Minutes
Town Council Special Budget Meeting
March 25, 2019
Town Hall Annex

1. The meeting was called to order at 7:00 PM.
   Present: Joan Lewis, Lisa Conant, Carolyn Arabalos, Jonathan Hand, Julie Blanchard, Matthew O'Brien, Mike Sobol
   Also present: John Elsesser, Town Manager; Amanda Backhaus, Finance Director

2. Unfinished Business:
   A. 18/19-56: FY 2019/2020 Budget Deliberations:
      1) Parks & Recreation: Wendy Rubin, Parks & Recreation Director; Caterina Merriam, Program Supervisor; and Marie Gallo-Hall, Parks & Recreation Commission Member, were present to discuss the Parks & Recreation proposed budget for FY 2019/20.

      Wendy Rubin showed a PowerPoint presentation that gave an overview on projects, concern and upcoming issues (attached to minutes). The addition of Mill Brook Place has really taken off in terms of facility rentals. That and Patriots Park Lodge are booked for the next two months. It keeps us busy. Facility rentals aren’t an area where we can grow.

      A list of programming was provided. Programs are 100% self-supporting and activities are offered for all ages. The department does a lot to support current trends such as sustainability. We work with the Arts Guild and other community organizations to plan special events. Arts used to be part of the Recreation Commission but is now its own entity.

      Statistics from the previous year were reviewed. The new software system is working much better for online registrations. There is a waiting list for before and after school child care. Minimum wage makes it difficult to attract staff. Other towns pay $15/hour. We pay minimum wage. Mandated increases to minimum wage will impact our budget. We hire 40-50 youth annually. We try to focus on what we do well. Our Basketball program is the largest in the region.

      The department has maintained a healthy fund balance which is eroding with the cost of infrastructure maintenance. We generated $322,153 in revenue. Facility rentals, beach passes and program fees are the sources of revenue. These are impacted by weather and as such are unpredictable. The department strives to keep up with current trends and to provide services and programs that are affordable and high quality. The Parks & Recreation Facebook page has 1493 followers.

      In FY 17/18, the Recreation department operated on a $444,114 budget while only utilizing $101,090 in taxes to operate. The return on investment (ROI) is 439% with an average cost per median household of $20.51 – less than a movie ticket. The revenue fund pays for the Director’s salary and a subsidy for lifeguard payroll. It also covers supplies, equipment, utilities, repairs and maintenance. We are way below the national average for operating expenditure per capita. Coventry also falls short of meeting the median salary for the Recreation Director position compared to other similar towns, according to a salary study conducted by CCM. We are also below the national median for staffing based on population density. The national median is 8; Coventry is 2.
An overview of items for the FY 19/20 proposed budget was reviewed. It includes repairs to the Community Center roof, gutters, doors and siding, painting, power washing, and the entrance sign. Creaser Park is showing some wear and tear. We plan to re-roof the pavilion, and power wash it and the cabin exteriors. Exterior wood is rotting on some of the cabins. John Elsesser noted that we have done some modest tree removal over the years to let some sunlight in where the buildings are. They are being used for storage. The Scouts use one of them. The other building that we used to rent out for parties is unusable right now – the floor is too damp. The Community Gardens is using one building for meeting space. We are looking at moving things around to focus on the best buildings first.

Parks/facilities future needs include: gates to control access to Patriots Park, repairs to the Lisicke Beach shed where equipment is stored, the band shell and boathouses, a general lack of storage space, the community center floor and the Mill Brook Place roof. The playscape is showing signs of aging and we can’t get parts for it because it is too old. Replacement of one this size would be $50,000-$70,000. John Elsesser noted that there might be a structural problem with rotten beams that are affecting the community center floor. It was originally meant to be a summer structure and is subject to frost heaves. We are looking at doing a study for a new community center down the road. In the meantime, we keep plugging along with what we have.

Upcoming programs/future plans: A Youth Sports Summit on April 10th, The Laidlaw Park 25th anniversary celebration, disc golf at Creaser Park, a softball field study report, and collaboration with the Coventry Senior Center for joint programming. The Parks and Recreation summer brochure will now include Senior Center programs. Future concerns include: minimum wage increases, facility expenses, growth of the Recreation Daze program, and replacing the aging playscape. An increase in minimum wage to $15 would be $40,000.

