TOWN OF EAST HADDAM
Board of Finance
Public Hearing 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

Board of Selectmen Members:
Irene Haines

Board of Education Members:
Dr. Theresa DeBrito
Patricia Stricker

Others: Valerie Belles, Finance Director
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 7:00 p.m. and the attendees said the pledge of allegiance.

OPENING COMMENTS

Mr. Gelston asked the participants at the head table to introduce themselves. He then read the Public Hearing Notice. He stated that the Town is at the end of the budget development process and the Public Hearing is another opportunity for the citizens to raise questions and voice their thoughts. He stated that the Board of Finance wants to hear their comments and said that they will influence the Board's next steps: whether to move forward with the budget as is or modify it. He then provided the guidelines for speaking at the hearing.

First Selectwoman Haines stated that this year has been particularly challenging financially. She noted the state's new method of valuing vehicles for property tax purposes, which reduced the Grand List by $17M, and national economic factors and said that both have an impact on the budget and both are outside of the Town's control. She advised, however, that the Town has persisted in

maintaining its financial stability with the proposed 2025-2026 Budget and also noted that it has continued to invest in a number of economic development initiatives that will impact the Grand List in a positive way. She stated that she is looking forward to hearing from everyone tonight.

BOE Chairwoman Stricker stated that the BOE budget is an integral part of the Town's total budget. She noted that the BOE requested an 8% increase in their 2025-2026 budget, 7.54% of which was due to the rising cost of contractual obligations and the increasing cost of central supplies, electricity and insurance. She advised that the BOE must comply with 380 unfunded mandates and listed a number of accomplishments and recognitions awarded to the schools, teachers, and students. She recognized the large number of parents and students in attendance that are anxious about the proposed $600k decrease in the BOE budget but stated that the BOE must, and will, make it work and that their goal continues to be to ensure that every tax dollar spent provides a return on investment.

Mr. Gelston opened the floor to citizens' comments.

GUESTS AND AUDIENCE COMMENTS

- Michael Callahan pointed out some discrepancies in the Citizens' Guide and stated that he feels the comment in the Guide that a part of the increase in the budget is due to large insurance premiums is mis-leading.

- Laurel White stated she is a member of the BOE and expressed her concern about the implication that the BOE "padded" its budget and the impact of a $600k cut in its budget. She noted that the BOE will take the BOF's direction to reduce their budget seriously and that they will be judicious and conscientious of the community's needs.

- Bridget Erlandson acknowledged the difficult task the BOF faces every year and thanked them for their long standing collaboration with the BOE. She reiterated that 7%+ of the increase in the BOE budget is due to mandatory costs and stated that she feels the only way to accomplish the proposed reduction is to cut essential programs and positions. She requested the BOF reduce the amount to be cut from the BOE budget.

- Ken Tosi thanked the Boards for the work they do. He called their attention to several issues on ClearGov that he feels need further clarification. Mr. Tosi stated that he would like to reference unambiguous information when trying to make an informed decision on how to vote for the budget.

- Abigail Martin stated she is a senior at NHRHS and expressed her support for retaining the existing class sizes and programs. She encouraged the BOF to make a decision on the BOE budget that will be best for the students.

- Rosemarie Evans stated that she has observed the teachers of East Haddam often going above and beyond expectations without compensation. She noted that she does not want to believe that a small minority of taxpayers who think the schools have "too much" are the ones driving decisions about the BOE's budget. She thanked the public for attending the NHRHS musical,

noting it was the largest turnout they have had in a while, and encouraged citizens to attend several other upcoming BOE events.

- James Francese stated he is a member of the BOE and discussed the dilemma of taxes in a bedroom community where there is a small tax base. He took exception with several comments made at a recent BOF Budget Workshop meeting and shared his opinion that the "*hypocrisy is rank and offensive*". He encouraged Town residents to accept the change that development will bring so that there can be some property tax relief. He appealed to the taxpayers to approve the budget at the upcoming referendum.

- Robert Gaudio thanked the Boards for their work and stated that he is a teacher in Berlin. He encouraged the public to contact their legislators in Hartford and tell them to rethink some of the school mandates and to protest the cuts to Special Education reimbursement. He emphasized the need to attract new businesses to Town.

- Kaiden Ramke suggested that the BOF take into consideration that there are less than 300 students enrolled in the high school and that many of the classes are not full or even close to full. He also stated that, in his opinion, it is debatable that some of the niche classes being paid for won't be of any help in the students' lives after high school.

- Wade Tomlinson stated that he is a parent and a teacher at Franklin Academy. He stated that he does not feel East Haddam is competing adequately with the curriculum offered in other area schools. He stated that the cuts in the BOE budget that the BOF has directed are not acceptable and suggested that the BOE needs to provide even more opportunities to students.

- Keira Thompson advised that she is a member of the BOE and appealed to citizens and the members of the Boards to support public education. She stated that investing in public education is "*not just a moral imperative but an economic one*" as well. She urged everyone to vote Yes at the first budget referendum.

- Thea Jansky stated she is a member of the BOE and that all of the members are heavily invested in the school system and don't take their elected positions lightly. She encouraged everyone to look forward to the future rather than the past and urged citizens to reach out to the Superintendent to discuss their concerns, suggestions and ideas. Ms. Jansky reviewed the BOE budget development process and encouraged public participation. She noted that social media is a place where mis-information is spread and recommended citizens go directly to the source for their information.

