TOWN OF EAST HADDAM
Board of Finance
Regular Meeting Minutes
June 10, 2024
Municipal Office Building – Room 1 & 2
Via Zoom and YouTube Live

Participating:

Board of Finance Members:
Joseph Corbett
Todd Gelston
Maureen Goff
Eric Kolasinski
Harvey Thomas
Rebecca Whatley

Others: Valerie Belles, Finance Director
Laurie D'Aquila, East Haddam Ambulance Association
Irene Haines, First Selectwoman
Jay Moreau, Citizen
Maureen Pierson, Citizen
Margie Roberts, East Haddam Ambulance Association
Ken Tosi, East Haddam Ambulance Association
And other members of the public

CALL TO ORDER AND PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Mr. Corbett called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. and the attendees said the pledge of allegiance.

Motion made by Mr. Gelston to amend the agenda to add the following two items under New Business: e. East Haddam Ambulance Association Refresher/Update, and f. A Presentation by Mr. Gelston Concerning a Plan to More Effectively Utilize the Months Between Budget Seasons. Mr. Thomas seconded the motion it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.

GUESTS & AUDIENCE COMMENTS

The following citizens spoke at the meeting:

- Jay Moreau – advised that he had watched the May 14th Ambulance Association presentation to the Board of Finance. He provided some background regarding the relationship between the EHAA and the Fire Department and noted that, nationally, emergency medical service calls outnumber fire calls by 3-4:1. Mr. Moreau reviewed a number of factors that negatively impacted the EHAA financials, including COVID and low reimbursement rates. He stated that he supports the Town making the Ambulance

Association whole and encouraged the Boards of Selectmen and Finance, along with the Fire Department and EHAA to figure out how to move forward together.

- Maureen Pierson – Thanked the Board of Finance for their work on the budget and all the work they do for the Town. She noted the increase in the mil rate over the past two years and stated that the Town cannot expect residents to continue to pay higher property taxes every year. Ms. Pierson also questioned why First Selectman Haines did not attend the EHAA's May 14th presentation to the Board of Finance. She stated that the community supports funding the EHAA because (1) they are community minded and care about the citizens, whether they get paid or not, and (2) hiring them for another year will cost the least amount in taxes and residents cannot afford any higher priced options. Ms. Pierson also stated that the Fire Department's response to EMS calls is slow and encouraged the Town to approve the EHAA's request for funding.

CORRESPONDENCE

- Email from Pete Govert – Mr. Corbett called the Board's attention to a copy of an email in their meeting packets from Pete Govert, dated June 4, 2024. Mr. Corbett read Mr. Govert's email which noted that the taxpayers have heard "*very little*" in over a year about the Fire Department's plan to take over the Town's emergency medical services response. He recommended, "*A presentation on [the Fire Department's] part that is as comprehensive as what I saw from the EHAA would be valuable in understanding what the town's plan is".*

Mr. Thomas stated that he agreed with Mr. Govert's recommendation that the Fire Department should provide detailed financials for their proposal to assume responsibility for responding to emergency medical calls. There was a general discussion regarding vetting potential Town contractors and the consensus was that the BOF should request that the Fire Department provide it with a minimum of two-years of financial projections, including capital, related to their EMS response proposal.

- Email from Barbara Gaudio – Mr. Corbett called the Board's attention to a copy of an email in their meeting packets from Barbara Gaudio, dated May 21, 2024, concerning the Ambulance Association's request for $69k in funding from the Town. Mr. Corbett read Ms. Gaudio's email which stated, in part, that, "*my thoughts are they should get no reimbursement for any portion of their financial request at this time"*. She encouraged the Town to, "*Please consider waiting until they go through their [OEMS] appeal process and decide … if they receive any additional funds if they win their appeal".*

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. April 16, 2024 Public Hearing Meeting Minutes – Mr. Corbett called the Board's attention to the minutes of the budget Public Hearing on April 16, 2024.

Motion made by Mr. Gelston to approve the Public Hearing Meeting Minutes of April 16, 2024 as written. Mr. Kolasinski seconded the motion and it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.

In response to a question raised by Mr. Gelston, Mr. Corbett confirmed that there were no action items in the minutes that need to be followed up on.

b. Special Meeting – May 14, 2024 – Mr. Corbett called the Board's attention to the minutes of their May 14, 2024 special meeting.

Motion made by Mr. Gelston to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of May 14, 2024 as written. Ms. Goff seconded the motion and it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

a. Board Sub-Committee Reports

i. Communications – Mr. Gelston reported that the Communications Subcommittee had not met recently; however, they do have a list of articles they will be submitting to the East Haddam Newspaper. Ms. Whatley noted that the project to post lawn signs reminding residents of the budget referendum went well.

ii. Long-Range Capital Improvements – Ms. Haines reported that she and Finance Director Belles have met with the Town's bond counsel and Mr. Lindsey to discuss options for funding the Town's capital projects and she expects to schedule a meeting of the Long-Range Capital Improvements Committee at the end of June or beginning of July.