Marie Gallo-Hall said that a lot of time people think of Parks and Recreation as something just for kids, but we offer services across all demographics. We serve everyone. We can only raise our fees so much before we start losing the people we are trying to serve. We really need the town to help.

Matthew O’Brien asked if anybody is using the pickle ball courts. Wendy replied yes. The high school court was down for a while for repairs. John said those have been repaired and there is a waiting list. Wendy said that the Patriots Park court was meant to be for kids. We might have to put some fencing up for protection. Caterina said we are doing some free instructional clinics over the summer. Wendy said if anyone wants to play on their own we have equipment we can lend out.

Mike Sobol said there has been a lot of talk about dog parks. He asked if it is on their long-term plan. Wendy replied that a true dog park is a closed in area where people can let their dogs run. It would be great to have one, but it is less needed in a rural area than an urban one. At this point we don’t see a real drive for it. Unless people are willing to take it into their own hands it won’t be successful. The successful ones are usually run by grass roots organizations. Usually the town’s only role is to provide space. John noted that it wouldn’t be at Creaser Park due to the emergence of bobolinks, which are a protected species. Wendy said an expert at CT DEEP is going to come out and see if we have them. Off-leash dogs need to be in a fenced-in area. Marie said that dog bites are a big liability and we don’t want the Town to be at-risk because of off-leash dogs. Mike
said we have a lot of open space in town. Wendy said that several people have come in and asked about a dog park. John said there are a lot of people interested in a skateboarding park too. Mike said he hears a lot of people talk. Wendy said we are not ruling it out.

John said we continue to have issues with Mill Brook Place — it is typical when you have a new facility come on line. This winter we had several instances where snow slid off the roof near the entrance, and a chunk of ice hit the heating system. We can build an enclosure for the heating system but we need some sort of cover over the door.

2) **Human Services Department:**

Courtney Chan, Human Services Administrator; Sneha Patidar, Youth Services Coordinator; and Brenda Bennett, Senior Center Coordinator, were present to discuss the Human Services Department’s proposed budget. Courtney Chan gave an overview of the department’s social service initiatives. Heating assistance is busy this time of year. Assistance has been provided to 79 households as of this date. The season ends April 1. The department has also processed some Clergy Fuel Fund emergencies — there have been 16 since October at a cost of $4714. We have seen a huge uptick in the need for electricity assistance. We are seeing more electricity shut offs this year than in the past. Clients used to be able to request budget plans on their own. Now Eversource customer service is outsourcing this work directly to the municipal social workers. We think there is not enough information going out to people. When they call 211 they are getting pushed back to towns. Rates are going up. One call to Eversource can take 10-45 minutes for our staff. We helped 20 households since last fall with $6,842 out of the special needs fund.

The Salvation Army bell ringing program raised $5678 this year. We did less bell ringing. A lot of stores are trying to be fair to those who are selling and cut back our time slots. Carolyn Arbolos noted that a lot of people don’t know what this is anymore. There is no signage. Courtney replied that we are looking to get some new signs made. A meeting is coming up with our representative — they are seeing a decline across the country for the bell ringing program. 90% of the funds come back to Coventry which is not typical. Matthew O’Brien said that the Tolland volunteers have vests which helps with recognition. Courtney said that Highland Park Market has been very generous to allow us to store our bell ringing materials there. We would love to find a volunteer coordinator.

Other regular programs include the Holiday program, which served Thanksgiving meals to 46 families and 55 meals to Orchard Hills residents. The Christmas program served 65 family meals and 56 Orchard Hills meals. The numbers are about the same every year as people move in and out. Our office is really busy with Eversource clients and clients in crisis. We are a small staff. Case management is on the rise. We do a lot of collaborative work with the Senior Center and the Police Department. The Food Bank is still going strong. We are thankful that the Recreation Department lends us the space at the community center for the Food Bank, which has expanded beyond the closet space where we used to operate. Clients can go in the room and personally shop which has been beneficial.