- Terri Garrity stated she is a member of the BOE and reviewed the Special Education part of the BOE's budget. She noted the competition for Special Ed teachers and support staff and stated that attracting and retaining them comes at a cost. She commented that the state recently approved an additional $40M for Special Ed purposes but noted that she does not expect the Town will see much of it. She stated that the East Haddam BOE's 2025-2026 budget increase is in line with other CT towns of a similar size.

- Amalia Shaltiel stated she supports the BOE budget and feels it is appropriate. Ms. Shaltiel discussed the Town's discontinuation of the composting program at the Transfer Station and noted that the state's NIPs program would pay for both the composting program and participating in the RiverCog's hazardous waste program. She asked the BOS to reinstate the composting program. Ms. Shaltiel also expressed her frustration with the Public Works' plan to remove thick oak trees and noted that the twelve trees that were removed from her property were not sick trees. She stated that she believes the Town needs to re-evaluate its tree removal budget.

- Rath Tokarz stated he is a senior at Nathan Hale Ray High School and stated that he feels the proposed cuts in the BOE budget don't make sense because the other schools that he visits through the high school's sports and music programs seem to offer much more. He stated that he feels everything offered at NHRHS helps the students to plan for their futures. He noted some of the benefits he's experienced on a personal level and said he wants the Town to maintain the same opportunities for those that follow him.

- Lori D'Aquila thanked the Boards for their work. She reiterated a suggestion that she had made during last year's Public Hearing on the budget which is to include the following two questions: (1) Is the budget too high?, and (2) is the budget too low?

- Denise DiStefano questioned why, if the Town is 34% and the BOE is 57% of the total budget, is the BOF asking the BOE for an 89% cut and only 11% from the Town's budget. Mr. Gelston advised that the Town's side of the budget was already "pretty lean" and also that the BOF had made a conscious decision to reduce expenses but not capital. He stated that the Town has to do a lot of catch-up on its infrastructure and briefly discussed the road improvement plan. Ms. DiStefano requested that the BOF be open to negotiation and supported Ms. D'Aquila's recommendation to add the "too high" "too low" questions to the referendum ballot. Ms. Stricker stated that the BOE wants to be respectful of the BOF's direction for a $600k reduction in their Operating budget; however, she emphasized that achieving those cuts will be extremely difficult for the BOE, students and teachers.

- Sam Brown stated that he feels that the comment that the Town is going to have to "suck up" on education is a bit reckless and disrespectful.

- Kim Dodge thanked Mr. Gelston for his explanation. She stated that everyone wants what everyone wants; however, these are difficult times and everyone must live within their budget. She noted that many people in the community are struggling financially and the yearly property tax increases are unsustainable for taxpayers.

- Branden Spencer stated he has three children in the school system and the school system was the main driver in his family's decision to move to East Haddam. He suggested that the cuts to the school budget could cause some residents to move out of Town thereby reducing its tax base.

- Michael Masci discussed the road improvement study and asked about bonding for road repairs. Mr. Gelston provided clarification about the plans to bond to improve the roads and confirmed

that some improvements will take place this year. Ms. Belles provided additional information about the Town's plans to bond for large projects and its debt service budget.

- Khemron Ganesh stated he is a senior at NHRHS and that he doesn't agree with the cuts in the BOE's budget. He discussed his experience at the high school and asked the BOF to reconsider its direction to the BOE to cut its budget for himself and future students.

- Joshua Strecker stated he is a parent and a teacher at NHRHS and noted that there has been a history of small increases in the BOE's budget. He stated that he has worked in three school districts and the teachers in East Haddam are the best he has ever worked with. He stated that he has been very happy with the education his daughter received in the elementary school and now in the 4th grade at the Middle School. He noted that there is no fluff in the BOE budget so he believes the cuts will have to be to staff and he expressed his concern about the impact of that on students.

- Cate Tarnowski stated she is a senior at NHRHS and an advocate for school funding. She noted that the budget cuts will affect the community as a whole.

- Abigail Martin discussed all that schools give back to the community. She asked the BOF to keep pride in the schools in mind like students keep pride in the community in mind.

- Ken Tosi noted that he heard no speakers tonight that are in favor of cuts to the BOE budget and asked what the BOF's process is to address that feedback. Mr. Gelston advised that little citizen feedback was provided during the BOF's Budget Workshop meetings so what was said at tonight's meeting provides them with more information. He explained that the BOF will meet immediately following this meeting and the process to move a budget forward to referendum and reiterated that there must be a balance among the Town, the BOE, and taxpayers.

- Amalia Shaltiel encouraged the Board members and citizens to call and write their state representatives demanding they do more cost-sharing for education. She also suggested the Town consider separating the BOE budget from the municipal budget for purposes of the approval process. Mr. Gelston noted that that had been considered in the past and suggested it could be looked into again.

- Michael Callahan noted that the Grand List and state funding have not kept pace with increasing expenses. He stated that the Town and the BOE have been fiscally responsible and managed expenses well; however, the Town has a revenue problem. He encouraged the BOS to focus on growing revenue.

Ms. Belles stated that no emails had been received related to the Public Hearing.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Gelston stated that he appreciated all of the participants comments and noted that they are worthy of consideration. Ms. Stricker thanked the IT staff for its overtime work at this meeting.

Motion made by Mr. Barney to adjourn the meeting at 8:49 p.m. Mr. Thomas seconded the motion and it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.

Respectfully submitted,
/s/
William Barney
Secretary