TOWN OF EAST HADDAM

Board of Finance

Public Hearing Minutes

April 29, 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 read the legal notice announcing this Public Hearing. The attendees said the pledge of allegiance.

OPENING COMMENTS

Mr. Gelston asked the participants at the head table to introduce themselves. He reviewed the purpose of the meeting and stated that, after the April 8th Public Hearing, the BOF had deliberated and elected to reduce its directive that the BOE decrease its FY2025-2026 budget by $500k to a decrease of $400k. He noted that the change would be covered by allocating an additional $100k from the Town's unassigned fund balance to the FY2025-2026 budget, resulting in no change to the bottom-line of the budget or the mil rate.

Mr. Gelston thanked the members of all the participating Boards for their cooperation and invited the other Board chairpeople provide opening comments.

First Selectwoman Haines referenced the significant impact of the state's change in how vehicles are valued for property tax purposes on the Town's Grand List. She stated that the Town has consistently come in under budget and will continue to invest in economic development initiatives which will generate more tax revenue for the Town. She advised that this year's priorities included public safety and infrastructure. Ms. Haines noted that 25% of the Town's revenue comes from state and local fees, special donation funds, and investment income; the other 75% comes from the Town's taxpayers.

Ms. Haines noted the constituencies represented at tonight's meeting and stated she also wanted to recognize those not in attendance. She listed senior citizens on fixed incomes, taxpayers who think the proposed budget is okay and are happy to pay their property taxes, and citizens who had other commitments tonight and could not attend the Public Hearing, and those that are listening on-line. She stated that it is the Boards' responsibility to develop and pass a budget that is fair to everyone living in East Haddam: all ages and incomes, all present and not present, all who voice an opinion and those that do not.

Ms. Stricker stated that members of the BOE had attended the BOF's April 8th meeting and reviewed their Operating and Capital budgets. She advised that the BOE had subsequently held a special meeting to discuss adjustments to line items in its budget to absorb the decrease in funding. She reviewed the changes that were made to the BOE's budget and noted that the BOE is working with the BOF to cover a shortfall of $10,373.00 for capital projects from the BOE's reserves.

Ms. Stricker reviewed several Capital projects that were put on hold and stated that the BOE continues to be committed to a high quality education for all students and high-quality staff for the schools while being fiscally responsible to the tax payers.

Mr. Gelston opened the floor to citizens' comments.

GUESTS AND AUDIENCE COMMENTS

- Rosemarie Evans stated that she is president of the East Haddam Education Association and acknowledged that the Boards of Finance, Selectmen, and Education are participating in the budget process with "open minds". She discussed the level of teachers' pay, noted that three positions will be eliminated this year and reminded the Board members that the present-day students will be sitting in their seats in the future and the citizens of the Town will then be "under their mercy". She encouraged citizens to vote Yes at the budget referendum.

- Denise DiStefano called attention to her perception of the discrepancy in the amounts the BOE and the Town were directed to cut from their budgets. She asked Ms. Haines to be specific about what the Town would cut from its budget. Ms. Haines reviewed a list of line items that were being considered. There was a general discussion regarding the impact of healthcare insurance premiums on the budget.

- Maureen Pierson expressed her opinion that it is a "mistake" to cut teachers positions and stated she would prefer to see the Tree Removal budget reduced by $300k. She stated that she does not want the Town to "*push through a higher mil rate like [it] did last year*".

- Abigail Martin stated that she is a senior at Nathan Hale Ray High School and said she does not support the cuts to the BOE's budget. She suggested that the BOF members are "*oblivious*" to the schools' needs and that they are "*self-righteous and arrogant.*" Ms. Martin delivered letters written by NHRHS students to Mr. Gelston.

- Curtis Rodowicz stated that he applauded the Board members for trying to take all of the Town's taxpayers into account when they draft their budgets; however, he feels that the BOF's directed cuts do not prioritize education. He stated that it upsets him that "*we are prioritizing our entire government budget over education*". He said that he would prefer to have the Town's Capital projects removed to restore the BOE budget and emphasized the Town needs to reinvest in its school facilities.

- Catherine Tarnowski stated she is a senior at NHRHS and expressed her concern about the cuts to the BOE budget. She stated that the students that spoke at the Public Hearings are not "puppets" for adults and advised that they are intrinsically concerned about the cuts.

- Melanie Kolek read a statement written by Meg Dedman, a teacher at NHRHS. Ms. Dedman's statement expressed her concern about cuts to the BOE budget. It noted that the dollars and percentages were okay in theory but were not okay in practice. Ms. Dedman encouraged the BOF to read the students' letters submitted by Ms. Martin.

