

**MINUTES  
COVENTRY TOWN COUNCIL  
MARCH 22, 2021  
7:00 P.M. – SPECIAL BUDGET MEETING  
TOWN HALL ANNEX & VIRTUAL**

**1. Call To Order, Roll Call:**

The meeting was called to order by Blanchard at 7:09 p.m.

Members present:

Julie Blanchard – Chair

Lisa Conant - remote

Jonathan Hand – remote

Matthew O'Brien, Jr. - remote

Matthew O'Brien, Sr. - Vice Chair

Lisa Thomas

Richard Williams – Secretary – remote

Members absent:

Also present:

John Elsesser – Town Manager

Amanda Backhaus – Finance Director - remote

**2. Pledge Of Allegiance:**

Council members and Staff stood to recite the pledge.

**3. Unfinished Business:**

**3.A. 20-21-56: FY 2021/2022 Budget**

**1. Parks & Recreation Department (7:00 p.m.)**

Wendy Rubin, Cat Merriam from the department and Beverly Carlson from the Parks & Rec Commission were present.

Wendy Rubin discussed the short- and long-term plans for the department. The spring programs are up and running. Planning for the summer programs is in motion. The department is trying to hold the costs of programs down and are hoping the American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding allows them to recoup some of the lost revenues from the past year. They have yet to address the park maintenance and operating costs. The budget proposed by the Town Manager does not address those costs the way the department submitted the budget. Parks & Rec is looking for \$25k - \$30k from the General Fund to cover the maintenance and operations costs that are above and beyond what the department budget can handle. They took the \$30k for life guards and moved that to Rec Supervisor salary leaving \$25k to be paid for from this line item from the Special Revenue fund from fees and charges. Parks & Rec was hoping to change the

maintenance and operations charges to a Town paid full-time position as the other departments are. This position is the only one in town not covered by the General Fund.

We are proposing to eliminate life guards at Lisicke Beach Monday through Friday. The gate keeper will be at the park. Signs will be posted allowing swimming at your own risk. The number of visitors during the week does not justify having life guards working. Some life guards will be present when private and semi-private swimming lessons are being held. Numbers were run to show what has been charged in fees and what the fees would have to be with the minimum wage increase. Lisicke Beach will cost about \$22,500 to operate with life guards present only on the weekends and the gate keeper there seven days per week. In 2020 six hundred resident beach parking stickers were sold at \$25. To break even that sticker cost would have to go up to \$37.50 with the same amount being purchased. We could not have life guards at Patriot's Park during the week either but life guards are not going to want to work Saturday and Sunday only. In order to operate at break even or to subsidize other costs the overhead fees would have to be raised quite a bit. Residents assume the beach sticker should be part of their taxes. Parks & Rec is likely to see a huge reduction in the number of stickers sold if the cost goes to almost \$40.

The Patriot's Park revenue is based on the fees that are charged to non-residents. Beach stickers for residents are accounted for under Lisicke Beach. O'Brien, Sr. asked Rubin to send him the minimum wage increase impact to the budget. Last summer was a unique situation due to COVID-19. With people working from home and the five heat waves the number of people coming to the beaches, especially Patriot's Park, had us breaking the record for revenues from Patriot's Park. It was the first time a profit was realized since Rubin has been here. It is usually run at a huge cost. It does not look like it will be a great year for the beaches with the adjustments for the opening and closing dates.