Mr. Corbett reported that he has been in communication with Board of Education Chairman Stricker and he expects to pull together representatives from the Boards of Selectmen, Education, and Finance to review and prioritize the comprehensive list of long-range capital projects prior to the next Committee meeting.

iii. Financial Policies – Mr. Thomas reported that the Financial Policies Committee has scheduled meetings for June 28th and July 12th.

Mr. Corbett advised that he has been considering ways to make the Board of Finance more effective by developing a long-range action plan and he has asked Mr. Gelston to take the lead on that project. He noted that Mr. Gelston's presentation under New Business will address this issue.

Mr. Thomas noted that several CT municipalities are struggling with significant shortfalls in their BOE budgets because, over the past several years, they have been relying on Covid funds to fill the gap. He complimented the members of the Boards of Selectmen, Finance, and Education for their foresight in restricting the use of Covid funds for expenses that were directly Covid related and, secondly, on one-time, non-recurring expenses.

FIRST SELECTMEN'S REPORT

Ms. Haines reported the following:

- The Athletic Complex and HVAC projects are over budget and the BOE will be requesting the BOF reappropriate funds for both projects.
- She and Finance Director Belles have been meeting with the Town's bond counsel and Mr. Lindsey concerning options for funding capital projects. She noted that the Town has paid for a number of projects with cash and the Town now needs to rebuild its Cash Account.
- There are only two more 63-hour Swingbridge closures on the calendar, in June and September; however, it is possible that they will not be needed.
- There is a bill in the Hartford legislature to phase out vehicle property taxes. Ms. Haines noted that, if the bill goes through, East Haddam will lose a revenue source of approximately $1.7M.

Ms. Haines responded to questions from the Board.

FINANCE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

a. April 2024 Year-to-Date Budget Report – Ms. Belles called the Board's attention to the April 2024 YTD budget report in their meeting packets. She provided an overview of the report and responded to questions.

b. Audit Update – Ms. Belles stated that she believes that the auditors will issue their audit report by the June 30th deadline. She advised that the auditors will then immediately move onto the 2023-2024 audit.

Ms. Belles reviewed her discussions with the Town's bond counsel and Mr. Lindsey. She advised that Mr. Lindsey has been invited to attend the BOF's July meeting. She responded to several questions from the Board.

OLD BUSINESS

There was no Old Business discussed at the meeting.

NEW BUSINESS

a. Gift Acceptance – Consumer's Union – Mr. Corbett called the Board's attention to a copy of a letter in their meeting packets, dated May 10, 2024, from Jennifer Stockburger, Director of Auto Testing at Consumer Reports, Inc.

   Ms. Haines advised that each year, in lieu of property taxes, Consumer's Union gifts an amount towards a Town project. She stated that this year, their $20,000.00 contribution will help fund the installation of new playground equipment at the Town beach; she noted that any remaining expenses will be paid for with ARPA funds.

Motion was made by Ms. Goff to accept a gift from Consumer Reports in the amount of $20,000.00 to be used for partial funding towards the Town Beach Playground (revenue account 33050-43000-G2701 and expense account 33055011-58820-G2701) and to recommend that the Board of Selectmen schedule a Town Meeting for approval. Mr. Kolasinski seconded the motion and it passed unanimously. Motion carried.

b. Gift Acceptance – EMPG Grant – Ms. Haines provided background on this agenda item.

Motion was made by Mr. Gelston to recommend to the Board of Selectmen the acceptance of the State of Connecticut, Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection, Division of Emergency Management and Homeland Security grant, entitled "FY 2023 Emergency Management Performance Grant", in the amount of $5,488.25 (revenue budget 10542-43000 and expense budget 10542070-51590) and to ask the Board of Selectmen to schedule a Town Meeting for approval. Ms. Whatley seconded the motion and it was unanimously approved. Motion carried.

c. Grant Authorization Request – Redevelopment Agency – Ms. Haines advised that The Redevelopment Agency is requesting authorization to apply for the Partners in Preservation grant through the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). She noted that the grant requires a dollar-for-dollar match, which will be funded through monies approved within the 2025 Redevelopment Agency budget.

Motion was made by Ms. Whatley to authorize the grant application presented by the Redevelopment Agency to apply for a Partners in Preservation grant through the State Historic Preservation Office in the amount of $15,000 with a dollar-for-dollar match to seek out and hire experts that can guide the Agency in determining the most appropriate use for the site of the old Town Offices through conducting studies, assessing feasibility of reusing and redeveloping the buildings in the area and assisting with facilitating outreach meetings. Mr. Gelston seconded the motion and it passed unanimously. Motion carried.

d. Funding Request – Ambulance Capital Reserves – First Selectman Haines requested that the $100,000.00 set aside in the Contingency fund for use by the future responder of emergency medical services calls be transferred to the Ambulance Capital Reserves to be added to the funds for the purchase of a new Ambulance which is due to be replaced in FY 2026.

