

CORRESPONDENCE FOR JULY 1, 2020 BOF Meeting

June 15, 2020

First Selectwoman & Board of Finance,

I have watched the zoom meetings during this budget year pertaining to the two new Firefighter/EMT positions and I agree with the 45+ citizens who have voiced their opinions for the Fire Department addition of more career staff. I grew up in a fire house with my dad and am the fourth generation in the fire service for my family. My wife and I combined have 20 years of volunteer service as Firefighter/EMTs. We are members of the Colchester Hayward Fire Department and joined while living out of town 6 years ago. We have lived in Colchester for three years now. Colchester Hayward Fire Department is looked at as a well-respected department with quality training in the eyes of area volunteer departments and we take pride in what we do. Today, I am writing to you due to the fact we are unable to cast our votes, but also as a Firefighter/EMT in the department and as a concerned taxpayer.

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, Colchester Fire Department was in desperate need of more career staff. When my wife and I joined the department six years ago, there was easily 20 certified and qualified members available at Fire Headquarters every weekend. Members would be around at all hours of the day whether it was learning how to operate a piece of apparatus or just hanging out till that next emergency call came in. Times have changed. Most of us play a dual role in both Fire and EMS or EMS and Fire Police. We also have members on military leave. This is a nationwide problem, not just in Colchester. Taking an ambulance call can take up to two hours and that is not easy to just drop what you are doing sometimes to go out and help. When a structure fire comes in during the day, most members are at work outside of town and cannot leave their place of employment to come help. The career staff that we have now is left to work with minimal manpower.

I am a volunteer and I work per diem on weekends as a Firefighter/EMT. Many times, I respond with limited staffing depending on the type of call which can be unsafe. There have been times recently where the ambulance could not legally crew volunteers and therefore, I had to act as a first responder and wait for our area mutual aid to come help. This is a delay in care, ultimately for the patient who is having a medical emergency.

I also am an officer in the department. While responding, as an officer to an emergency, it isn't a great feeling knowing you have no one else responding. It is hard to put a plan into action once you arrive on scene when it's just you there. NFPA 1710 requires a fire apparatus to arrive on scene within a certain amount of minutes with a certain amount of firefighters. Time of day and day of the week are huge. As President Knapp stated our calls are unscheduled at random. Many of us plow snow, so winters are tough. Many of us have boats, so summer weekends are tough. We respond when we can, but we need the career staff as much as the career staff need the volunteers. We work well together as a combination department and that is what keeps the Colchester Fire Department running.

I would like to address the issue that I have heard multiple times now in past meetings regarding the Farm Gate Structure Fire and how these two new Firefighter/EMTs would not have been there so it does not matter. Well there is an agreement that on any report of a structure fire or any third tone medical call the career staff can come back in on overtime to assist the volunteers. We are fortunate enough to have two of our current career staff living in town already and one of them did come back in

for the Farm Gate Structure Fire (and the other was already working). It doesn't matter the shifts that the two new positions work in the schedule; it is a foot in the right direction.

I also would like to address the Ambulance Incentive Program for volunteer EMS members. It is irrelevant for the two new proposed Firefighter/EMTs. There are 23 volunteer members that regularly take EMS shifts between the hours of 1700 – 0500 Monday thru Friday and 0500 – 2300 on the weekends. Out of the 23 volunteers I believe 20 of them are on the Incentive Program. This Incentive is in place to help compensate the members to stay in the station and reduce response times while on shift for 6 hours. If we allow the volunteers to continue to take shifts on this program it now allows the Firefighter/EMTs to respond adequately to the next fire or rescue related emergency and/or the second medical call. As Chief Cox stated 20% of our 2,000 call volume is back to back or multiple calls at once. Volunteer EMS members should still be allowed to take their ambulance shifts, if they want to, because the Town of Colchester has paid for their EMR or EMT training.

Please remember, you cannot put a price tag on a human life. This board should be very proud of the 87 members that still volunteer their time in our great town. Finally, I was present at the January 2020 Colchester Hayward Volunteer Fire Company meeting when First Selectman Bylone stated she would do everything she could to get us four additional Firefighter/EMTs. This is a need, not a want. Like I said before, we are moving in the right direction if we get two additional Firefighter/EMTs. I am urging you to pass this budget so we can get the help we have been needing for years.