Summer camp may be in the same situation with the virus restrictions we have to adhere to. There will be no profit from holding summer camp. The camp and the after-school program normally offsets the overhead costs. We are going into the year with a deficit. Rubin feels that is because the department is expected to cover the cost of maintenance and improvements to the facilities that is above and beyond the direct services being provided. The fees for camp will have to be increased. We have a minimum child enrollment of 52 and a maximum of 68 due to the restrictions. Normal capacity is 140 children so the restrictions equal a 51% decrease in capacity. O'Brien, Sr. said the ARP is meant to be a multi-year program perhaps allowing us to recoup the lost revenue although we don't know the whole picture. Rubin said so far it looks good with parents' willingness to send their children to camp. The cost due to the restrictions will have to increase 42% from \$150 to \$199 per week. There is also the lost revenue because of not being able to offer extended hours for the camp. We are losing \$32k by not being allowed to run the before and after school programs. The increase in the camp fee is for COVID-19 related expense such as having a full-time staff member that does cleaning throughout the day, hand washing stations, PPE,

minimum wage increase, and all staff needing to get to certification classes, instead of recertification only, because of not running camp last summer.

Last year we lost \$15k in rental revenues. Ninety-nine rentals were refunded last year. Rentals are picking up for this year and the numbers are working in our favor but Rubin does not know if the money from the rentals will offset the overhead costs. Our programs are designed to break even or they are not run.

The department has programs and encourages the residents to engage in recreational activities such as the trails, hiking, swimming, fishing, and kayak rentals. Hopefully, for the next school year we can get back on track with the after-school program and start the process of bringing the department back into a better situation.

O'Brien, Sr. said his best guess is that the ARP will cover all covid related expenses. What is not known is if it will cover lost revenues. The minimum wage going up each year is a strain. Rubin said the past three years of minimum wage increases accounted for \$110k in labor costs of running the beaches for seven days per week plus twice the number of camp counselors. For camp this year that increase is \$26k. Cat Merriam said normally we employ 20 camp counselors and camp management staff for eight to ten weeks in the summer. These people are paid for 20 – 30 hours of training and 40 hours per week. Camp directors and the aquatics staff make more than minimum wage but their pay rate is scaled by the number of years they have worked at the camp. We are half-way through, at \$13/hr., the yearly minimum wage increases up to \$15/hour. Parks & Rec staff will provide the net effect of the minimum wage increases to the Council.

Beverly Carlson said she is new on the Parks & Rec Commission. Recreation is so important for this town. She finds it puzzling that this department's budget has to come up with the maintenance costs for the buildings from program fees. Elsesser said the rent commission goes to the Rec Commission to cover the maintenance. LOTCIP money covered the roof and grant money is given for those larger maintenance needs which is about \$10k - \$30k per year. Rubin said she thinks Carlson is talking about the maintenance costs such as service contracts for the portable toilets, water testing, bug control, and the \$13k for paper towels, soaps, and the custodian. The rental fees are not high enough nor the facilities rented enough to cover all of the maintenance costs.

Thomas asked about the Rec Supervisor salary. Ms. Rubin said this is \$55k per year and the General Fund offsets \$30k of that which used to be the lifeguard subsidy. The balance comes out of the revenue funds. This has been covered by the department 100% in the past. This year we asked to have the entire position moved into the General Fund.

Williams said Parks & Rec operates as a business during these difficult times and it's unfortunate. A lot will be covered by ARP. He would like to see the budget remain the way it was because it provides incentive to keep revenues up. Williams does not like the idea that salary is being covered by the General Fund. Those costs will be covered

by the ARP for the next couple of years so we don't have to worry about that. Adjusting the fees to be competitive with other summer camps and programs is appropriate and a good way to raise revenues.

Unidentified speaker – She is taking issue with Williams' comment about this department being a business. The Parks & Rec department is a service that the Town provides to the residents. We are not about making money. The second issue of concern is that when we raise fees we generally get push back from the town residents. There was an uproar when a beach sticker was raised to \$10 per season. We can only raise fees so much before people can't afford them and we have less participation in programs. Williams said he appreciates where this comment is coming from and can see that viewpoint. In the past the department has been run like a business in that it produces revenues to offset salaries and produces a positive cash flow. Williams feels residents should probably not have to pay for a beach pass. Programs such as summer camp and after school care is basically day care so parents can work; those should produce revenue. Basketball is profit generating to remain self-sufficient. If you want a service you pay for it. There is a scholarship program for those unable to pay. Williams would cut expenses or raise fees.

