

*Town of Colchester, Connecticut*

127 Norwich Avenue, Colchester, Connecticut 06415

Bernie Dennler, First Selectman

Board of Selectmen and Board of Finance Joint Special Meeting

January 4, 2024 – 7:00 PM

Town Hall Meeting Room 1 & via Zoom

**Members Present:**

First Selectman Bernie Dennler, Selectmen Denise M. Turner, Art Shilosky, Cliff O’Donal and Rosemary Coyle (via Zoom).

Board of Finance**:** Chair Scott A. Chapman, Vice Chair Michael Egan, Members Karen Belding, John Thomas, Timothy Vaillancourt, Michael Hayes.

**Others Present:**

Town of Colchester Department Heads: Valerie Geato, Director Youth and Social services (Via Zoom), Gayle Furman, Town Clerk, Demian Sorrentino, Town Planner, Zach Cash, Resident Trooper, Joe Leone, Director of Public Works, Tiffany Quinn Recreation Director, Michele Wyatt, Tax Collector, Patty Watts, Director Senior Services, John Chaponis, Assessor, Kate Byroade, Director Craigan Library, Steven Hoffman, Fire Chief and Brad Bernier, Deputy Fire Chief, Julie Shilosky and Jayme La Grega, Registrars, Steve Sharpe, Fleet Supervisor.

1. Call to Order
2. Call to Order by Board of Selectmen: B. Dennler, First Selectman called the meeting to order at 7:00pm
3. Call to Order by Board of Finance: S. Chapman, Chair called the meeting to order at 7:00pm
4. Pledge of Allegiance

B. Dennler led the Pledge of Allegiance.

1. Statement by First Selectman:

B. Dennler stated the purpose of the meeting is for the public to hear from the town department heads on the state of the budget. This meeting’s purpose is to be used as a starting point not as an end point for figuring out the state of the town’s budgets. He has provided the MUNIS reports and attached commentary provided by Maggie Cosgrove. B. Dennler warns because of tonight’s meeting he will likely impose a form of spending freeze. He will not be commenting on personnel matters in tonight’s meetings.

1. Citizens Comments

Public comment was given by M. Dubreuil, Woodbine Rd. who raised concerns regarding using M. Cosgrove’s opinion and stated she is not a Town Employee.

B. Dennler provided clarification that the former administration hired M. Cosgrove as a Town of Colchester employee.

1. Discuss current standing of Fiscal Year 23/24 Budgets by Department

The Current standing of Fiscal Year 23/24 Budgets was presented by each Department head as follows:

**P. Watts, Director of Senior Services,** shared there were changes made to her budgets from what she asked for in the budget planning process. P. Watts explained processes changed in that they no longer use RFP’s it is now through purchase orders which make everything encumbered upfront; she will be correcting line items showing over expenditures at this time. A specific example is that the temporary staffing line item was reduced by 50% to $1500.00 and further reduced to $0.00 so she will have to make some transfers as they cannot operate with zero for temporary staffing in the senior center budget. However, she feels she will be able to deliver her budgets mainly due to additional personnel roles not being fulfilled yet and will continue to be tight on spending at this time.

Discussion followed from board members regarding part time medical driver position.

**Valery Geato, Director of Youth and Social Services**, joined via zoom. V. Geato explained operating piece of her budget did not have huge losses in any one area, however, there were arbitrary cuts to her budget. She looks forward to new ways of doing the budget because she never had a conversation with the Board of Finance last year. She learned about her new budget on the town website. Examples of arbitrary cuts include telephone bills, oil , memberships, professional services, but those expenses are set prices so it did not make sense to cut them as they will be overspent at their baseline. The biggest cut to the Youth and Social Services budget was the program line item which was $12500.00 cut by $10000.00 to $2500.00 with no discussion. V. Geato explained she found a solution and proposed it to the former administration who agreed using the state DCF grant fund which she applies for and the matching fund that is generally in the general fund to be put back into her program budget to cover the cuts. However, that has not been placed in her budget yet, it is still going into the general account. Overall if the state funding is not put into her accounts as promised, she will go over approximately $15000.00.

R. Coyle asked clarifying questions on the DCF grants.

**Michele Wyatt, Tax Collector,** explained her budgets are flat, there will be overages in a few line items due to cost increases and additional legal notices. However, there will be savings of about $19000.00 in salaries due to not having an assistant in her department from July to the middle of October, therefore she anticipates her overall budget coming out with a surplus.