Sneha Patidar gave an overview of the Youth Services program. She has been on staff for two months. We are evaluating to see how we can improve programs. We are looking to revamp the Youth Job Bank — we got lots of calls for shoveling this winter and just didn’t have the kids to do it. We are also working with Recreation to re-evaluate the summer
camp scholarship form. We are working with social workers at both elementary schools on the mentoring program. We had to suspend the program at the elementary school due to the UConn rowing team’s defection. We are working on a stay at home safety program for students ages 8-13 that will focus on safety when they are home alone. We are offering two sessions this spring. We are working with a 4th grade teacher and the Senior Center to come up with a pen pal program. Sneha went to a training last month about social media presence. There are a lot of apps that students are using now that parents don’t know about. We are working on training session to keep parents informed. Sneha is meeting with social workers at the schools to see what the needs are. The Juvenile Review Board is a large issue with new mandates. We are working with a regional coordinator to plan for them. Starting in July, indecent and immoral cases will come to us and next year, runaway cases will also come to us. Truancy cases will not come to the Juvenile Review Board. This will definitely change what we are doing going forward. Sneha met with Police Chief Palmer and Officer Hicks last week to prepare.

Brenda Bennett gave an overview of the Senior Center. She has been coordinator for a year now. A lot has happened but she feels like she is settled in and has a routine. She has evaluated programs that have run successfully and those that have not. We continually look at current offerings, with a focus on how to sustain an active lifestyle for our adults. We are trying to get the word out that it’s not just a Senior Center, it’s an active adult center. We are working on the development of programs to entice people to come, plus managing the day to day operations. We were fortunate to get a part time person which has been a big help, and fortunate to be able to increase her hours from 13 a week to 19. Working with Parks and Recreation and the Library to bring programs in really takes a lot of planning and evaluation. John Elsesser noted that the increase in hours from 13 to 19 is temporary for the rest of fiscal year, made up of salary savings from departing staff. Courtney said one of the things we’ve noticed is that Brenda is seeing an uptick of crisis cases at the Senior Center. This takes time away from programming as they work to meet those needs. Brenda said some of the things we are doing now are renters rebate and winter energy assistance. It is great for some of the seniors not to have to travel to another building. The luncheons are very successful but it is a long busy day. Brenda provided statistics on program costs and attendance. She said we are excited about the publication of the 06238 programs brochure in collaboration with Parks & Recreation. She is a little concerned about having enough space if participation increases. Courtney said we also implemented a scan card tracking system which will help with attendance statistics.

Matthew O’Brien asked how you are advertising your services. Courtney replied that we are revamping the brochure. It will be in offices and will go around to area businesses that accept them. We also have the website and Facebook pages. John noted that they also do direct mailings. We try to cross share on Facebook too as the audiences are different. Courtney said that 211 also has our information.

John said that the overall Human Services budget is down slightly because of changes. We are picking up the 6 hours to stay in the budget and added $200 to program costs. We are exploring some options for summer meals which weren’t as popular last year. Matthew asked if we are using student interns. John replied we have had college interns in the past - some have been great and others not so much. Courtney said we were working with Eastern – but they changed their standards and we weren’t as pleased. We are looking at other colleges. It is a lot of work taking on an intern. Matthew asked if high school students are involved. Courtney replied sometimes - it is sensitive what they can do due to confidentiality concerns. High school students primarily work in youth.
services. The transitional vocational program runs our Food Bank. That has been phenomenal. The students stock the shelves, track expiration dates and help with the holiday programs.

3) Registrars of Voters:
Registrars Marge Roach and Pam Sewell were present to discuss the Registrars of Voters budget. Inge Pope, Deputy Registrar, was also present. Amanda Backhaus distributed a report showing shifts in hours for this year and the two prior years (attached to minutes).

Marge Roach shared a copy of the law that was passed in 2015 making it mandatory that all registrars become certified within two years. She took the training and passed and is qualified to be a registrar. Pam has started the training process but is not yet certified. Mike Sobol asked what happens if the training is not completed by November. John Elsesser replied that is an enforcement issue for the Secretary of State. Marge provided upcoming exam dates. She said that some have been cancelled because they haven’t gotten the number of people they need. She said that once you are certified there are certain things you have to do to maintain your certification. You also must attend the annual convention. Lisa asked if the certification expires. Pam Sewell said finding moderators is a big problem. Joan Lewis said our town committee did a big effort to find people to go. As technology changes people are more reluctant to do it. Pam said nobody wants to run the machines. John said that the Registrars produce the lists, make sure the machines are set up, the ballots are available, and work with the Town Clerk’s office to prepare legal advertising. There is a lot of work prior to the elections.

Joan Lewis said one of the questions that has been brought to the Town Council is why do you need two people in the office on a general basis. Marge replied that we don’t. If you look back over the years you will see it has been an ongoing problem. She shared a letter written by John Elsesser in 2013 regarding violation of Town policies. The department is always over budget requiring a supplemental appropriation. Almost every year she asks why this is being allowed. Now for the first time she has made more money than Pam or Inge and they are upset.