- Andrea Webster thanked the Boards of Education and Finance members for their work. She noted what she perceived as a cycle of cutting the BOE's budget and stated that she would like the Town to change the discussion and stop "attacking" the BOE. She noted that small class sizes foster compassion and understanding. Ms. Webster emphasized the need to increase revenue for the Town.

- James Francese acknowledged that it is a "losing proposition" to serving on the Board of Finance. In response to a question raised by Mr. Francese, Mr. Thomas advised that the Town's annual debt service is approximately $3.5M and approximately $300k of it was for Open Space purchases. Mr. Thomas stated that the larger portion of the Town's current debt is related to the renovation of the Municipal Office Facility, the High School track, and the schools' HVAC projects. Mr. Francese expressed his concern about deferring work until a crisis happens and he encouraged citizens to vote Yes on the budget referendum.

- Shaina Ang stated that she moved to East Haddam as an 8-year old non-English speaking immigrant and attributed much of the success in her life to the teachers and counselors in the East Haddam school system. She said that she is disappointed about the cuts to the BOE and questioned if the BOF members are "hearing" or "comprehending" the impact of the cuts on the students.

- Jeff Wolter reviewed his background and history of work with the Town. He expressed his concern about using $2.5M in unassigned fund balance to supplement the proposed FY2025-2026 budget and also the level of bonding proposed.

- Wade Tomlinson recommended fully funding everything in the BOE and Town budgets vs. the proposed budgets. He also recommended the Town look into solar panels on all of the Town buildings.

- Sam Brown expressed his opinion that the country is currently sliding toward "anti-intellectualism" and stated he feels that the Board members "do not care".

- Jamie Damato suggested that the Town open-up its website for suggestions from citizens on the budgets. He stated that he also supports investing in solar panels for the Town buildings.

- Ruth Masci stated that she believes the students care about the school system and spoke "eloquently" at tonight's hearing. Ms. Masci stated that she cannot support a budget for which she does not know what the Town will cut. She expressed her concern that the Public Works Department is not being well managed.

- Denise DiStefano supported adding a Too High/Too Low question to the budget referendum ballot. She expressed her concern that the cuts to the BOE and Town budgets are not equivalent.

- Curtis Rodowicz supported adding a Too High/Too Low question to the budget referendum ballot.

Mr. Gelston read the letters from the students to the meeting attendees. He also read the following emails:

- Randy Dill expressed his opinion that the budget is too high for elderly citizens on fixed incomes and struggling parents to afford.

- Kathy & Ken Klein asked what amount of the budget is a consequence of state and federal mandates for public safety and education. Ms. Stricker responded that the BOE has 300+ mandates it must fund at a total cost of $20,224,471.00.

- Jessica Hatfield thanked the Boards for their work and opined that the problem the Town has is a lack of revenue. She stated that she feels the Boards cannot cut any more expenses and expressed concern that the Town is on an "unsustainable path".

- Terri Garrity (BOE) expressed her pride in the students who spoke at the Public Hearings and encouraged the BOF to "listen to their voices".

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Mr. Thomas thanked Ms. Belles, Ms. Hughson, Dr. DeBrito, Ms. Stricker and the BOE, and First Selectwoman Haines and the BOS for making it possible for the BOF to do the difficult job of meeting the needs of the whole Town while supporting the budgetary limits of many of its citizens.

Ms. Haines advised that the Town is, in fact, actively pursuing solar solutions at Town facilities and explained how the process works. She stated that they are also looking into installing a solar field at the Harris property but, so far, they have been constrained by the size of the area. She agreed that the Town has a revenue problem. Ms. Haines said that the Town's budget represents a 2.7% ($894,726.00) increase over last year's budget, noted that $1,192.670.00 of its Operating budget is dedicated to Shared Services which supports both Town and BOE departments, and reported that the Town pays $1.3M of all capital projects, which supports all of the Town facilities including school facilities. She noted that the Town absorbs those costs to help the BOE with its state-mandated minimum budget requirement.

Ms. Stricker noted that the Town receives a combined approximate annual amount of $4M from the Ray Board fund, the Purple fund, the Helen Cohen fund, and state and federal funding which is dedicated exclusively to BOE expenses.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion made by Mr. Kolasinski to adjourn the meeting at 9:28 p.m. Mr. Barney seconded the motion, and it was approved by a unanimous aye vote. Motion carried.

Respectfully submitted,
/s/
William Barney
Secretary