a. **Tax Relief for Elderly and Disabled Ordinance Amendment:**

Ms. Gionta called the Board's attention to a report in their meeting packets created by the Interim Assessor regarding the town's Tax Relief for the Elderly and Disabled program. She advised that, based on Social Security's COLA increases over the past eight years she had recommended increases to the three-tier income level qualifications as well as the related amounts of tax relief.

Motion was made by Mr. Thomas to amend the ordinance entitled Tax Relief for the Elderly and Disabled to adjust the eligibility thresholds and relief amounts as follows:

- **From $500 relief for incomes from $0 to $24,999.00 to $600 relief for incomes from $0 to $29,999**
- **From $400 relief for incomes from $25,000 to $34,999 to $500 relief for incomes from $30,000 to $39,999; and**
- **From $300 relief for incomes from $35,000 to $50,000 to $400 relief for incomes from $40,000 to $55,000,**

for the Grand Lists 2021 through 2026 and request that the Board of Selectmen schedule a Town Meeting for approval. Mr. Dutch seconded the motion and it was unanimously approved. Motion carried.

NEW BUSINESS

a. **Grant Acceptance—Historic Document Preservation Grant:**

Ms. Gionta noted that the grant recently submitted by the Town Clerk for the preservation of historic documents had been approved.

Motion was made by Ms. Whatley to accept a grant in the amount of $5,000.00 from the State of Connecticut Library, for the purpose of Historic Document Preservation Account 26041-43000, and to recommend that the Board of Selectmen schedule a Town Meeting for approval. Mr. Corbett seconded the motion.

In response to a question raised by Ms. Whatley, Ms. Gionta confirmed that there is sufficient time before the stated deadline to fully execute and complete the grant requirements.

The motion was unanimously approved. Motion carried.

b. **Grant Acceptance—Community Foundation of Middlesex County for Summer Day Camp and Enrichment Programs:**

Motion was made by Mr. Gelston to accept a grant in the amount of $1,500.00 from the Community Foundation of Middlesex County for the purpose of funding recreational enrichment programs and activities for the Summer Day Camp Program Account 28405-44709, and to recommend that the Board of Selectmen, contingent upon the Board of Finance's acceptance of said grant, at its February 16, 2022 meeting, schedule a Town Meeting for approval. Ms. Whatley seconded the motion and it was unanimously approved. Motion carried.

GUESTS AND AUDIENCE COMMENTS

In response to a question raised by Mr. William Barney, a member of the Library Board of Trustees, Mr. Thomas and Ms. Gionta provided clarification about the current status of the Board of Trustees' request for funding for a new library building. Ms. Gionta advised that the Board of Selectmen is soliciting volunteers to staff a new Library Study Committee which will research the options available to the town concerning the potential for a new library and to make a recommendation regarding their findings. She noted that the Committee will be allotted a budget to conduct their study and develop a recommendation.

Ms. Gionta stated that she will follow-up on the status of the proposed Committee and advise Mr. Barney of same. Mr. Harvey stated he will attend for a new library building.

Ms. Gionta reiterated that she does not have access to the on-line questions that may have been submitted by remote meeting participants; however, if questions were submitted, she will bring them up at the next meeting of the Board of Finance.

OTHER

In response to a question raised by Mr. Thomas, Ms. Gionta confirmed that she had recently received the list of questions that he submitted to Ms. Varricchio as a follow-up to the recent Tri-Board meeting. She stated she will get the answers to his questions and provide them at the Board of Finance's March meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion made by Mr. Dutch to adjourn at 8:00 pm. Mr. Thomas seconded the motion and it was unanimously approved. Motion carried.

Respectfully submitted,
/s/
Bruce Dutch
Secretary