O'Brien, Jr. said the department has done a great job and managed their budget very well. He sees the department as doing important work during this time for the sake of mental health. There has been a decrease in revenue because of covid. We have been lucky in the past that the department has been able to self-fund by two-thirds. This is not typical of Parks & Rec departments. Why isn't the self-funding working any longer? This is not the fault of the department. O'Brien, Jr. has volunteered at the parks and he sees the need for improvements in many areas. He sees using the General Fund as very important during this time. The Council will have to take a look at what may be made up from the ARP. He sees the staff as being passionate about the programs and appreciates the hard work.

## **2. Registrar of Voters (7:30 p.m.)**

Marjorie Roach, Democratic Registrar of Voters, and J.R. were present.

Ms. Roach presented a budget that is almost in line with last year's. J.R. is jumping into the job which has doubled the training. In the past the office could get by with having one Registrar present. Roach is working with J.R. and Doris works with Marilyn. The Council must realize the office is drastically changing. More people have registered since January and people are not registering properly. Staff must work more and faster. Orientation is a slow process for this job. J.R. has to take classes and become certified. Roach said we will have to follow the same procedures of cleaning everything for the next voting day.

Thomas said in the past there were multiple times where some of the registrars worked beyond the number of hours budgeted for and we had to pay for those extra hours. Thomas would like the office to have some self-discipline. Efficiencies and improved working relationships will be better on the budget. Elsesser said covid has impacted

class scheduling; they are working on getting these classes available online.

Ms. Roach would like to be able to get money for purchasing items for the May referendum. Backhaus said we have some money left over and then we can use ACF. Roach would like to explore the establishment of a pay scale for the Registrars. Certification is so important yet the same pay scale is used for those who are certified as who don't meet all the qualifications of the job.

### **3. Police Department (8:00 p.m.)**

Chief Palmer was present in the Annex; Sgt. Jeff Spadjins was present via Zoom.

Chief Palmer spoke of a recent article in the Journal Inquirer as Members may see comments or get questions about it. The department received an FOI request about interactions with people from Asia. The way the article was written was misleading and not well written. It was made to sound like these were the victims of hate crimes of Asian people in town which is not true.

Chief Palmer took the Council through the PowerPoint presentation. A capital request of \$55,350 is included for a hybrid vehicle to save on gas. That is the total price including the inside equipment and markings. There is a slight model change so the equipment can be moved from the old car to new car.

In the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) is a request for Interview Recording Equipment of \$16,600. We've had the current equipment for four years and it is not reliable in that we are not able to recover recordings. The equipment is for the secure interview room and the booking area. Also in the CIP is a request for \$10k to improve the driveway and public parking area. Currently there are two parking spots and one handicapped spot. At times there is no parking available with finger printing, family members, bail bondsmen, or victims coming into the department. Mark Kiefer provided the amount for this project a couple of years ago. Hand asked if this may be an opportunity to use road millings. Elssesser said there are not a lot of millings left and gravel would not be good.

For the operating budget there are two sergeant positions unfilled. Officer Provost will be done with field training soon. Officer Santiago has begun attending the Academy on a commuting basis. He will complete field training in September. Palmer was notified two weeks ago that Officer Beausoleil is leaving. She is sad to be leaving as she loved the department and working here but she made a decision based on what is best for her family. The average time staff is with the agency is eight years which is down from in the past. The department has a great staff and it receives many compliments. Younger officers need some training. Last year remote training was used but this type of training does not lend itself to remote sessions. Modifications to the budget for salary and non-salary items were discussed. The overall summary is (\$9,015) for non-salary and (\$88,129) for salary.