**Gayle Furman, Town Clerk**, explained her budget is flat as of now and feels the budget will balance by end of year.

**Demian Sorrentino, Planning Director** shared he is at 49% on expenditures overall on his budgets and is under on personnel as he did not have two positions filled at the beginning of the budget year. The overtime line, which is used for clerks, specifically to have a union member in his department cover the six boards and commissions under his department’s control, that line item is now at $0.00 but understood that it may have been the Board of Finance’s intention to return that $1500.00, but it has not happened yet. The contract temp line item was $5000.00 previously but was cut to $0.00 as well and is now maxed out. This is for when the department needs another licensed professional such as the building inspector, the current one has not yet taken vacation. The biggest issue is with the legal line item, there were charges for cases he was involved in but were not related to directives from his department. Now their department has current legal cases, so the line item is now showing -175% for legal fees. Other initiatives and the current legal case on Cabin Rd. have been charged to his department budget, but that is not necessarily where they were supposed to come from in his understanding. D. Sorrentino offers to meet in executive session with the Board of Finance to discuss the current legal case further.

D. Sorrentino adds if the legal fees are removed retroactively and moving forward his budget can be on target. Explained some instances he found the expenditures and encumbrances are counted twice so that will also need to be corrected.

Discussion followed by Board Members.

**John Chaponis, Assessor**, explained he has a small budget, he does some estimates for cars and pro-rates for new construction, and he came in over for this budget. J. Chaponis also shared an update that the town won a court case vs the state recently and the town will be getting approximately a $325,000 to $340,000 check coming in that was not planned for in the budget.

**Kate Byroade, Cragin Library Director** explained she had communicated with the Board of Finance and Board of Selectmen early in the budget process because the budget she requested was changed and it was not restored. Operationally certain costs cannot be changed. The revenue she brings in from the copies is put in general fund not returned to the library’s budget. K. Byroade explained every year she will ask for more money in the books line, it’s everything they have at the library for this budget she asked for $55,000, it was cut by $5,000 making it $3,000 less than what she previously had. Supplies were cut 50%. For the service contracts line, she asked for $16,000 it was cut to $12,500. Specifically, the line for emergencies was reduced to $500 and in August a pump on their boiler went and the work came to $5,200. The elevator maintenance that was planned and budgeted for last year was never serviced as planned, the service company was never able to schedule it, so the $3,000 for it will need to be spent this year. Fire alarm systems have not been inspected since before covid, she has quotes out for that now. A light fixture fell off the wall, which will need to be fixed eventually but for now has been secured. Another issue with the budget is she planned on and intended to make a part-time position go full-time, however the full-time salary was not budgeted properly for this budget, so she could not make the position full-time this year. In not using the extra money for that position will as it is more than a part-time salary but less than a fulltime salary should help her balance her budget this year. The payroll budget did not have a contingency line for negotiations. Overall, she thinks she could potentially be $12,000 under budget.

Discussion followed from board members.

**Steve Hoffman, Fire chief and Brad Bernier, Deputy Fire Chief** explainedonce herecalculated his budget it looked better than he initially thought. Overtime is accounted for through projections, fuel bill may be over but has not been documented in MUNIS, building issues specifically the furnace is 35 years old and always getting fixed. Chief Hoffman clarified he was expecting physical testing as it is a requirement to be budgeted higher, but it did not get increased. Other line items on par. Trucks coming next week.

**Tiffany Quinn, Parks, and Recreation Director** explained her copier budget is over which needs to be sorted out. The salary line for her stipend which was not accounted for is showing over, which has now ended. Program Supervisor has been hired back since covid being paid out of the general fund with expectation it would be paid out of the program fund, can be reclassified but the budget will still be about $10,400 over due to the stipend.

**Zach Cash, Resident Sergeant,** his budget will be close because he has not been able to hire their new hire and the process is so long that should cover the overtimes that are already over for this year. They had an emergency purchase for guns. Miscellaneous items were cut where the cost will never change so they will be over in those line items. Could explore some revenue lines like pistol permits to cover overtime. They cannot see their grant accounts and where the money is being pulled from for the overtime, he will work with finance to sort it out.

Discussion followed by board members.

