MINUTES
COVENTRY TOWN COUNCIL
APRIL 6, 2020
TOWN HALL ANNEX & VIRTUAL
7:30 p.m.

1. Call To Order, Roll Call:
The meeting was called to order by Blanchard at 7:30 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

2. Pledge Of Allegiance:
Council members and Staff stood to recite the pledge.

3. Audience Of Citizens:
(30minutes – 5 minutes maximum per citizen)

Elsesser read the following comments into the record that were received via email:

Jen Beausoleil, 1040 Cedar Swamp Road – Wrote in about the town budget hearing and voting process and how that could be affected by executive order. Her statement is attached.

4. Acceptance Of Minutes:
March 16, 2020
Motion: 1 move to accept the minutes of the March 16, 2020 meeting.

By: O’Brien, Sr. Seconded: Thomas

With the following corrections:
• Page 1, heading – change the date to “March 16, 2020.”
• Page 1 – add “Hassett” to “Julia”.
• Page 3, item 6.A. – change “micro grid’ to “microgrid”.
• Page 3, item 6.B. – change “Sonia” to “Sonya” throughout and add “Maher” after the first instance.
• Page 3, item 6.B., last paragraph, fourth sentence – change to “Elsesser stated the Governor’s office has sent press releases.”.
• Page 5, second bullet – change “Venders” to “Vendors”.
• Page 5, item 6.F.3., bullet four – add “that” before “responded”.
• Page 5, item 6.F.3, paragraph – change “STEEP” to “STEAP”.
• Page 6, item 6.F.4., title – add “I” in front of “PP”.
• Page 7, second paragraph, sixth sentence – add “are” before “little”.
• Page 7, fourth paragraph, fourth sentence – remove “of” and add “our” after “educating”.
• Page 8, second paragraph, third sentence – add a “,” after “schools”.
• Page 8, second paragraph, fifth sentence – change the second “are” to “of”.
• Page 8, last paragraph, fifth sentence – change “is” to “are”.
• Page 9, second paragraph, ninth sentence – change “indicating” to “indication”.
• Page 9, third paragraph, first sentence – remove the space between “East Conn”.
• Page 9, fourth paragraph, sixth sentence – change “improperly” to “properly”.
• Page 9, fourth paragraph, fifteenth sentence – change “seemed” to “seems”.
• Page 10, second paragraph, last line – remove “56”.
• Page 11, fifth paragraph, seventh sentence – add a “-“ between “district wide”.
• Page 11, fifth paragraph, eighth sentence – change “If” to “It”.

Voting:
For: Hand, Conant, Blanchard, O’Brien, Sr., O’Brien, Jr., Thomas, Williams
Against: None
Abstain: None

March 23, 2020
Motion: I move to accept the minutes of the March 23, 2020 meeting.

By: O’Brien, Jr. Seconded: Hand

With the following corrections:
• Page 2, third paragraph, third sentence – remove the second “so”.
• Page 3, first paragraph, twenty-first sentence – change “provides” to “provide”.
• Page 3, first paragraph, twenty-second sentence – change “year” to “years”.
• Page 3, item 1, first paragraph, third sentence – change the first “to” to “a”.
• Page 4, tenth sentence – add “and have been fully staffed” after “officers”.
• Page 5, first paragraph – eighth sentence – add “be” before “because”.

Voting:
For: Hand, Conant, Blanchard, O’Brien, Sr., O’Brien, Jr., Thomas, Williams
Against: None
Abstain: None

5. Consent Agenda:
All items listed with an asterisk (*) will be acted on by one motion. There will be no separate discussion on these items unless a Council members so requests, in which case, the item will be removed from the consent agenda and considered in its normal sequence on the agenda.
Motion: I move to accept the Consent Agenda.

By: O’Brien, Sr. Seconded: Hand
Voting:
For: O’Brien, Sr., O’Brien, Jr., Hand, Blanchard, Conant, Thomas, Williams
Against: None
Abstain: None

6. **Reports:**
6.A. Council Chairwoman: Julie A. Blanchard
Blanchard mentioned the daily executive orders being issued from the Governor’s office creates the issue of how and when to approach determining the Town budget while having citizens being aware of the budget and the process for adoption this year. The Library and BOE have not realized any savings as yet while being shut down.