Motion made by Mr. Thomas to approve a transfer in the amount of $100,000.00 from the BOF Contingency 10541020-58339 to Capital Reserves Account 332-10506 Project 25024 Ambulance Reserves and request that the Board of Selectman schedule a Town Meeting for approval. Motion was seconded by Ms. Whatley.

Mr. Gelston expressed his concern for public safety and stated that it is his opinion that the funds should be used to support the agency that is currently responding to emergency medical calls. He recommended approving the EHAA request for $69k and transferring the balance of $31k to the Capital Reserves account for a new ambulance.

Mr. Kolasinski abstained from the vote and Mr. Gelston voted nay. The motion carried by a majority of aye votes.

Motion made by Mr. Thomas to add the following agenda items under New Business: (e) State Farm Grant Authorization Request – Redevelopment Agency. Maureen Goff seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved. Motion carried.

a. State Farm Grant Authorization Request – Redevelopment Agency – Ms. Haines advised that The Redevelopment Agency is requesting authorization to apply for the State Farm Good Neighbor grant. She noted that the grant is by invitation only and the first step is writing a letter of intent. More information to follow should the letter of intent be accepted. The average grant awards have been around $266,000.

Motion was made by Mr. Thomas to authorize the grant application presented by the Redevelopment Agency to send a letter of intent for The State Farm Good Neighbor Citizenship grant. Mr. Kolasinski seconded the motion and it passed unanimously. Motion carried.

b. East Haddam Ambulance Refresher/Update – The following provided comments concerning the EHAA's request for funding:

- Ken Tosi – expressed his disappointment that the BOF had not heard from the EHAA before moving the $100k from Contingency to Capital Reserves. He stated that he feels that the Board is not following the proper process and reviewed his presentation at the May 14th BOF meeting. He stated that the Fire Department's proposal has not been presented to the public since last year and he feels they should be held to the same requirements as the EHAA. Mr. Tosi stated that the BOF needs to verify that the Fire Department's proposed budget for responding to emergency medical calls makes sense. He reiterated that the animosity between the Fire Department and the Ambulance Association and among residents needs to stop.

  Mr. Corbett responded to Mr. Tosi's comments and corrected several of his mis-perceptions. There was a general discussion regarding the process moving forward.

  In response to a question from Mr. Gelston, Mr. Tosi confirmed that they have asked to be put on the agenda for the BOS's next meeting to request funding and provide an updated presentation in support of that request.

- Laurie D'Aquila – offered clarification for the rumors going around Town about OEMS's recommendation concerning the status of certification for the Fire Department and the EHAA. She noted that in May 2023 the Fire Department submitted its application to OEMS and, in April 2024, a hearing officer for OEMS submitted a Proposed Memorandum of Decision to the Commissioner of Public Health. Ms. D'Aquila reviewed several flaws in the Fire Department's application and in the Memorandum submitted by the OEMS hearing officer. She stated that, contrary to Town gossip, the EHAA is not "dead" and they are still in operation and providing services to the Town. She responded to several questions from the Board.

- Margie Roberts – reviewed the background of the EHAA and the progress it has made in the past 5-years in its response time and mutual aid rates. She noted that the

Town's Ambulance Association ranks high in the state for performance for rural towns. Ms. Roberts stated, that from a taxpayer's perspective, the Town has gotten a really good deal in the past. She noted that she has spoken with a number of individuals from other CT towns and they have advised that their municipalities have provided financial support to their EMS responders for some time. She noted that in the future, regardless of who provides the service, the Town will have to contribute. Consequently, it is her opinion that it would be short-sighted to "blow up" the existing program and build a new one from scratch.

c. Presentation by Mr. Gelston Concerning a Plan to More Effectively Utilize the Months Between Budget Seasons - Mr. Gelston stated that the BOF's budget work is mostly reactive and that the months not spent on the budget process are slow. He suggested using the post-budget months to do some proactive work and plan for the next decade. He noted the Town's many assets and stated that it needs to "*develop a strategic action plan in a no-pressure environment that is truly actionable across multiple administrations and multiple years"*. Mr. Gelston stated that he will present the additional phases of his proposal at future BOF meetings.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion made by Mr. Kolasinski to adjourn the meeting at 9:31 p.m. Ms. Goff seconded the motion and it was unanimously approved. Motion carried.

Respectfully submitted,
/s/
Todd Gelston
Secretary