**Julie Shilosky and Jamie La Grega, Registrars,** J. Shilosky explains when they put their budgets together last year there was no early voting. Budgets are all off, they were cut considerably last year. J. Shilosky explains the early voting tab for 5-7 personnel comes to $4,500, need 2 fireproof cabinets $6,200, special ballots $2,500 bringing their estimate to over $2,3000 applied to a grant from the state of Connecticut for $10,000 still over $10,000 short and these figures which does not account for the presidential primary which is estimated at $14,000. They will have to plan for a lot more in next years budget as well.

Clarifying questions and comments from the board.

**Joe Leone, Department of Public Works**, he has a few orgs in MUNIS under his department.

Public Works: administration will be on budget.

Highway: is over on professional services, overtime, and under purchase supplies and on road improvements. The full amount will be spent on road improvements. Late budgets did not allow us to hire pavers in time for the fall. They will hire for the spring. Significant requests for the trees that need to be cut in the right of way roads. Still over 600 trees to be cut, it is a multiyear budget investment. There are emergencies that also require immediate attention. Overtime that is showing over on highway, was miscoded from grounds crew’s overtime. Estimate for roads is $375,000. Vacancies may cover the overages.

Fleet: 30% cut from last year but overall, they will be under. Grounds, overtime was used to address the appearance of the town.

Capital projects: In the Green, he did not know it was coming out of his budget.

The splash pad was leaking a lot of water, repairs were longer than anticipated and the bill was applied to this fiscal year. Snow removal is fully encumbered in the budget, salt is purchased as needed. Salaries are over, funding has yet to be pushed over for facility maintenance salary. Service contracts, senior center gas line should be a capital expense and building repairs in the youth center were emergencies, mold, water getting in, roof falling apart, larger concern about lead. The Town Hall roof replacement designer miscoded all coming from DPW operating budget. Budget is $164,000 over; J. Leone can account for $115,000 of it. Some will have to be reclassified.

Transfer station: cost spent $194,000 on transportation budgeted $170,000, looking like $21,0000 so there will be an overage, also spent $10,000 to clear out hazardous waste someone dropped off.

Facilities and transfer station will be over. Payroll may help offset the 5-figure number.

Discussion by the Members of the Boards

**Bernie Dennler, First Selectman** professional services (ClearGov) and copier budgets do not necessarily count as funds available. Legal is over in the budget. Union contracts under negations start without legal counsel. However, legal council needs to be involved and personal matters require legal counsel. HR Director Shannon Ramsby is leaving at the end of the week. There could be a vacancy and some savings looking to fill the vacancy as soon as possible not to burden the finance department further.

B. Dennler also presented the finance department has been overspent; Maggie Cosgrove was hired as a town employee in the summer. Audit is ongoing and she is now working more than anticipated. Issues found in the audit and not closing out properly. Health insurance payments appear to have not been made for six months and are not encumbered.

Discussion by Boards Members

1. Discuss next steps

B. Dennler wants to propose a soft spending freeze and asks the Board for their opinion.

Discussion by Board Members expressing they were in favor of a soft spending freeze until the state of the budget is understood.

B. Dennler shared the BOS approved the position for the town to hire a Deputy Director of Town Finance/Acting Finance Director. Someone has been identified to fill the role, to help the Finance Department as soon as possible. Which should also help move forward correcting the reporting. There will be a balance of correcting the past, planning for the next budget, and doing the next audit.

Further Discussions by the Board members.

1. Citizen’s Comments

Public comment was given by:

Jeremy McKenzie of Bull Hill Rd. thanked the boards and expressed his concern over the past budget process and the need to fund the town appropriately.

Ron Silberman, of Boretz Rd. Vice Chair of Water and Sewer Commission expressed he has not had an accurate report in a year and a half. Thanked the boards.

Michelle Millington Skinner Rd. thanked both boards for the work and the collaboration made by the boards.

1. Adjournment Board of Selectmen: A. Shilosky **MOTION to adjourn,** R. Coyle **SECONDED**. **MOTION CARRIED 5-0** 9:31pm

Adjournment Board of Finance: K. Belding **MOTION to adjourn,** M. Egan **SECONDED. MOTION CARRIED 6-0** 9:31pm

Submitted by:

Taryn Scott

Executive Assistant to the First Selectman