

**TOWN OF EAST HADDAM**  
**Board of Finance**  
Special Meeting Minutes  
March 20, 2025  
Municipal Office Building – Room 1 & 2  
Via Zoom and YouTube Live

Participating:

Board of Finance Members:

William Barney  
Joseph Corbett  
Todd Gelston  
Maureen Goff  
Eric Kolasinski  
Harvey Thomas

Others:

Valerie Belles, Finance Director  
Don Angersola, Facilities Director  
Dr. Theresa DeBrito, Superintendent of Schools  
Jacqui Endorf, BOE & Citizen  
Rosemary Evans, BOE employee & Citizen  
Irene Haines, First Selectwoman  
Cindy Hughson, BOE Business Manager  
Logan Ramsey – EHHS Student  
Joshua Strucker, BOE employee & Citizen  
Keira Thompson – BOE & Citizen  
Linda Zemienieski, Executive Manager  
And other members of the public

**CALL TO ORDER AND PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

Mr. Gelston called the meeting to order at 4:30 p.m. and the attendees said the pledge of allegiance.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

a. Special Meeting March 10, 2025

**Motion made by Mr. Barney to approve the Minutes of the Board of Finance’s Special Meeting of March 10, 2025 as written. Mr. Kolasinski seconded the motion and it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.**

**GRANT AUTHORIZATION**

- a. Conservation Commission Grant Application – Mr. Gelston called the Board’s attention to materials in their meeting packet related to this agenda item. Ms. Belles advised that there is a

Town match of \$1,236.00 required with the grant; however, \$1,036.00 of the match is in-kind volunteer hours, leaving only a \$200.00 outlay from the Conservation Commission's budget. In response to a question from Mr. Thomas, Ms. Belles verified that the grant covers only two educational sessions in the fall of 2025.

**Motion made by Mr. Thomas to approve the Conservation Commission to apply for the Eightmile River Wild and Scenic Coordinating Committee Watershed Grant Program. Town match portion of funding in the amount of \$200 to come from Conservation Commission Printing and Binding account 10541750-55500. Mr. Barney seconded the motion it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.**

## **2025-2026 BUDGET**

- a. Public Works
  - i. General Highways – Discussion of this agenda item was postponed.
  - ii. Snow & Ice Removal – Discussion of this agenda item was postponed.
  - iii. Tree Care and Removal – Discussion of this agenda item was postponed.
- b. Transfer Station – Discussion of this agenda item was postponed.
- c. Public Works Capital – Discussion of this agenda item was postponed.
- d. Transfer Station Capital – Discussion of this agenda item was postponed.
- e. Board of Education Operating – A 8.14% (\$1,953,408.00) increase was reflected in the BOE's Operating budget. Superintendent DeBrito called the BOF's attention to a packet of information provided by the BOE regarding: staffing levels by school, enrollment numbers for the past five years, student/teacher ratios, and projected enrollment. It was noted that student enrollment is steady at this time.

Dr. DeBrito reviewed student assessment results as compared to state averages and other CT schools. She noted that the East Haddam student scores are consistently above average. She introduced Logan Ramsey who spoke about his student experience at the EHHS.

Dr. DeBrito responded to questions from the Board and there was a general discussion regarding the district's student/teacher ratios. In response to a comment from Ms. Goff, Ms. Hughston advised that part of the 11.35% (\$301,625.00) increase in the Certified Personnel Salaries line for Elementary School is a result of the BOE losing a \$75k grant from the state for its Pre-K program. There was a general discussion concerning step increases for Certified Personnel. Ms. Hughson noted that part of the increase in Salaries was for additional social worker hours in the Elementary School, a third School Security Officer, and a proposal to add a temporary position for NEAX Accreditation and Compliance. Ms. Goff requested additional details from the BOE regarding the increase in the Salaries category for the Elementary School.

In response to a question from the Board, Dr. DeBrito stated that the primary drivers of the BOE Operating budget increase are Salaries and Benefits. Ms. Hughson confirmed that the

negotiated salary increase for non-certified personnel is 2.5% for three years. She agreed to provide additional information on the negotiated salary increase rates for certified personnel. There was a general discussion regarding the cost of benefits and it was noted that the BOE used a placeholder of a 15% increase for health insurance premiums.

Mr. Barney called attention to a discrepancy in the Activities expense between the three schools and noted the \$49,665.00 (74.57%) increase in the High School's Student Activities line item. Ms. Hughson stated that the biggest increase to the Activities budget was a proposal to hire a part-time athletic trainer. She advised that, currently, they are contracting with an agency to provide training services and that that expense had not been budgeted for in FY2024-2025. There was a general discussion about the budget for Purchased Services.

In response to a question from Mr. Thomas, Ms. Hughston advised that the BOE has two pre-K Smart Start programs, each with an enrollment of 15 students. Families who participate in the program pay an income-based tuition of \$0-\$600/mo.

Mr. Barney noted that the district's 8:1 student-to-teacher ratio seemed "remarkable" to him and stated it might be equivalent to some of the state's best private schools. In response to a request from Mr. Gelston, Ms. Hughson agreed to provide notated information about what is driving the District-Wide 6.36% increase in Salaries.

Mr. Thomas noted Dr. DeBrito's slide, from her March 10<sup>th</sup> presentation to the Board, listing the drivers of the increase in the BOE's FY2025-2026 budget and requested Ms. Hughson include dollar amounts next to each category for FY2024-2025, FY2025-2026, and the amount of the change from year-to-year. Ms. Goff requested additional information and there was a discussion about the extent to which the BOF has authority over the BOE's budget. Mr. Corbett noted the history of cooperation between the BOF and BOE and stated that it is in the Town's best interest to continue that good relationship. Dr. DeBrito expressed her understanding that the BOF needs to understand the BOE's budget so that they can speak knowledgeably about it to the public.