Respectfully,

Matthew Ziegler

CHVFC Fire Lieutenant

From: James McNair <jmcnair3@comcast.net>

Sent: Wednesday, June 17, 2020 1:14 AM

To: Robert Tarlov <BOFChair@colchesterct.gov>; First Selectman <selectman@colchesterct.gov>

Subject: Rob Eulogy for open gov

Rob,

In my opinion, open gov was a noble effort to increase transparency. Our FS explained to me her reasons to get rid of it. In adequate documentation of scope. [It's unclear if that was the charge of the BOS or BOF], cost, lack of use by the public and BOF.

Moving forward, what was your takeaway to its demise? Also, the BOF hoped to use it to independently do it's own research. Will there be a plan B to do so in the future?

Thanks,

James

From: Robert Tarlov <BOFChair@colchesterct.gov>

Sent: Thursday, June 25, 2020 12:13 PM

To: RENEE McNair <jmcnair3@comcast.net>

Cc: First Selectman <selectman@colchesterct.gov>

Subject: Re: Your questions re: OpenGov

James,

I am not speaking for other Board members, but am speaking based on my experiences and observations over the last 42 months. My perspective may be different than others.

I think by the time Mary was elected and got involved, OpenGov staff had had it with our town staff and they really did not want to deal with us anymore.

I too, have heard that it was stated that Board of Finance did not follow the Purchasing Policy.

1. Board of Finance did not approve the purchase of the software, we recommended that the software be purchased. With the exception of the audit, the Board of Selectmen approve contracts and award bids.
 - a. The Board of Finance, on February 01, 2017, recommended that the First Selectman add money to the budget to fund software for OpenGov.
 - b. Almost 14 months later BOS began discussion, and on April 5, 2018, after a motion to purchase the software, the Board of Selectmen decided, in the discussion, to send the contract to town counsel for review first.
 - c. After legal review, at a Special Meeting on April 13, 2018, the Board of Selectmen unanimously approved the software with the revisions suggested by the town attorney. OpenGov agreed to all revisions.
 - i. In discussions, some BOS members had asked if the Purchasing Policy was followed. I can only assume that they were satisfied with the answer as they moved forward and voted unanimously to authorize the FS to sign the contract.
2. When the Board of Finance was reviewing the software, 3 of the 5 BOS members and Maggie attended most of the meetings.
 - a. In 2016, after the Board of Finance had seen 2 presentations from companies who submitted proposals., CFO Maggie Cosgrove stated we needed a third proposal to comply with the Purchasing Policy. (An email from Maggie on November 3, 2016 stated the same). She said there was a third company with a similar product, (Tyler/Munis) and that she would contact them. She arranged for that company to make a presentation and they subsequently submitted a proposal.
 - b. The software offered by these three companies was similar, but not the same. At the time of evaluation, OpenGov had a separate transparency module, and for that module, they were the cheapest over the 3 year contract. Tyler and Clear Gov had only transparency and their reporting was not as robust as, and was not as user friendly as OpenGov who also had additional modules available. We recommended the purchase of both the Transparency and Intelligence modules with OpenGov
 - i. The BOF saw value in the Transparency software.
 1. The BOF felt having the ability to have access to the data 24/7, especially at budget time, would be a major plus. Being able to see history and trends without comparing multiple documents also a plus.
 2. Requesting information even during business hours generally required multiple requests, some still never received and often those received came incomplete and after it was needed.
 3. Information always received in pdf format rather than Excel. OpenGov could be downloaded in Excel.

- ii. Intelligence (Accountability, Activity Management, Reporting Communications) - only available with OpenGov.
 - 1. The Board of Finance felt the Intelligence module was the differentiator, enabling BOF to make better financial decisions, enabling the First Selectman and department heads to better manage their resources, and saving time. We said that the transparency software was good, but felt we shouldn't move forward without this module.
- iii. Budgeting - only available with OpenGov.
 - 1. We heard testimony from other towns that found this as a major time saver and great tool for zero based budgeting.
 - 2. We felt the budget module was an important module for future consideration after the initial software was up and running.

Why did the software not get off the ground?