Williams asked how overtime costs could be controlled. Chief said this was a tough

year with officers out for extended periods of time. Two officers are on duty at all times. This is the first time since Palmer has been here that there has been overtime. We lost two officers during the fiscal year. Covid sick time was not deducted out per guidance. The CRF money is in the \$14k - \$16k range. New staff will have less time off which equates to having less shifts to backfill. Overall, the budget will be okay in the end and not overspent this year. Elsesser said the ARP fund rules indicate that funds can be used for premium pay with some limitations of \$13/hour or \$25/person. Williams asked about payroll hours budgeted for 24/7 staffing. Backhaus said 2,080 or 2,090 hours are budgeted for each full-time person. There is some overlap with having two officers on duty at any one time. Officers work 10-hour shifts. Overtime shifts are for 2 – 4 hours per day.

O'Brien, Sr. thanked the Chief and commended the whole department.

#### **4. Discussions/deliberations**

O'Brien, Sr. said Steering discussed the possible take-over of Avery Shores. The financial aspects of doing so have been requested.

Next Monday will be the start of deliberations with the meeting beginning at 7:00 p.m. If there are questions about items this gives time to get answers by the April 5, 2021 meeting. WPCA is increasing staffing that was shared with COVRRRA. Two people are needed at WPCA for safety reasons. A part-time position, without benefits, is being added to COVRRRA.

O'Brien, Sr. asked the Members where they would like to see the budget go. Thomas said she would like to figure out if there are other ways people get services from their Parks & Rec department such as a fee paid with car registration for use of the State parks. Elsesser said we would have to find out if that is legal to do and then to charge non-residents for Patriot's Park use. O'Brien, Sr. said how much of ARF will apply is not known yet. Elsesser said the real guidance will come from Treasury and they have 60 days to produce that guidance. The rules are very vague right now. Backhaus did not interpret premium pay as being overtime. Williams said these were extra hours needed due to the virus and people being out sick. Elsesser said twelve sentences were written on a 676-page bill. He received a bit of verbal guidance with lost revenue clearly being fundable. O'Brien, Sr. said it may cover the contribution to General Fund. What was clear is that the ARF cannot be used to reduce taxes from last year nor next or deferring future tax costs. Elsesser said the Parks & Rec department will do better by being made whole by ARF than any other department.

Hand said he agreed with Backhaus' interpretation of premium pay. He viewed it as hazard or bonus pay for those who were forced to go work in the covid world.

O'Brien Sr. said the BOE does have some requirements for catch up learning. The BOE may be asked to think about funds that can be used for education for the coming year or change their budget.

Williams said of Parks and Rec summer camp he assumes it will be at capacity because parents need that service in order to work. The problem is they don't have the before or after hours. Working parents need the before and after hours. Elsesser said the answer may be for a longer camp day and a higher fee. Hand asked if Elsesser is hinting at looking to cover the costs of summer education day programs to address the learning loss mentioned in ARF. O'Brien, Sr. said running a summer school session was mentioned. Elsesser said he has not had a chance to talk to Dr. Petrone. Hand said that is one of the uses of the bigger pile of money. Thomas said Senator Murphy spoke about using funds for summer recreation. School districts are looking for staff to work in the summer.

Elsesser said a vaccine clinic was set up with 300 slots. When the system went live for testing 200 slots were filled. Eastern Connecticut is doing better with scheduling people for vaccines. Vaccines supplies are starting to flow more. When newly eligible groups come on you can't get into the system for appointment slots. Elsesser is pleased the Health District was able to do this for us and told them we would love to do it again.

Blanchard said there is another food box drive-through pick up scheduled for March 26, 2021 beginning at 10:00 a.m.

#### **4. Adjournment:**

**Motion:** I move that the Council adjourn at 9:03 p.m.

By: Thomas

Seconded: O'Brien, Jr.

Voting:

For: O'Brien, Sr., O'Brien, Jr., Hand, Blanchard, Williams, Conant, Thomas

Against: None

Abstain: None

Respectfully Submitted,

Yvonne B. Filip

Yvonne B. Filip, Town Council Clerk

***PLEASE NOTE: These minutes are not official until approved by the Council at the next Council meeting. Please see the next Council meeting minutes for approval or changes to these minutes.***