Blanchard reported Elsesser and others have received comment from one citizen who is concerned 5G is coming to town. That is not what is happening. Fiber is being laid between the schools, DPW, and the fire stations in order for these facilities to share the internet from Town Hall. Coventry would have no roll in 5G as this is under the jurisdiction of the CT Siting Council. The dark fiber will replace Charter Spectrum fiber that is on telephone poles and was installed 15 years ago. Elsesser will respond to the citizen.

6.B. Council Members:
O’Brien, Sr. reported on the microgrid/cogeneration meeting. A company was there that is interested in working with the group to bid for the infrastructure. This remains in the preliminary stage. The intent is for the number to be as similar or lower than what we have been paying. Some people at the meeting stated this was the first time they are hearing this. The Town wants to build in a calculation for lost service; the company pushed back on such a stipulation. PURA has agreed to a technical review regarding a master meter.

Conant reiterated for the public that if people are in need, the Human Services office is ready and willing to help. This period is getting bad economically for a lot of folks. There are resources available.

Hand mentioned some signage he has seen in the fencing of the schools; this is lifting people’s feelings. Hand thanks those in the community for creating the signs.

6.C. *Finance Committee: Matthew O’Brien, Sr., Chairperson*

6.D. *Steering Committee: Matthew O’Brien, Jr., Chairperson*


6.F. **Town Manager – John A. Elsesser**
6.F.1. Projects Update
- The appraisal work for the Swamp Road intersection is 1.5 months overdue although it is expected this week. The signal design is underway.
- The Folly Lane bridge bid was put out this week. We anticipate the work taking place from May until December of this year.
- Cumberland Farms has stopped work. The inside work started and people felt too many people were working too closely together. A June opening is projected.
• The LOTCIP grant that was due next week for Swamp Road and South Street has been extended through June 22, 2020.
• The softball field pricing is in and sent to the committee. A spreadsheet was prepared to compare the pricing.
• The WAN rack was installed for the connections to the underground fiber.
• The CHS parking lot is out to bid. An announcement from the Governor is expected about schools. There is talk about colleges reopening first. If schools remain closed for the school year, the project can be started sooner.
• Human Services is in need of food. Drop off is available 24 hours a day in the lower vestibule of Town Hall. O’Brien, Sr. asked if money can be contributed online? Elsesser replied that option is not available at this time. Human Services can take gift cards. Backhaus added checks can be sent via mail. There is information on the types of items being sought on the Town website and Facebook page. Human Services was helping eight families; that number has grown to twenty-two families. United Way has reached out and has given out checks for a certain number of people in town. Human Services is also looking for families that meet the guidelines.
• An order came from the Governor’s office to reduce the interest rate to 3% for taxes that were billed in April. The period covered is March 10 – July 1, 2020. The other option is to defer payment of tax bills. From July until October we could be at a zero cash flow. The order will be reviewed by the Finance subcommittee next Monday. Coventry must let the State know the option it has chosen by April 24, 2020; this can be one or both options. Banks do have to pay out escrowed money for taxes. Forty-four percent of homes have mortgages. Mortgage payments can be deferred. Bonded summer projects may have trouble being paid for. Blanchard stated the State is telling towns to pay all these people and to forgive interest. Elsesser stated towns are now being asked to give people a break as they have of banks and insurance companies. The State is going to burn through their cash too.

6.F.2. Eversource: Tree Trimming & ROW Notification
Elsesser has received notice that Eversource will be doing two projects in town. Most of the work will be north of the lake. They will trim trees or take down dead trees. High power lines through Main Street and Swamp Road will have wooden poles replaced with metal ones. There is not a lot of impact to the town. Much of the sections are in swampy, backwoods areas.

6.F.3. CFSIC Update
This is about crumbling foundations. This is on hold right now. The bond money has all been committed. There are applications for repairs on 69 homes that will cost $3.89 million. $2.36 million has already paid out. Some people went out before this money was available and they were able to get reimbursed.