Mr. Thomas summarized that the BOF would like to see the list of categories of the drivers of the BOE FY2025-2026 budget increases broken down into a comparison of the last and next fiscal years and, further, that the Salaries line should be broken down into contractual obligations and how much is attributable to new programs or new personnel. Ms. Hughston agreed to provide the requested information. She also reviewed the number of High School students that are participating in sports programs for the Board.

- f. Board of Education Capital Budget – The BOE capital requests for FY2025-2026 total \$1.9M. Dr. DeBrito and Facilities Director Angersola reviewed the following Capital requests. Dr. DeBrito stated that the BOE prioritized their requests putting capital items focused on safety and security at the top of their list.
- \$500k for a rear access/secondary means of egress at the Elementary School.
  - \$25k for exterior lighting upgrades at the Elementary School.
  - \$25k for exterior lighting upgrades at the High School.
  - \$81,890.00 for security camera replacements at the Elementary School.

- \$111,187.00 for security camera replacements at the Middle School.
- \$155,964.00 for security camera replacements at the High School.
- \$25k for sidewalk repair/replacement at the Elementary School outer building.
- \$66k for driveway crack sealing at the Middle School and High School.
- \$25,750.00 for tile replacement in the Middle School cafeteria.
- \$48k for tile replacement in the Middle School main hallways.
- \$60k for a truck with a snow plow for systemwide use.

In response to questions from the Board, Mr. Angersola provided the following responses:

- He explained that the BAS system replacements at the Middle School and High School are to automate the HVAC controls at those two schools. He noted that the Elementary School has a functional BAS system but the High School does not and the Middle School's system needs to be upgraded.
- Regarding the request for a truck with a plow, he stated that the BOE does its own snow removal; however, the Town Grounds maintenance team helps out when necessary as time allows.
- He provided information about the request to replace the flooring in the Middle School cafeteria and main hallways with VCT tiles.
- He provided information about the proposed camera replacements at all three schools and stated that the new cameras including a recording feature with self-storage in the cloud.
- He provided information about the Systemwide Field Improvements capital project and explained that it is an annual field maintenance and restoration program.

- g. Other Budget Discussion Items as Needed – Mr. Thomas stated that the BOF will have to deliver a budget that meets the Town's safety and infrastructure needs, provides for good education, and one that will pass referendum. He noted that, since discussion of the Public Works and Transfer Station budgets had been postponed at this meeting, the Board will have to address them at their Saturday's budget workshop, as well as the FY2025-2026 Capital budgets. Ms. Belles noted that the East Haddam Ambulance Association is also on Saturday's budget workshop agenda. Mr. Gelston suggested extending the hours of Saturday's workshop to 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The Board agreed with his suggestion.

In response to a question raised by Ms. Haines, there was no consensus of the BOF about where the members stand on cuts to the budget at this point in the process.

## **GUESTS AND AUDIENCE COMMENTS**

The following guest/audience comments were raised at the meeting:

- Jacqui Endorf – stated she is a member of the Board of Education and invited the members of the BOF and citizens listening to this meeting on YouTube to attend some of the schools' events. She stated that by doing so, it will give them a better understanding about what is happening in the district.

- Rosemary Evans – advised that she is the president of the teachers’ union, a 20-year employee with the school district, and has had three children go through the school system. She stated that she had researched the student/teacher ratios in a number of the shoreline schools and East Haddam is in-line with all of them. She reported that Cochinogough, Westbrook, Old Saybrook/Lyme/Old Lyme, and Clinton schools’ ratios range from 10:1 to 7:1.

Ms. Evens invited the Board to attend the High School Senior Capstone Expo on April 30<sup>th</sup> and the High School Drama Club’s musical production of Beauty & The Beast next weekend. She encouraged the Board to attend more school events and to get the word out to the community.

- Joshua Strucker – stated that he works at the High School and has a daughter in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade in the school system. He stated that he was disheartened listening to the discussion about the district’s student-to-teacher ratio. He said that increasing that ratio would result in lost opportunities for the students. He noted that the BOE’s 8:1 ratio makes the Town attractive to families that are considering moving to East Haddam. Mr. Strucker stated he was speaking, not only to the BOF, but also to citizens who will be listening to the YouTube recording of this meeting.
- Keira Thompson – advised that she is on the BOE and stated that elevating anything comes at a cost. She highlighted several positives with the East Haddam School district: hiring a good superintendent, the Middle School being a runner up for the CT Association of Schools’ School of the Year, and the Elementary School being named a School of Distinction. She stated that the BOE has had a history of small increases to its annual budget and many surrounding districts have had “huge” increases in recent years. She said that she doesn’t see anything in the BOE’s FY2025-2026 budget that can be cut.

Ms. Thompson stated that she doesn’t see any new funding coming from the state nor is the state slowing down on mandates. She noted that the Town has a substantial funding problem and needs economic growth to relieve the taxpayers.

- Michael Callahan – stated that he has attended many of the Town’s and BOE’s budget workshops and he has concluded that the Town has a revenue problem not an expense problem. He noted that the BOE budget is proportionately less today than it was years ago and said that the Town needs to grow the revenue side of the equation.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

**Motion made by Mr. Kolasinski to adjourn the meeting at 6:19 p.m. Mr. Barney seconded the motion and it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.**

Respectfully submitted,

/s/

William Barney

Secretary