- 1. No Commitment from the Town
 - a. The CFO was not committed to the transparency software. Work needed to initiate implementation was not a priority, and once live, timely access to detailed information was impeded.
 - b. This could have been a great tool for BOE, but neither the elected board nor the administration were open to learning about it.
 - c. The Board of Selectman didn't understand why the financial people on BOF needed this tool. (A carpenter does not understand why the plumber needs different wrenches and the plumber does not understand why the carpenter needs different saws)
 - d. The First Selectman was not a technology user and did not understand the power of the software. There was no one on staff who would champion, or was asked to champion the software and one staff member was a detractor, likely influencing others and creating a negative bias. The IT person on the town side at the time likely did not have the skill set to implement, nor have the vision to see the value of this software to the town and IT people on the BOE side would not have known about the software. Department heads did not have an opportunity to even see the software until the fall of 2019, just before a change in leadership, and at a time that OpenGov had already given up on us.
 - e. Implementation of the Intelligence software was not considered until after the implementation of the transparency software was completed, despite the fact that the CFO would not be involved in that phase. It then took 6 more months to have a meeting with staff. I don't believe staff wanted the transparency that the Intelligence reporting software provided.
 - f. An OpenGov committee was established to act as a gatekeeper for all requests regarding the software functionality, marketing and education. It was made up of 4 members, 2 Selectmen, neither was a fan of the software, a BOE member who had no interest in the software, and a BOF member.
- 2. No understanding of the software capabilities -
 - a. The software we subscribed to had three components - everyone referred to it as transparency software, but this was the part that, when the BOF made their recommendation, members felt was the least important.
 - i. There was another module, Budget Building, that we felt should be considered at a later time.
 - b. The BOF felt the capabilities of Public Communications, Activity Accountability and Management had the higher priority of the software's capabilities, but was never initiated.
- 3. Time taken to implement

- a. By the time the BOS finally approved the software contract, 2 of the 6 BOF members were gone, and when the transparency portion was finally live, 3 of the 6 were gone. All were the stronger advocates for the software. There were 3 replacement members who are no longer on the Board. The three newest current members were never engaged with the software.
 - i. It took 14 months for the BOS to consider and approve the contract.
 - ii. It took another 10 months for the finance office to upload and verify the software. Most towns we spoke with took 2-3 months. Several stated that it took them longer, but said it was due to their delays, not OpenGov.
 - iii. Most of the software was never initiated.
4. Access and timing of information to the boards and the public.
 - a. Only the transparency portion of software was available for use, and as stated above, it was the other parts of the software that BOF saw the most value in. From April 2018, BOF kept asking when the rest of the software would be implemented.
 - i. On the transparency software, despite BOF repeated requests for access to greater detail and more timely updates, and some late assurances that it would happen, it never did. No reason to get the new BOF members educated with software when:
 1. The level of detail that Board of Finance was given access to was not sufficient.
 2. The OpenGov system updates the software daily, but our access to the updates was monthly and not given to BOF until after our second meeting of each month, which was after the Munis reports were reviewed and usually was the 4th week of the next month, and sometimes only after I inquired.
 - ii. The earliest year of data input was not visible, limiting the history able to be viewed.
 - b. The proposed budget could not be shown in OpenGov without a manual upload, so was never done.
 - c. The proposed budget, once adopted, was not shown in OpenGov until post audit, 6 to 7 months after its passage and implementation and more than half way through the year.
5. No public information or education. What no one knows exists is not likely to be used by anyone.
 - a. The website link is hard to find. Anyone accessing from a laptop, tablet or phone would have to know that they needed to page down to find the link. Almost impossible to find by accident.
 - b. No informational/training meetings. OpenGov was willing to do webinars for boards, employees and the public, but there was no motivation in town administration to set these up.
 - c. I believe that if OpenGov had been used in Public meetings and communications, it would have started getting a following.

I attended many OpenGov webinars over the last 2 years, where town after town demonstrated how they were using the OpenGov software and how much time and money they were saving with its use. Why were these towns able to successfully launch and use the software, and we could not? Because they wanted to?

The bottom line is, if you make a decision to move forward with software, then take 2 years to implement 25% of it, ignore the rest, and then limit access to the data and fail to update the data in a timely fashion, it will not be used.

There is no plan B involving me.

I saw this software as a tool to make me a more effective board member and to save me time in my research. I also saw it as a tool for future boards to replace times when there isn't a board member who has

the time, passion, ability and persistence to dig into the numbers. Also saw it as a big help to get new Board members up to speed with the current budget and historical perspective quickly.

The BOF spent many meetings reviewing the different software vendors for a piece of software we believed would give better, and more transparent information for the BOF (and BOE) to be more efficient and effective in our decision making, was a good management tool for the 1st Selectmen and Department Heads; was a good communication tool to be used with the public and provide increased public transparency. We also felt that if the full functionality of the public transparency and communications were utilized, FOI requests would decrease. (Town staff believes that giving more information to the public and the boards will cause more inquiries and rather than save them time, it will increase their work). Roberta and I spent many hours doing the research, including communicating with other towns, leading up to the BOF recommendation, and for me it was a major undertaking over 3 years just to get the OpenGov software to what we see now. It would be pointless for me, or any other volunteer, to invest more time into this just to get the same result.