6.F.4. Fiber Conduit Toward DPW Facility
Elsesser reported 310’ – 350’ has been run underground so far. They are working near the intersection of Fern Road and Main Street. A sketch of the WAN rack was included in the packet. A switch and splitter will be needed.

6.F.5. Update: Plan Of Conservation & Development
The PZC is going to try holding a Zoom meeting for the public hearing on the matter on April 26, 2020. We could lose all state grants if we delay adopting the updated POCD. There have been four to five forums with public input.

We have gone out to bid for Caprilands.

6.F.6. Spring Town Newsletter Considerations
O’Brien, Sr. suggests delaying the publishing of the newsletter in order to incorporate the proposed budget. Elsesser added this means getting the newsletter out more quickly than the normal 2-3 weeks it takes to put together the newsletter, send it to the printer, and getting it in the mail. An explanation of the budget voting process for this year can be explained in the publication when the Council has a more concrete plan for the process. This will allow the news to be widespread to the public. Additionally, after the process is explained we can do the budget in brief online and/or through e-blast. O’Brien, Sr. suggested contacting newspapers to run an article to include where people can look to view the budget. Thomas feels where to look to view the budget online needs to be very prominent to prevent people from having the search for its location on the website.

7. Unfinished Business:
7.A. 19/20-51: FY20/2021 Budget
A budget process memo was mailed to the Council members.

O’Brien, Sr. asked if we can hold an electronic Town Hall meeting. Elsesser responded we can do a presentation but not a vote. There are multiple ways for Elsesser to present the budget. If the Council approves the process next Monday, Elsesser can do a recorded presentation on Thursday. The Council felt three days was enough time to let people know where to see the budget. Citizens can formulate and submit questions and comments. Based on feedback, the Council’s budget can actually change. Thomas noted the usual process is for the Council to vote on the budget, it goes to Town Meeting, and then to referendum with no changes permitted. So the videotaped presentation in lieu of Town Meeting allows us to make changes? Elsesser indicated yes. The Governor is trying to promote civic involvement in the process even in this unique time. O’Brien, Sr. is concerned we don’t know how much money will be coming in since an executive order states said you shall set the mil rate. The tax bills would be generated and then deferred. It is disturbing to set a mil rate without knowing the revenues. This year we won’t have any clue. We’d have to have the taxpayers make up the difference. Or go to a negative revenue was Elsesser’s comment. Elsesser has had many conversations with Rich Roberts about this. It takes three weeks to generate and mail the tax bills. You will still bill for the taxes and then defer the due date.

Thomas is comfortable with the Town Manager’s recommendation of June 1, 2020 as are Conant, Hand, and Williams.

The Council could make changes after the questions and comments are received and then vote on the final budget all in one meeting. Williams suggested we could schedule another Council meeting for another day or extend the vote to the next regular meeting. This would give us another option. O’Brien, Jr. likes the idea of having a backup plan in place that gives the Council more time for a final vote.
Elsesser stated if the Council does adopt the resolution it does not mean you can’t make changes.

**Motion:** I move the Council adopt

**RESOLUTION**

**TOWN OF COVENTRY**

**TOWN COUNCIL**

**RESOLUTION PERTAINING TO A MODIFIED CALENDAR FOR**

**THE FY 2020-2021 ANNUAL OPERATING BUDGETS AND**

**NECESSARY ANNUAL TOWN MEETING ACTIONS AUTHORIZED**

**BY EXECUTIVE ORDERS 2020-7B, 7C AND 7I**

**WHEREAS,** on March 10, 2020, the Governor of the State of Connecticut (“Governor”) declared a public health emergency and civil preparedness emergency for the State of Connecticut, pursuant to Connecticut General Statutes Sections 19a-131 and 28-9, in response to the global pandemic of COVID-19 disease associated with a novel coronavirus that is currently affecting multiple countries and states; and

**WHEREAS,** on March 13, 2020, the President of the United States (“President”) declared a national emergency to combat the coronavirus that is currently infecting the population of the United States; and

