

TOWN OF EAST HADDAM

Board of Finance

Meeting Minutes

May 12, 2021

Nathan Hale Ray High School Auditorium

Mr. DiCristofaro, Chairman of the Board of Finance called the meeting to order at 7:01 pm. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Participating:

William DiCristofaro, Chairman of the Board of Finance

Robert Smith, First Selectman

Marc Piscioti, Chairman of the Board of Education

Brian Reas, Superintendent of Schools

Cynthia Varricchio, Finance Director

Approximately 30 individuals were in attendance.

Mr. DiCristofaro welcomed those in attendance as well as those watching from home. He reviewed the process that got the Board of Finance to this point of its budget. He recognized the achievements of many that went into the process. He commented that this year the budget process was extremely difficult. Mr DiCristofaro noted that the *Citizens' Guide* presented a great overview of the budget being presented, which will result in a mill rate increase of .62 or a 3.5% tax increase over last year's budget if passed.

Mr DiCristofaro cited increased costs associated with health care, transportation, road improvements and tree removal. Mr. DiCristofaro stated that the Board of Finance will not deliberate with the audience; but would endeavor to answer simple questions as they are asked. Complex questions will necessitate a delayed response at a later date.

Mr. David Carbo raised several questions. First was his concern regarding the term "guestimate." Mr. Carbo suggested that solid quotes should be in place prior to bringing an item forward. He was advised that place holders are utilized when actual bids are not in place.

Mr. Carbo inquired why \$150,000 was necessary to configure video conferencing. He stated that any standard computer can perform zoom services. He was advised that FOI laws regarding municipal meetings are more comprehensive than that of a regular business. He was also advised that the town has over 20 different Boards and Committees and that most of that business is conducted Monday through Thursday at 7:00 pm.

Mr. Carbo questioned the necessity of a \$40,000 expenditure for security cameras at the Transfer Station. First Selectman Smith reported that the cameras are necessary to monitor illegal and after hours dumping, and the dog pound.

Mr. Carbo questioned the 10.7% increase in recreation and leisure. It was noted the addition of a groundskeeper is what is impacting that budget.

Mr. Carbo noted his surprise that the budget for Youth and Family Services has been held for so long. He raised concern regarding \$7,000 stripped from their budget. It was noted that Mr. Carbo

referenced a \$7,800 special appropriation made. The item was restored to the Y&FS budget and not transferred to another fund as requested. Mr. Carbo stated that he feels Social Services are neglected in East Haddam.

Marilyn Gleeson spoke in favor of equipping all conference rooms for video capability. She stated that it provides a wonderful service for the towns people to view a meeting at their convenience.

Linda Stuhlman thanked all for their hard work but took exception to some of the wants rather than needs. Particularly she took exception to a \$15,000 raise for the First Selectman position.

Laurie D'Aquila asked several specific questions related to the ambulance budget. Responsive to inquiry, she was advised that our gas price is fixed until December 31. She also noted that per agreement the Ambulance Association will receive a \$60,000 refund toward an ambulance that was budgeted. But will not be purchased by the town. Based on the age of the current ambulance and future purchase necessary by agreement, Mrs. D'Aquila was concerned that the town is utilizing reserved funds to balance the budget.

Mrs. D'Aquila also requested that the Board of Finance provide a liaison to its Association, as it does with the other Boards and Commissions in town. Mr. DiCristofaro stated that he would follow up on that request, as he believed it was a communication issue.

Mrs. D'Aquila sought clarification regarding the additional Fire Department staffing being requested. Mr Smith advised that it was the intent to run two eight hour shifts daily, Monday through Friday. She was also advised that funding for the Lucas Device is in the budget.

Kim Dodge acknowledged the difficult times people are living in and noted that this is not the time to raise taxes. She also expressed concern for the education budget. Mr. Piscioti, Chairman of the Board of Education stated that there are no fees for an additional school administrator contained within the budget. It was noted that there are fees for a part time Human Resources position that remains unfilled, whereas a full-time position has been requested.

Mr. Reas noted that the Board of Education budget represents a 2.87% increase over last year's budget and is attributable in the areas of transportation, health insurance and special education.

Mrs. D'Aquila asked about the ambulance funding in reserves that was removed. Mrs. Varricchio responded that the reserved funds are being returned to the budget as they will not be expended. Mrs. D'Aquila stated that it will likely be required to fund for the additional ambulance in 2025. She encouraged reserves to continue. Further discussion regarding coverage between Mr Smith and Mrs. D'Aquila took place.

Irene Haines noted that the Economic Development Commission has been awarded a grant to connect trails to Chapman's Pond. She noted that a \$5,000 matching grant is necessary by the town. She asked if that was included within the budget. Mr. Smith stated that putting those funds in the FY2021-2022 budget will be too late, and the funding will need to come from this year's budget cycle.

James Smith submitted a question via email. He raised concern with transparency related to the salary study conducted in 2017-2018 and the positions targeted for increases have not been released. Mr. Smith stated that the same firm that conducted a study in 2007 also conducted one in 2017-2018.

He noted that the recommendations from that study have not been implemented yet. He stated that the document remains preliminary and they do not wish to disclose it until after so the employees who are impacted are not disappointed if it does not occur. Mr. DiCristofaro stated that a staggered approach to bring the position to within the salary range will occur. 50% of increase for July 1, \$25% on January 1 and the remaining 25% on July 1, 2022.

Mrs. Stuhlman strongly objected to passing a budget in order to find out what was in it.

Mr. Carbo inquired what was being done to mitigate last year's financial audit risk of custodial credit risk. Mrs. Varricchio stated that she would follow up to that question at a later date.

Marilyn Gleeson stated that she supported the salary increase. She stated that employees should be paid fairly. She added that Mrs. Stuhlman was being disingenuous and making her comments because she is a Republican. Mrs. Stuhlman countered that Ms. Gleeson is the Selectman's girlfriend. The meeting was quickly brought back to order by Chairman DiCristofaro.

Kim Dodge again pleaded to keep the budget increase to only necessary items. She noted that many households are on fixed or reduced incomes. She noted that annual raises are provided to all employees; she stated that asking people who are struggling to give more to those that are already employed is unconscionable. She also opposed spending more funding on one way conversation (video equipment) and encouraged more dialog. You get what you get and do not get upset. Quote from school. Upset that told to a child. Please cut what you can for the good of all. Ms. Dodge received applause for her comments.

Kevin Staehly submitted an electronic question regarding what demographic was utilized for the salary survey. Mrs. Varricchio stated that she will respond to him directly as she did not know if the P value were utilized, she stated that if the results of the salary study from 2007 was funded, there would not be such disparity at this time. She added that the 2007 study was conducted by Randi Frank, the same firm that did the study in 2017-2018. Mr. Smith added that there is no one above the median range in the entire town.

Mrs. D'Aquila inquired how much funding the town received in COVID relief. Mrs. Varricchio responded; it was also noted that the requirements of how those funds can be utilized is still being reviewed.

Patty Stricker stated that she was not trying to be difficult but stated that she could not understand why the people were being asked to approve a budget without full disclosure of what was in it. She noted that while people's names should be exempt from disclosure, their positions should not. She advocated for transparency.

Mr. DiCristofaro concluded the Public Hearing at 8:25 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Deb Denette