

Minutes
Coventry Town Council Regular Meeting
February 22, 2022
Town Hall Annex & Virtual

See a video of this meeting at this link:

<https://coventryct.viebit.com/player.php?hash=GkCg7NI8fFAw>

Call to Order, Roll Call:

The meeting was called to order by Thomas at 7:30 p.m.

Members present:

Julie Blanchard

John French

Robyn Gallagher

Jonathan Hand - Secretary

Matthew Kyer

Marty Milkovic – Vice-Chair

Lisa Thomas - Chair

Members absent:

Also present:

John Elsesser – Town Manager

Amanda Backhaus – Finance Director - remote

Pledge of Allegiance:

All stood to recite the pledge.

Audience of Citizens:

(30 minutes – 5 minutes per person, 750-word count maximum)

No participants present.

Acceptance of Minutes, February 7, 2022:

Motion: I move to accept the minutes of the February 7, 2022, Regular Meeting, **with recommended revisions.**

By: Hand Seconded: Milkovic

Voting:

For: Hand, Thomas, Milkovic, Kyer, Gallagher, French, Blanchard

Against: None

Abstain: None

6. Reports:

6.A. Council Chairwoman: Lisa Thomas: (See written report attached to minutes.)

Congratulations to Coventry Police Department for receiving a grant for DUI enforcement.

Reminder of the Council Chair office hours, next session on March 3 at 6:30-7:30 at Booth & Dimock Library. Two letters were sent under Thomas' signature about bills important to our community. The first was regarding a personal state income tax deduction for homeowners with crumbling foundations, and the second was for a personal income tax deduction for volunteer EMS & firefighters receiving stipends. She hopes to see these bills advance. Thanks to Laura Stone for crafting these letters and sending them out, and to John Elsesser for getting them on her radar. A citizen's letter regarding the firefighters' pension trust payment and the difference it makes was also shared.

6.B. Council members:

Milkovic: Was happy to see the town is going to be receiving a \$350,000 grant to build out trails in Nathan Hale Forest - it was the largest grant received for trails. Also appreciated the receipt of classroom air filters distributed to our schools. We are lucky to have UConn and Eastern CT University as neighbors. Each classroom will have a filter, will help with COVID and dust.

French: Was refused access to the Finance Committee agenda packet by Town Administration. Feels all Council members should get all packets. Will start going to FOI if necessary. Was told he could get only agenda and packet, not the correspondence the committee gets. Doesn't understand why a Board member would not receive it when released. It is public information. It should get pushed to all Council members so they can be aware. Elsesser: what French asked for was to be on the email list that goes to Finance. That sometimes has other scheduling issues and things for the committee. We did inform French he could sign up for automatic notification of agendas to get the packet the minute it is published. What he asked for was to be on the Finance Committee mailing list. Thomas: when the agenda is set and ready to go, everything is attached that is going to be discussed. It is illegal to add anything else. Protocol is for communication and questions **is** to go through the committee **Chair. (capitalize Chair throughout)** Gallagher: Everything discussed at the meeting has been on the agenda since she has been chair. She also finds this concern disappointing - she has encouraged French to reach out to her if he has any concerns or questions. He has never done that. If he has questions for the Finance Director, Gallagher would appreciate being informed. Kyer: This protocol has been past practice - we are not doing anything different. French: just because it is past practice doesn't mean we should be doing it. He also has concerns about the way Executive Session is being handled. There should be specifics about what is being talked about. Thomas to Elsesser: asked that Executive Session topics be labeled differently to address French's concern. Kyer: We have electronic devices for a reason. Reduces cost and staff member time to generate paper packets. Thomas: We can certainly notify the Town Council whenever a packet goes out. Also wants to make community aware of ability to sign up for alerts to get notification when an agenda is published.

French: The library schedule is robust and he is opposed to going out to bid until we have signed contracts between the library board and Town Council.

Hand: Has personally signed up to get alerts for all agendas that get published and doesn't have to search for them - you get an email with a link you can click. It is so simple.

Gallagher: There are still a few days left to recognize an employee through the employee recognition initiative. There was a notice in the winter newsletter. It closes 3/1. The newsletter is on the website and has a **QR** code. The Reading Challenge at Booth & Dimock Library is

coming to an end. We are at 476 out of a goal of 500 books. Encourages all to log in and participate.

