TOWN OF EAST HADDAM
Board of Finance
Special Meeting Minutes
April 8, 2025
Nathan Hale Ray High School Auditorium
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
Irene Haines, First Selectwoman
Melanie Kolek, Citizen
Craig Mansfield, Director of Emergency Management
Patricial Stricker, BOE Chairwoman
Keira Thompson, BOE
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 9:00 p.m. and the attendees said the pledge of allegiance.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. March 20, 2025 Special Meeting Minutes – Mr. Gelston called the Board's attention to the minutes of their March 20th meeting in their meeting packets.

Motion made by Mr. Barney to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of March 20, 2024 as written. Ms. Goff seconded the motion and it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.

b. March 22, 2025 Special Meeting Minutes – Mr. Gelston called the Board's attention to the minutes of their March 22nd meeting in their meeting packets.

Motion made by Mr. Kolasinski to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of March 22, 2024 as written. Ms. Goff seconded the motion and it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.

NEW BUSINESS

a. Moodus Firehouse Building Committee Request for Funding – Craig Mansfield reviewed the background of the request for additional funding for the Firehouse Building Committee. He advised that the additional funding of $394,128.00 will move the project to rebuild Firehouse Company No. 2 forward to the bid process. He stated tht the Committee's goal is to get a firm bid to take to referendum so that they will not have to go back to the Town for additional construction funds.

Mr. Mansfield responded to questions from the Board and clarified the amount that is being requested and what it will cover. Mr. Gelston expressed concern about the Town approving this project and there was a brief discussion about what has already been invested in this project. Mr. Mansfield justified the need for the new firehouse and confirmed that the Committee would not come back to the Town for additional funding until the project passed referendum.

In response to a question from Mr. Barney, Ms. Belles confirmed that the additional funds would be a special appropriation.

Motion made by Mr. Barney to approve a special appropriation of up to $400,000.00 from the General Fund balance to Capital Account 33250013-58926 - Project C0217 Fire Company #2 Structural Engineer Report, for the purposes of funding the Moodus Firehouse building project through Phase 1 and Phase 2 up to contract administration, and to request the Board of Selectmen schedule a Town Meeting for approval. Mr. Thomas seconded the motion and it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.

2025-2026 BUDGET

a. Discussion and Potential Adjustments Following the Public Hearing – Mr. Gelston queried the Board about their thoughts on making any final adjustments to the recommended 2025-2026 Budget that they moved forward at their March 22nd meeting. Mr. Thomas stated that he was prepared to move forward with the budget as it was recommended.

First Selectwoman Haines asked about the impact of lowering the reduction in the BOE's budget to $300k. Ms. Belles provided the details and stated that it would result in a mil rate of 28.70 mils, which represents an increase of 7.27% vs. 6.3%. There was a general discussion about the impact of such a change on expenses, taxes required to meet the increased expenses, and the mil rate.

Mr. Corbett stated that the BOF had put a lot of work into the recommendation they moved forward on March 22nd and noted that, while he could support a small change to the budget, he is not in favor of last-minute changes that the Board does not have time to fully consider. He stated that it is his opinion that any substantial additional changes to the budget should be driven by a failed referendum. The Board concurred with Mr. Corbett's comments.

b. Guest & Audience Comments – The following guest/audience comments were considered:

- Debbie Langdon – sent an email thanking the BOF for their work on the budget but expressed her concern about its impact on taxpayers. She reviewed the recommended FY2025-2026 budget in her email and requested further reductions to the BOE budget, suggesting it be lowered to an increase of 3%-4%. Ms. Langdon also discussed the need to find additional revenue sources for the Town.

- Robert Simmons – sent an email complimenting the BOF on its work on the budget noting he felt they made "*good and responsible*" cuts that were carefully allocated. He stated that he would be voting Yes at the referendum.

- Amalia Shaltiel – sent an email expressing her concern about the Town's "*aggressive*" tree removal plan and requested the Tree Removal budget be reduced to deal only with dead, dying and falling down trees.

- Melanie Kolek – stated she felt the Public Hearing was a "*waste of time*" since it appears that the BOF came to it predisposed not to make any changes to the recommended budget. She asked, if the referendum fails, how will they know whether to increase or decrease the next version? She encouraged them to include a "too high / too low" poll on the referendum ballot.

  Mr. Gelston responded that it is always good for the BOF to hear from the citizens and that, he feels, they don't hear enough during the budget development process. He stated that the BOF was concerned about the cuts to the BOE budget and it was a hard decision to make; however, they have a responsibility to balance the needs of the BOE, the Town, and the taxpayers. He agreed that a too high/too low poll would be helpful.

  Mr. Barney stated that he had heard nothing at the Public Hearing that dissuaded him from voting to move forward the BOF's March 22nd budget recommendation.

- Keira Thompson – stated that she chairs the BOE's Business & Planning Committee and expressed her frustration that, while BOE members attended some of the BOF's budget workshops, none of the BOF members attended the BOE's budget workshops.

- Patricia Stricker – stated that she has tried to be supportive of the BOF's role in developing the overall Town budget; however, she expressed her extreme irritation with what she perceived as some its members' disrespect of the BOE and the general attitude that nothing will change their minds.

Mr. Thomas advised that no good comes from becoming annoyed with each other. He stated that the BOF, BOS and BOE all have a responsibility to the townspeople of East Haddam. He noted that, as impressive as it was to hear students talk about what they get out of the school system, the average age of residents in Town is 50+, many of whom are living on fixed incomes and cannot afford increases in their property taxes.

Mr. Thomas stated that it is the BOF's responsibility to do what is fiscally responsible for the Town, keeping in mind that there is a broad range of citizens that cannot afford a 7% increase in their taxes. He emphasized the need to listen to everyone's requests but then the BOF must make balanced decisions that are financially sustainable. He concluded his comments stating it is not helpful to attack or get annoyed with one another because, in the end "*we are all working toward the same goal*".

- James Francese– stated he had not expected that the Public Hearing would result in much change to the BOF's original recommendation; however, what he took exception to at this meeting was the arrogance of some of its Board members.

c. Vote to Send Budget to Town Meeting – Mr. Gelston asked if the Board was prepared to move the budget forward to a referendum.

Motion made by Mr. Barney to present to the Annual Budget Meeting, scheduled to be called for by the Board of Selectmen on April 30, 2024 at 8:00 p.m. at the Nathan Hale-Ray High School Auditorium, a total budget of $44,440,792.00, based on the Grand List as of October 1, 2024 of $1,190,802,955.00. The budget would require an increase over the 2024-2025 budget of 9.26% in expenditures, a mill rate increase of 1.69 mils, and a 6.32% increase in tax revenues. Mr. Thomas seconded the motion and it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion made by Mr. Barney to adjourn the meeting at 9:46 p.m. Mr. Kolasinski seconded the motion and it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.

Respectfully submitted,
/s/
William Barney
Secretary