**WHEREAS,** on March 13, 2020, the Town Manager of the Town of Coventry (“Town Manager”) declared a local state of public health emergency and civil preparedness emergency to ensure that local officials and the Town Manager have all the authorities necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19 disease and to protect the public safety of the Town of Coventry; and

**WHEREAS,** the effects of the transmission of COVID-19 has resulted in the spread of infections in the Town of Coventry, in Connecticut and throughout the country, as well as resulting in shortages of personal protective equipment and other supplies that could jeopardize public safety and civil preparedness; and

**WHEREAS,** in response to the issuance of declarations of a public health emergency and civil preparedness emergency by the Governor, he has issued a series of Executive Orders setting forth the law governing the conduct of the business of state and municipal government during the period of the emergency; and
WHEREAS, on March 14, 2020, the Governor issued Executive Order No. 7B ("EO 7B"), paragraph 1 of which suspends all statutes, charter provisions, ordinances and regulations mandating open meetings in order "...to permit any public agency to meet and take such actions authorized by the law without permitting or requiring in-person, public access to such meetings, and to hold such meetings or proceedings remotely by conference call, videoconference or other technology" ("Electronic Meetings"); and

WHEREAS, on March 15, 2020 the Governor issued Executive Order No. 7C ("EO 7C"), paragraph 5 of which extended "all budget deadlines for the preparation of the municipal budget" for the FY 2020-2021 "that falls on any date prior to and including May 15, 2020 are extended by thirty (30) days"; and

WHEREAS, the Coventry Charter confers the legislative power of the Town of Coventry in the Town Council, for all matters except those powers specifically reserved for the Town Meeting; and

WHEREAS, EO 7C permits the legislative body to "alter or modify the schedules and deadlines pertaining to the preparation and submission of a proposed budget and the deliberation or actions on said budget" including any required public hearing(s), publication, referendum or final budget adoption: and,

WHEREAS, EO 7C postpones all submission dates as set forth in the Coventry Charter until such time as the legislative body approves said modified schedule and deadline consistent with the thirty (30) day extension; and,

WHEREAS, on March 21, 2020, the Governor issued Executive Order No. 7I ("EO 7I"), paragraph 13 of which dispenses with any in-person voting requirements, including referenda and town meetings requiring in-person votes, for purposes of adopting 2020-2021 fiscal year municipal budgets and setting the mill rate; in effect conferring final responsibility on the Town Council to adopt a budget which would otherwise be allocated by the Charter to the Automatic Referendum; and then set a mil rate.

WHEREAS, EOs 7C and 7I do not alter or modify the control of line-items that fall squarely within the authority of the Board of Education budget and, thus, the Board of Education should comply with all submission requirements pertaining to budget deadlines adopted by the municipality, except as modified by this Resolution; and,
NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT HEREBY RESOLVED by the Town of Coventry Town Council pursuant to paragraph 5 of Executive Order 7C, the legislative body of the Town of Coventry hereby sets forth the following modified schedule, process, and deadlines for the submission, deliberation and final action on the Town Budget for FY 2020-2021, which meetings shall be conducted in accordance with the requirements noticed in accordance with EO 7B ¶1.

1. The Town Manager has forwarded a proposed FY 2021 Town of Coventry Budget and Board of Education Budget, Capital Budget and Debt Service Budget (the Annual Budget) consistent with the Coventry Charter (Charter) to the Town Council and has made said proposed budgets available for public inspection on the Town’s website and held a public hearing on said proposal on March 12, 2020.

2. The Town Council shall adopt a proposed Annual Budget on or about May 18th and then shall require the Town Manager to hold a Public Presentation by means of an Electronic Meeting no later than May 21st. The Town Council shall accept written public comment via email and hard copy documentation through and including May 29, 2020 from persons eligible to vote on the town budget and who must include their name and address.