Kyer: Congratulations to Kayla Fontaine for being selected to be a reviewer for the *School Library Journal* - a widely used tool nationwide. Kayla will periodically receive assignments in the area of her expertise. We are lucky to have Kayla working at our library.

Finance Committee: Robyn Gallagher, Chairperson:

Thanks to everyone who attended the Finance meeting - it was a long meeting. She has asked other members of the committee to take areas of discussion and report back. We discussed the EMS fund and Julie Blanchard will report on that. Thanks to Jim McLoughlin and Bud Meyers for coming to discuss this issue. The other big topic was the list of potential uses for American Rescue Plan Act funding. Marty Milkovic will discuss. Thanks to John Elsesser and Amanda Backhaus for a very informative proposal. We discussed cultural and arts grant uses - it was the culmination of months of work and we are grateful to those who applied and those who reviewed. We discussed the request to go from 1% vs. 2% for the Board of Education Reserve Fund for Capital Expenditures with Board Chair Jen Beausoleil. We also discussed going out to bid for audit firms - we haven't for some time and would hope to get competitive pricing. We also discussed surety bond coverage.

Julie Blanchard - EMS fund: (See report attached to minutes.) We appreciate the EMS crews. Stakeholders expect the Fire Department will be able to respond and resolve emergency situations. In 2020 the town contracted with Vintech for 24/7 ambulance coverage. This greatly increased response times. The annual cost to provide service was \$750,000; we are projecting a negative fund balance. There are a variety of factors including Medicare reimbursement. **Our Fire Administrator and our fire Chief shared their preliminary report in which they recommend the following:** We should seek legislative support to increase the reimbursement rate. Should consider live-in college student support. Appealed to members to commit to covering volunteer shifts so we can have less paid coverage. Looking to see if we can charge for non-transport calls. Exploring hiring per diem vs. Vintech. Consider use of ARPA funds until we can catch up. A survey was sent **by the Fire/EMS Department** to the Town Council, fire department members and citizens. Results are being reviewed and compiled. The Town Manager will discuss the state of this fund and our plans to help in his budget presentation. It will also be included in the Budget in Brief document. Gallagher: would add that Fire/EMS is in the process of updating a 5-year strategic plan - we don't anticipate we can turn the corner immediately on these budget issues. The contract with Vintech does give us some flexibility if we need it.

Marty Milkovic: -Overview of ARPA funds: Coventry was fortunate to receive \$3.76 million. We discussed using it for non-recurring items such as offsetting losses in the EMS fund, and a number of other non-recurring capital items that we are behind on. This will help us catch up. Gallagher: A number of the big ticket items have been discussed by the Council before, but a new one is the Nutanix back-up system that is used by **the** Town & Board of Education - it covers the cost for 3 years. Backhaus: We save about \$20,000-\$30,000 if we go with a 3 year contract. The Board of Education has already budgeted \$50,000 in their operating budget which they won't have to cover. She thinks it will be necessary at least for the next 3 years. Milkovic: **these** items will come to the Council to be voted on.

Thomas: asked for consensus about sending letters to legislators about increasing Medicaid reimbursement. Elsesser: would encourage to do it soon because it is a short session. Consensus: yes. Thomas: should we put a proposal for non-transport to Finance? Backhaus: Bud Meyers is working on that for future Finance Committee consideration.

Kyer: Thinks there might be a date missing from the list of budget meetings that was attached to the agenda. Thomas those are Town Council budget meetings. The other date was the Town Manager's budget hearing on March 10. Reminders will be sent frequently. It is an opportunity for the public to be present.

6.E. COVRRRA – John Elsesser:

We got a response from Willimantic Waste for trash. Tonnage fees were less than anticipated and recycling was very complicated. It just came in and we have not had time to evaluate. We will come up with recommendations for the budget. Asked Council to bear with us - we are stressed to the max getting the budget done by Monday - some things will just have to wait. The transfer station relocation cost is still beyond what we feel comfortable with, even using additional ARPA money. Todd Penney and Elsesser to meet regarding possibility of using design build approach and get proposals to look at value engineering. We would like to move forward to get the land cleared.