I've heard talk about ClearGov as an alternative. That company was only a year old at the time we did our review, had only 40 customers, all but 4 in New England, none in CT. OpenGov had over 1400 clients, climbing to about 2000 when BOS voted. Not sure if the ClearGov platform has evolved since the BOF reviewed it, but not very robust at that time. Not sure why we should expect the implementation of ClearGov to be any different than OpenGov, we'll just spend less per year for a lesser product, to get to the same result in the end that we did with the OpenGov implementation.

It's time for me to move on from this issue. Although I saw this software as important on many different levels, other than a couple of current BOF members and a couple of members of the public, no one else sees the value in this type of software.

Rob

Rob Tarlov, Chairman, Board of Finance
860-608-4293

From: j g <bakerfarmgirl39@yahoo.com>
Sent: Thursday, June 18, 2020 12:33 PM
To: Robert Tarlov <BOFChair@colchesterct.gov>
Subject: My feelings and experiences concerning the town of Colchester's operations

>> Good Morning,

>> We moved here 4 years ago and I am not a fan. The taxes constantly go up. The school system is horrendous. We have a teenager that did go to Colchester schools all his life. He has since moved to Lebanon and went from Bs Cs and Ds to honor roll every semester. You need to bring back Home Economics, and you also need to add a life skills and etiquette portion to that. Most of these kids have zero respect for adults or each other. Most of it starts at home, but our taxes are so high there's no way a parent can spend enough time with their kid to teach them all of these things, so the schools need to up their game. The amount we pay in property tax here is atrocious, yet when I called the town the last 3 years to see what was available for our youngest son who is now 5 there was nothing...absolutely nothing, no

summer camp, or programs, and if I wanted him in pre school and we didn't win the lottery I had to pay, oh and because he turned 5 in January even though he's ahead of the game education wise he was to remain in preschool until next year, so I had to pay another full year of preschool for him because Colchester has no testing to allow children who are ready early entrance to education. We have shelled out about \$20,000 in the past 4 years for day care and schooling for our now 5 year old. That's a lot of money!

>> It feels like we are never done paying around here. We pay about \$600 per month just in town taxes and another \$250 in insurance because we are a farm, plus personal property taxes we pay more per month in taxes and insurance than we do on our mortgage! My question is for what?? The town offers near to nothing! Other states charge a fraction of that I mean in North Carolina for example \$1200 a year is a pretty standard property tax. We are being taxed to death! Then there's car tax, and personal property tax! Personal property tax??? Well what does that mean?? What does that even mean??? I was given my Grandfathers late 1970s tiller I didn't even buy that thing it's worth maybe \$50 well every year I have to pay taxes to use something he paid for and paid tax on in 1970. I also pay tax on a car that I paid tax on when I bought it and now I'm paying tax every year on top of that tax? We do still need to file for the tax reduction for the farm that will go in this year. We could never retire here and live comfortably at the rate of tax increase in this town.

>> I had a home project here and it took two years to get all the information I needed to get the project even started because every time I talked to the town they couldn't seem to answer what I needed in a timely fashion. I know for a fact I'm not the only one annoyed by these things here, it's ridiculous the way this town is run! Thanks for trying to keep the taxes from going up yet again, but based off what you've said it's either now or later they're going up, because God forbid the town not get a raise for the subpar job they tend to do around here!

>> Jim Karreberg needs to go also! He is a man on a power trip especially when it comes to women in business. The other woman in the office There Daphne she had an email issue, however she is wonderful she does care and she made every effort to help us I think she even spoke to Jim about getting us going. Everything with this man is a major production and he always needs to "speak with his fellow sanitarians" about everything before he makes a move. He also doesn't know the laws, my Husband had to read the information and prove to him that we did not need his approval or help with our project, after 2 years of correspondence with him. I know East Haddam fired Chatham health for the same issues. You can and should hire privately. He needs to be investigated. I went to the town for a permit to put in sheet rock and insulation after he told me the year prior that was my next move. I'm standing in the office and he asked what I was waiting for I told him and he said "I didn't approve that!" It had nothing to do with him at that point, I can't put sheet rock and insulation in my home without his approval?!??? Is that his department? No it's not and he wasn't joking, I can take a joke trust me this household is full of comedy acts! We went with a bakery license through the department of consumer protection because we didn't want to deal with him anymore, when in reality we could have gone with a food service license and been able to do more with our business, but because of the amount of paper work and his comments of "If it gets approved" And "It's a lengthy process!" we decided against it. I also had a dying parent during the process and that was too much to put up with! He has no interest in helping people, just making their lives difficult! He sure knows what papers ya need though, and how much it will cost! I'm just disgusted with the entire thing even still. You need someone kind and happy to help in that department that cares and wants business models to thrive in this community, and wants people to get what they need without a lot of nonsense and lack of knowledge!