3. The Town Council shall consider the input received and shall adopt the FY 2021 Annual Budget as may be amended based upon input received. The Town Council shall consider and approve as separate resolutions for the Town Government Budget, the Board of Education Budget, the Capital Budget, Debt Service budget and COVRAA service rates. They shall submit the budget to the Town Clerk in accordance with the Charter on or about June 1, 2020 and shall cause said final Annual Budget to be available for public inspection on the Town’s website no later than June 5, 2020. The adoption of said resolutions shall be deemed final approval of the Annual Budget.

4. The Town Council shall also consider and adopt other resolutions typically considered at the annual meeting including, entering into agreement for Town aid for Roads funds, adoption of the Capital Improvement Plan, authorization to submit LOCIP grants, borrowing funds in anticipation of taxes, and correcting mathematical errors.

5. The Town Council shall set the mil rate related to the FY 2021 budget on or about June 1, 2020.

6. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, all public hearings and meetings shall adhere to rules, protocols set for Electronic Meetings, including the use of online or
telephonic conferencing, and that no in-person meetings shall be held in consideration of this process.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, in the event the previously declared emergency is resolved or declarations prohibiting assembly of groups of persons are lifted on or prior to May 4, 2020, the Town Council shall act to reinstate the usual process of a referendum regarding the proposed FY 2021 budget starting at the Special budget meeting stage, as outlined in the Town Charter, as if an adjourned Town meeting vote had been defeated.

By: Thomas  Seconded: Hand

Voting:  
For: O’Brien, Sr., O’Brien, Jr., Hand, Blanchard, Conant, Thomas, Williams  
Against: None  
Abstain: None

8. **New Business:**

8.A. **19/20-57: Consideration/Possible Action: FY 19/20 Budget Transfers**
Backhaus has one transfer request that is time sensitive. This includes using training money budgeted for Backhaus and Elsesser to be used for the UCONN Intern program.

**Motion:** I move the Council approve the budget transfer request of $16,500 to Town Manager Other account.

By: O’Brien, Sr.  Seconded: Thomas

Discussion: Elsesser feels any one of the five candidates in the program would be good. Elsesser will focus on one having critical, essential skills or experience, such as small business restarts.

Voting:  
For: O’Brien, Sr., O’Brien, Jr., Hand, Blanchard, Conant, Thomas, Williams  
Against: None  
Abstain: None

8.B. **19/20-58: Consideration/Possible Action: Call To Town Meeting For Purchase Of Portion Of Stewart Property On Knollwood Drive For Open Space And Future DPW Use (Not Ready For Action)**

8.C. **19/20-59: Consideration/Possible Action: Acceptance Of Driveway Easement Over Pine Knoll Drive Road Stub For Residential Purposes**
**Motion:** I move the Council approve the request of Richard Von Hirschberg to seek a driveway easement for residential purposes over the Pine Knoll Drive road stub.
Reason for the decision: The easement will provide a more prudent access to Von Hirschberg property and the parcel directly abuts the road stub, pursuant to CT General Statutes 8-24.

By: O’Brien, Sr. Seconded: Hand

Voting:
For: O’Brien, Sr., O’Brien, Jr., Hand, Blanchard, Conant, Thomas, Williams
Against: None
Abstain: None

8.D. 19/20-60: Update From CHS Walls Committee And Consideration/Possible Action On Request For Appropriation From Council’s 1.5% Fund To Strengthen Exterior Wall Of Auditorium And Band Room

Blanchard explained that Ed, Chairperson of the CHS Wall Committee, has an update for the Council.

A summary of the issue is that reinforcing across many walls in the building was incorrectly installed. The scan results were verified through destructive testing. Loads should be decreased as much as possible while undergoing additional testing. A report included from the engineer noted the deficiencies found wall by wall. The committee decided to go through each wall and take the time to figure out the approach to take of reinforcing each wall to achieve the best result. The most critical locations are the auditorium and band room. These have the tallest walls and the rooms are likely to have high occupancy. O’Brien, Sr. confirmed with the CHS Chairperson there is no real danger to people in the meantime. This is a code concern. In the auditorium horizontal beams will carry the load and be attached to the wall. Demolition can be avoided in the area to attach to the column. The same approach is proposed for the band room although the beam would be above the ceiling tiles.