6.F. Town Manager – John Elsesser:

6.F.1. Projects Update:

- Excited about trails grant. Have two years to do it. We received a reduced grant amount.
- We got \$25,000 aquatic invasive Hydrilla treatment grant.
- We are out to bid for generator replacement at Orchard Hills. The Department of Housing grant process took a long time to get through. Will be modifying bids to address the collapsed slip lining.
- The landfill methane venting project was put out to bid. Low bidder is being evaluated. Expect to award after a few questions are answered.
- UCONN School of Nursing also is making 100 units of box fan ventilators for Coventry schools. The personalized aspect of creating them means a lot to the students involved.
- Reminder about the website for our affordable housing survey. Statewide goal is 10% of housing to be affordable. At one point we were 8% but we have dropped to below 5%. Don't think people understand what affordable housing is. Hope to educate people about what that is. Thomas: thought report did a good job explaining what the categories are and what they mean to our community - i.e. students, volunteer firefighters. Elsesser: thinks the term affordable housing has negative connotations but those who choose to understand it will.
- The Library renovation project was authorized to go out to bid. Softball fields will be following soon.

6.F. 2. COVID-19 Update:

Will wait for later discussion.

6.F.4: CCM state legislative program:

Thomas: shared some things she thinks are important. Council members can do the same thing. Blanchard: PA 490 and that municipalities are adequately covered under the program. Elsesser: One of the things we're trying to do is make value adjustments once the lots are sold.

Also the State is not fully funding the amount they are supposed to. The program has strayed from its original intent. It works well but there have been abuses. Blanchard: where in the budget would she see whether the program is funding us. Backhaus: you wouldn't see it in the budget because it is incorporated into the assessment. Would need to run a separate report - she can ask the assessor to do. Thomas: would be interested to know. Blanchard: interested in increasing thresholds for prevailing wage. Elsesser: that has been a goal for several years. It is difficult for small companies.

7. Unfinished Business:

7.A. 21/22-34: Consideration/Possible Action: Amendment For Town Personnel Rules Per OSHA COVID Requirements:

I move to send this item to the Steering Committee for further review:

By: Hand Second: French

Discussion:

Elsesser: There are a few things still to talk about. We kept the requirement for employees to let us know their vaccination status. Blanchard: asked about conflicts with privacy. Backhaus: we are not allowed to release specifics - only percentages. Elsesser: it is a significant policy with broad ramifications.

Voting:

For: Hand, Thomas, Milkovic, Kyer, Gallagher, French, Blanchard

Against: None

Abstain: None

7.B. 21/22-50: Consideration/Possible Action: Adoption Of Revised Job Description For The Position Of Cemetery Sexton:

I move to adopt the revised job description for the position of Cemetery Sexton.

By: Hand Second: Milkovic

Discussion: Thomas: thanks to the Cemetery Commission for further review and updates. Appreciation expressed to the committee for their progress and diligence.

Voting:

For: Hand, Thomas, Milkovic, Kyer, Gallagher, French, Blanchard

Against: None

Abstain: None

7.C. 21/22-53: Consideration/Possible Action: Board Of Education Request For Adjustment To Reserve Fund Policy:

I move to approve the Board of Education's request for an adjustment to the reserve fund policy.

By: Milkovic Second: Hand

Discussion: Gallagher: We discussed this during the last Finance Committee meeting. The Board of Education, unlike the Town Council, does not have funds they can carry over from year to year, and when you're operating and budgeting for a large entity and budgeting conservatively, there is naturally **money** left over at the end of the year. The Council does this with fund balance. The BoE does a similar approach so they don't have to come back to request more at the end of year. Increasing **permissible transfer percentage to the** fund from 1% to 2% would allow them to tackle projects over the summer that would carry over into July/Aug. Historically the fund has been used for items on the capital plan. If they address it, they don't need to carry it over to the next capital plan. She is not aware of any challenges regarding appropriateness of use. The change is consistent with State statute.

Backhaus: based on policy we devised, the BoE requests Council approval of transfer - Council retains full control over the decision. Finance voted 2-1 to recommend approval of the BoE's request.

Milkovic: thinks we should clarify this is in the State statute.