>> How about the transfer station? We have to pay all kinds of money just to throw out trash!? With the amount of taxes we pay, we should be able to throw away trash with no additional cost. The last time my Husband went the guy at the booth didn't know how to use the credit card machine and would only accept cash so my Husband had to leave!!! Now either that's a lack of training or he has a hand in our till! He emailed the town about it and no one ever got back to him! So out of the four people that were working that day no one knew how to use the credit card machine??? Hmmm!!!

>> I'm sorry to rant, but it really bothers me that most of this town is scraping by and we aren't seeing

anything from the town in terms of support. Everything is an issue it seems like and I don't operate that way. I love people, I want to help people that's why we Farm and Bake because we care what people are putting in their bodies, we don't buy the cheap grain, we buy the good stuff! We buy the good flour, we avoid the harsh chemicals on produce. We want the town to have the same attitude towards people as we do! Be here to help and stop being greedy!!! The town does not need anymore money unless they are going to start providing some seriously different and more involved programs and supporting staff for those programs. Our kids shouldn't be in a lottery for pre school parents can't afford to pay and for sale signs are going up all around this town! Make Colchester better!

>>

>> Sincerely, Jennifer Gregoire

From: jmcnair3@comcast.net <jmcnair3@comcast.net>

Sent: Monday, June 22, 2020 8:59 AM

To: Robert Tarlov <BOFChair@colchesterct.gov>

Subject: tax warrant for mill rate calc

Rob,

Is this the calc dated June 8th the same as what was approved June 15th?

Thx,

James

From: Robert Tarlov

Sent: Monday, June 22, 2020 10:41 AM

To: jmcnair3@comcast.net <jmcnair3@comcast.net>

Subject: Re: tax warrant for mill rate calc

Yes

From: James McNair <jmcnair3@comcast.net>

Sent: Monday, June 22, 2020 2:50 PM

To: Robert Tarlov <BOFChair@colchesterct.gov>

Subject: Re: tax warrant for mill rate calc

Thx. Did Maggie provide official document detailing year over year reduction in capital and transfer? Stuff deferred until following year or purchased with surplus this year?

From: Robert Tarlov <BOFChair@colchesterct.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, June 23, 2020 8:12 AM
To: James McNair <jmcnair3@comcast.net>
Cc: First Selectman <selectman@colchesterct.gov>
Subject: Re: tax warrant for mill rate calc

James,

There is no official document that I am aware of. The information is publicly available, but not in a single document, so currently it would take one a little bit of work to pull it together.

As we begin to discuss the 2021/2022 budget next month, I think this data will be consolidated and available to the Board of Finance and the public. Right now there are a lot of moving parts and all BOF members need to have this information in one place as over the next eight months we discuss the priorities of the Town and next year's budget.

Rob

Rob Tarlov, Chairman, Board of Finance
860-608-4293

From: James McNair <jdmac3ct@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, June 25, 2020 9:12 AM
To: Robert Tarlov <BOFChair@colchesterct.gov>
Subject: Raise policy

Rob,

Good day to you. The policy for non-union and elected officials states a raise will be added to the town budget. Yet could an elected official ask the BOF to remove their own increase if they wanted?

Thx

James

From: Robert Tarlov <BOFChair@colchesterct.gov>
Sent: Thursday, June 25, 2020 12:28 PM
To: James McNair <jdmac3ct@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Raise policy

I don't see why not.

Rob Tarlov, Chairman, Board of Finance
860-608-4293

From: Robert Tarlov <BOFChair@colchesterct.gov>
Sent: Thursday, June 25, 2020 12:40 PM
To: James McNair <jdmac3ct@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Raise policy

I believe that Stan did not take a raise in 15/16.

Rob Tarlov, Chairman, Board of Finance
860-608-4293