Mike Sobol said he thinks one of the bigger concerns the Council has – is that all of our agencies are responsible for staying within budget. How does the Registrars’ office stay accountable to working within a budget? Marge said she thinks the whole department has changed a great deal. Computers came along and things changed. We have to change passwords almost every 30 days. She thinks the Councils in most towns don’t realize what the Registrars do. In 2018 she ran the office, did all the tasks with no help from Pam or Inge. She met the Town crew to set up election equipment and the day after to take it down. She went to the convention all 3 days – the others didn’t go to all 3 days. They didn’t go to the October convention at all. Mike said that there are a lot of things that are required for the job - set up, training, etc. What do you do on a weekly basis? Pam replied adding people and taking them off (the voter lists). Joan asked where the lists come from. Pam replied some come from the town clerk, some come from DMV. Carolyn said if the information is available online, wouldn’t it be easier to access? Pam replied that it isn’t always easier or quicker. You still have to enter the data. It is not much different if it comes on a piece of paper or on a computer. Marge showed a document from 2018 where we added 89 people and removed almost 200 people in one month. You have to document it and take them off the card. It is not a simple process – there are 4 steps on each card. It is a lot of activity, but still, one person can do it - it doesn’t take two people. Mike said whether it is one or two people, how are you monitoring your hours to stay
within budget? Carolyn said when calculating hours – it should be 1352 per year. Pam said you can’t do it that way because of elections. Carolyn said it goes back to Mike’s question about what do you do to manage to the budget. Amanda Backhaus said the question is how are you going to monitor, regardless of elections, to stay within budget? Mike said that the elections and conferences and referendums are set, so how do you make adjustments? Pam said we also have to be there to test the machines. Inge said she was the Registrar for many years. The work goes faster when two people are there. Mike said our concern is that there is a budget. How are you making adjustments to stay within that?

Matthew O’Brien said it seems like the duties are required. John Elsesser said he does not have authority over the personnel but he does have authority over the budget. They can be personally liable. There are times when two people are needed but there are other times when things are slow and they could go to one person. We could check with other towns to see how long it takes to process one card. Joan said we aren’t going to solve the problem but we are going to be looking at your budget and probably reducing the line. Marge said if you look at Dorothy’s time (Dorothy Grady) you will see she doesn’t always work. Joan said she would ask the Registrars to go back and see if there are ways to be more efficient. It seems to be an ongoing problem and it doesn’t seem to happen with other departments.

4) Budget discussion:
The Council reviewed other areas of the budget that have not yet been discussed. Amanda Backhaus said we looked at revenue and believe we can increase it by $20,000 for building permits.

Joan said there were a few things that had been talked about. Matthew requested a recap of Thursday’s meeting as he was unable to attend. John shared a list of items agreed by consensus so far, but not yet voted on. Joan noted that Matt was asking about police overtime and Mike and Matt brought up the school truck. We could push the truck back a year and the school could do what they want – including paying for it out of surplus. John shared an article on debt service and how long term rates are dropping. Amanda said we estimated debt service on the school projects at 3% and we talked about maybe moving some of the CNG payments to debt service rather than CNREF. Amanda is not ready with those figures yet.

Joan said she was hoping to get all of the issues out with any remaining questions tonight. Mike Sobol said he would like to see the school truck pulled. John said we could work to wherever the Council’s target is - but if you wanted to get to the point where the increase is only as a result of the State, we are there. Matthew said he wants to see grand list figures with supplemental motor vehicles. Joan said she has a target in mind. She would like to get to a .5 increase, which requires a lot. She would like to get beyond what the State has imposed on us. Mike said he thinks .5 is a step in the right direction.

Further discussion ensued regarding cuts to the Registrar of Voters budget. Mike said there is no accountability so it doesn’t matter what the number is. The Council agreed to make additional cuts to this budget.

Joan said we are getting the services to increase Wetlands. Could we push back the start date to reduce that cost? John replied that it beats where we are. That would save $8750. Matthew said in the police overtime budget it seemed like we were missing two people
for much of the year. Amanda replied that she did a five year look back. Overall we are averaging 89. The budget is 90. There are a lot of variables. Matthew said he would look at a time they would normally work. John said we think we gave you what we can give you. We had one person out with a long term injury. The Chief made the statement that no increase is actually a reduction given the change in salaries.