French: It is up to the Council to decide to implement. The wildcard with BoE funding has always been special education. He has questions about the tuition fund for out of town students and where that money goes. The job of the BoE is to educate students. The buildings are owned by the town. You would be giving them ability to go over a half million dollars. He would like to postpone this vote until after we meet with the BoE on 3/14. Minutes of the last meeting are not yet available. Uncomfortable with making this decision now.

Blanchard: opposes this because she has always wanted to have better relationship with BoE and this divides us. We have one budget; we should work together as a group. We should take care of facilities. BoE should focus on education.

Thomas: When policy was developed that Council chose to build in safeguards. There are limitations and an approval process. Whether it comes out **of** the general fund or nonrecurring fund it is the same dollars.

Hand: wants to make sure that the cap is not changing. Gallagher: thinks allowing them to save up to 2% rewards fiscal responsibility and encourages the seeking out of grants, etc.

Voting:

For: Hand, Thomas, Milkovic, Kyer, Gallagher

Against: French, Blanchard

Abstain: None

8. New Business:

8.A.

21/22-54: Consideration/Possible Action: ARP Cultural & Arts Grant Funding Awards:

I move that the ARP Cultural Arts Grant Funding Awards be approved as presented.

By: Hand Second: Milkovic

Voting:

For: Hand, Thomas, Milkovic, Kyer, Gallagher, French, Blanchard

Against: None

Abstain: None

8.B. 21/22-55: Presentation Of FY 2022/2023 Capital Improvement Plan:

Thomas: Presentation is of Town Manager's proposed budget. Council still has opportunity to adjust. *(Slides of presentation attached to minutes.)*

Elsesser: The plan proposes to catch up on some projects using ARPA funds. CIP is voted on at the Annual Town Meeting. It establishes timeframes and priorities. Planning & Zoning Commission review is required for certain items that are land-use based. PZC has the proposed budget and will make their recommendations back to Council later this month.

We have been striving to get the CIP up to \$1 million for a long time. We touched that level briefly. It dropped significantly during COVID. We are at a poor place currently.

Elsesser reviewed a summary of departments, funding sources, and proposed expenditures. We typically budget \$300,000 for roads. The pavement study showed that wasn't adequate. Other categories were reviewed including furniture and computer upgrades, police vehicle replacements, fire gear, open space, lake management, and DPW vehicles.

LOCIP state grants - are used for park improvements, fire pond maintenance, drainage, guardrails, etc. Other minor funds include local loci, tower equipment, cemetery, and misc. highway.

State and federal grants and ARPA proposed uses are mostly one-time expenses that would eventually need to be added to our operating budget. We are proposing to lease purchase a small dump truck.

Debt service shows projected levels with some projects dropping off which will create capital capacity for potential bonding projects in 2025/26.

Several new projects are included as placeholders.

We are proposing a \$3 million bond for roads and culverts. This does not include Broadway which will also need to be addressed. The repair that was done is temporary.

Not included in the proposed CIP: CHS walls wind code compliance, senior housing. A lot of details are in the full plan.

10. Executive session:

A. Contracts: - for purpose of talking about the library transfer of property.

Motion: I move that the Town Council enter into Executive Session pursuant to Connecticut General Statutes 1-200(6)(E)-discussion of any matter which would result in the disclosure of public records or the information therein contained described in sub-section (b) of Section

1-210 with the following people in attendance the seven members of the Council, John Elsesser, Town Manager, and Amanda Backus, Finance Director.

By: Milkovic Second: Hand

Voting:

For: Hand, Thomas, French, Milkovic, Kyer, Gallagher, Blanchard

Against: None

Abstain: None

The Council entered Executive Session at 10:16 p.m.

I move to leave Executive Session 10:43 PM.

By: Milkovic Second: Gallagher

Voting:

For: Hand, Thomas, French, Milkovic, Kyer, Gallagher, Blanchard

Against: None

Abstain: None

11. Adjournment:

Motion: I move that the Council adjourn at 10:44 p.m.

By: Blanchard Second: Kyer

Voting:

For: Hand, Thomas, French, Milkovic, Kyer, Gallagher, Blanchard

Against: None

Abstain: None

Respectfully Submitted,

Laura Stone, Town Council Clerk