O’Brien, Sr. is appreciative of the time the Committee has taken over the years to look at the problem and be creative about repairs and save money for the Town. Such proposed repairs will be acceptable by the State as long as the Building Official approves them. This would be from our money and with local approvals. It is not reimbursable through the State.

Elsesser added that two local vendors who have done this type of steel work for Coventry in the past were approached and pricing provided. The Town has reliance with these vendors. Deblasi would have the final sign off on the repair work, with which Hand felt more comfortable. The goal is to address these main walls over the summer. After that, other walls have less urgency and we can go at them on a piecemeal basis. The Committee agrees on making the necessary repairs using an individual approach rather than throwing the same approach to all walls. Williams appreciates all the work that has been done and this seems to be a cost-effective approach. Hand stated the solution is well thought out, is creative, and he fully supports this and all of the work by the CHS Walls Committee.
Motion: I move the Council appropriate an amount not to exceed $70,000 from the Council 1.5% Fund for the CHS Walls repairs for the auditorium and band room.

By: Hand Seconded: O’Brien, Jr.

Discussion: Blanchard is glad this is coming to fruition and is not bigger than it has to be. Blanchard expressed thanks to the Committee for their work.

Voting:
For: O’Brien, Sr., O’Brien, Jr., Hand, Blanchard, Conant, Thomas, Williams
Against: None
Abstain: None

8. Miscellaneous/Correspondence:
The general consensus when the budget was last discussed was that it was okay. A budget update is the CT DOT will not allow the grant for the van to be used if there are other destinations than the schools. This can be discussed again at the next meeting. O’Brien, Sr. would like to provide the Town Manager on the ideas Members have as a target. O’Brien, Jr. wants to see no increase budget for this year. Thomas stated at $32.3 million this does not represent a mil rate increase. Williams agrees with O’Brien, Jr. regarding a no increase budget. Recent events are having huge impacts on taxpayers. We need to reduce as much as possible and defer items or not make purchases but come up with creative solutions to decrease the proposed budget. A zero increase is a good target to start with. O’Brien, Jr. understands the budget was developed before COVID-19. Hand added that some good points have been raised; the most obvious being we are in uncertain time, on uncharted waters. We should move with prudence to take into account the hardships. Hand is on board with keeping the target real. At the same time, we can’t hamstring the efforts made in town. We can look specifically to make cuts that won’t cost us in the long term. Conant echoes some of what Hand has said. Conant is very, very concerned about the national and global economic level. Conant is concerned about a depression coming our way. We need a budget that is reflective of that. There are elements in the budget we should not hamstring. Some things are needed that will help in the long term. Williams suggests sending the budget back to the department heads to take a cut at reducing their budget.

10. Adjournment:
Motion: I move that the Council adjourn at 10:14 p.m.

By: Sr. Seconded: Hand

Voting:
For: Hand, Conant, Blanchard, O’Brien, Sr., O’Brien, Jr., Thomas, Williams
Against: None
Abstain: None

Respectfully Submitted,
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.
Our community is living in uncertain times.

Tonight you are considering whether to vote on a budget for next year. You are also considering whether to delay a budget vote so that you can get community feedback on your proposal.

So far, taxpayers have only seen the Town Manager's proposed budget, and the Board of Education's proposed budget.

Typically taxpayers have the opportunity to comment on the Town Council's proposed budget at the Annual Town Budget Meeting and subsequently vote on resulting budget at Referendum.

These are atypical times. Executive orders from the Governor have restricted public gatherings, empowered municipal authorities to enact 2021 budgets, etc.

Coventry has a long history of respecting and responding to taxpayer voices heard at meetings, Town Meetings, and Referendums.

For that reason, I respectfully request that you delay budget enactment votes in a manner that gives the greatest opportunity to propose a budget based on latest information and executive orders that may affect summer and fall municipal responsibilities. And a delay that gives the greatest opportunity possible for taxpayer feedback on next year's budget.
-Jen Beausoleil
1040 Cedar Swamp Rd
Coventry, CT
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