Matthew said he had asked about lake invasive treatment budgeting. How much did the State kick in? John replied that we don’t have treatment costs for fanwort. We have enough for the June Hydrilla treatment. Eric (Trott) has a call with CT DEEP on Wednesday. Last year the State covered about 60% but this year we think it’s going to be flipped. We think there is a high probability that we will get funding, but there is a new commissioner who may have other priorities. We feel comfortable that we can cover this year’s treatment but we must also cover next June out of this budget. If we get shorted, we might not be able to cover fanwort treatment. We think if anything this is already a conservative budget and he wouldn’t cut it.

Lisa Conant asked about urban forestry. Joan said that is new. She hates to think about cutting, but can we make reductions here? John replied that we have a couple of options. If we go to capital we have $30,000 for urban forestry stewardship. Basically this is tree cutting. You could look at changing open space stewardship to tree removal. Joan said she thinks we should do some open space stewardship - they are trying to get that committee going. If we have emergency tree removal needs, we could come back. Amanda suggested taking $5,000 from urban forestry and $5,000 from open space. Under Revaluation, Amanda said that we could cut back on some printing. John said we could take $5,000 out. It would delay having all of our maps done. Amanda said she could have the Assessor work harder on reducing that amount.

Joan said we took $40,000 from the Board of Education for the insurance savings. John said we had talked about having them absorb some of the building maintenance. Mike noted that you can make adjustments to the Board budget but you can’t tell them where to cut. Joan said she thinks with personnel movement we could take $25,000 for turnover. John said school computers were originally in the operating budget but they weren’t getting them so it was moved to capital. The core systems are in capital with the Board. We need to begin to replace the network infrastructure, including the backup server at the Police Department. The Council agreed to hold on this.

Carolyn asked if we can wait to see the dollar amount on the bond. John said we still don’t know where the State is headed on teacher pension. He asked if everyone agrees on a .5 increase as a goal. Consensus was yes, that this is a good starting point. It was agreed that the Council will make final decisions at their regular meeting on Monday rather than holding a special budget meeting. John noted that a DPW truck requires $20,000 in unanticipated repairs and we may need an appropriation. The dealer is asking for a courtesy honor on the warranty as we are only 30 days past. Also on the middle school athletic field drainage, there is a discount to do both fields at once and the vendor can get it done in April. Todd (Penney) is going to design the sidewalk project. At the next Finance meeting we will also look to see if there are opportunities to build the CNREF account. We also have a lot of engineering expenses coming up for the South Street, Swamp Road, and Hop River Road Bridge projects.
3. Adjournment:
Motion #18/19-241: The meeting was adjourned at 9:55 PM on a motion by Matthew O’Brien, seconded by Carolyn Arabolos and unanimously approved.

Respectfully submitted,

Laura Stone
Town Council Clerk

Note: These minutes are not official until acted upon by the Town Council at its next regular meeting. Those meeting minutes will reflect approval or changes to these minutes.
Coventry Parks and Recreation
"We foster active lifestyles, social well-being and environmental stewardship"

Parks
- Patriots Park
- Miller Richardson Park
- Laidlaw Park
- Lisette Beach
- Creasey Park
- Mill Brook Park
- NEW Mill Brook Place

Although we don't directly supervise maintenance operations— we manage the day to day operations of the parks and provide input into planning

This past year saw enormous growth in activity at the New Mill Brook Place
Based on 2019 figures
Per capita based on population of 12,250

We have maintained a Healthy fund balance which is eroding with cost of infrastructure maintenance

In FY17/18, the Recreation division operated a $444,114 budget while only utilizing $101,090 in taxes to operate. The Return on Investment (ROI) is 439% or, in other words, for every dollar of taxpayer money the town receives back $4.39 in services & programs. The Average Cost per Median Household is $20.51
We hire about 40-50 local youth every year

Community Center: $13,850
$4,500 for exterior power wash & painting
$4,200 for exterior paint - boathouses
$2,500 pavilion
$650 lodge entrance
$2,000 lodge interior

Creaser Power washing 3 cabins & paint exteriors
$3,750
Pavilion - Power wash $700,
Stain $1,750
Re-roof $8,400

Patriots Park entrances - gates to control access
Lisicke Beach shed - stores equipment
Band shell
Boat houses - garage doors
Lack of storage space
Community Center Floor
Mill Brook Place Roof