

**ASHFORD BOARD OF FINANCE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
Thursday June 9, 2022 / Held Virtually via Zoom / Ashford, Connecticut
7:00 P.M.**

Present

Judith Austin, Chairman, Paul Varga, Clerk, Garth Bean, Jesse Burnham, Christina Davis, Angela DeSanto, John Kopec, William Falletti, First Selectman, Ex-Officio Member

Guests

Loretta Wrobel, Chairman Conservation Commission, Nathan Johnston, Steve Morytko

1. Call to Order

Ms. Austin called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

2. Roll Call and Seating of Alternates

A roll call was carried out. Ms. Davis was seated for Mr. Bean who had to leave.

3. Communications - not reviewed for presentation

4. Public Comments – none

5. Approve Minutes of Meeting Thursday May 26, 2022

**MS. DESANTO MOVED AND MR. KOPEC SECONDED A MOTION TO APPROVE
THE MINUTES OF THE BOF REGULAR MEETING MAY 26, 2022, AS CORRECTED.
MOTION PASSED WITH ONE ABSTENTION BY MR. BURNHAM.**

Corrections: p. 1 Guests - Ms. Baker's first name = Cheryl. 6.a. 2d paragraph line 3, July 3rd

6. New Business

a. Selectman's Update

Mr. Falletti noted a budget process brain storming session will be scheduled with the leadership of the stakeholder groups. A public hearing regarding the ARPA funding and how it has been utilized and the possible priorities for future uses will be held on Tuesday July 5, 2022. Patience is asked considering Ms. Baker's retirement regarding reports, etc.

b. Summary of current year Expenditures by First Selectman

Mr. Falletti stated that the situation is about the same as stated at the last BOF meeting. The town is "in good shape."

c. Presentation by Assessor regarding Grand List

Mr. Varga noted that the Assessor could not attend this meeting but will attend the next meeting on June 23, 2022. She had supplied two documents to members in preparation for this meeting:

1. *OLR Backgrounders: Indicators of Municipal Fiscal Stress*. 12p. dated 11/30/2010.

2. *Tax Assessment and the Equalized Net Grand List*. 2p. by Kara J. Fishman, CCMA II, Assessor, Town of Ashford. dated 5/27/2022.

7. Old Business

a. Discussion with Conservation Commission regarding Open Space Acquisition

Ms. Wrobel, Chair of the Conservation Commission (CC), provided a review of why the CC was requesting that the gift to Ashford in lieu of taxes by the Yale Univ. School of the Environment (about \$8000 annually) be transferred from the General Fund into the Open Space Fund. The CC's idea is that by doing so a fund would be available if and when an opportunity arose for the town to acquire/purchase land for open space. Several reasons for land purchase by the town for open space were noted including: land adjacent to a trail or between two trails, land next to a waterway, land to be added to Ashford parkland. Ashford land contains a watershed that does need protection; water quality, abundance of open fields, forests and waterways are considered by most residents as providing a very desirable place to live. The intent for the fund is to purchase land so that it can be kept open space not part of the built environment.

Since one never knows ahead of time about land coming up for sale, having a fund available will help. Any decision to purchase would go through the BOS, other boards and commissions, public hearing and further town procedures. Most requests about land purchases have come to the CC from the BOS.

A purchase of development rights is done mainly to keep a large parcel of land together rather than having it broken up into lots; it was noted this type of purchase has only been done twice in Ashford.

Members were asked if they had questions or comments.

Ms. Davis asked how much money was in the Open Space Fund? No one seemed to know exactly. So this question is left to be answered. Later it was mentioned that it was about \$200. Ms. Davis also asked how do funds get into the Open Space Fund? Again, no specific answer was given. Apparently since the development rights' expenditures no monies have really been deposited into that fund. Documentation could not be located listing the fund. Again, this is something that will need to be cleared up. Mr. Falletti noted that he will find out where the fund is listed and how much money it contains.

Mr. Varga asked what percentage of land is open space in Ashford? He noted that open space land presents a cost to preserve and maintain. The private Yale Forest is "huge" per Ms. Wrobel. Those acres plus the two protected farms represent open space land. Ms. Wrobel stated that she would get the acreage for the Yale Forest and the two protected farms in Ashford and provide that to the BOF.

Mr. Falletti noted that historically most Open Space Funds have been used toward the purchase of the two farm areas mentioned above; the state and Joshua's Trust also helped with these purchases. Mr. Falletti noted that he agreed with the Conservation Commission's idea. Having such a fund would help also as conservation grants are often looking for matching funds. He looks at this CC suggestion as beneficial.

Mr. Morytko, a Conservation Commission member, noted that their Open Space Plan suggested the idea of budgeting a quarter of one percent (.25%) of the town budget into such an open space fund. It was clarified that it would be .25% of the General Government Budget, not to include the BOE or R19 budgets. He indicated that the state does encourage this type of activity, although a specific percentage is not required. He noted that some other towns do designate varying amounts to such a fund. The CC is only making a suggestion per Ms. Wrobel.

Mr. Burnham calculated that for our current General Government Budget of about \$3,840,000 x .0025 = about \$9000. This number is close to the \$8000 donated by Yale.

Mr. Kopec does not agree with tax funds being used to buy development rights. He stated it only benefited the person selling those rights, rights that last forever thus limiting what a new owner could do on the property.

Ms. Wrobel stated again the CC's reasoning, ultimately retaining the type of landscape containing open fields, farms, forest, waterways, etc. enhancing life in Ashford. The effects of climate change too will be seen in the future; air quality and waterway health are nationwide concerns. Maintaining the town vitality including our clean waterways can only be helped by maintaining open space that benefits all.

Ms. Davis and **Ms. DeSanto** agreed with Ms. Wrobel.

Mr. Varga felt that we can not fix the major problem. A farmer has three choices: 1. keep his land and take on other paying employment, 2. sell and move, 3. sell to prevent development, benefiting one person, making it hard for another to purchase the land in future. He asks that questions be answered before any voting takes place. His question: how many protected acres are in Ashford? He and Mr. Kopec expressed need for better zoning. Mr. Varga is not opposed but does want the answers.

Mr. Kopec repeated his concerns. He has restored a neglected farm with no government help. The purchase of development rights benefits only one person restricting what can be done in future on that land.

Mr. Merytko suggested probably less "extreme" examples of open space use considerations. One example: obtaining land along the brook for a trail from the Town Hall to Memorial Park.

Ms. Wrobel stated the proposal is to establish a way to build a fund so that it is available if something comes up that would benefit the town. She mentioned the Langhammer trail as an example of the effort to keep Ashford green, a beautiful town to live in. She stated that the Ashford Open Space Plan (June 2015) is online. Pages 14-15 list the open space inventory and how each was set up.

[locate the plan easily, google: open space plan for ashford ct]

Ms. Wrobel was thanked for her presentation and participation. She agreed to answer any further questions.

Since we do not want to rush into a decision, the Chairman tabled the decision until the next meeting so that further information can be studied. Mr. Varga volunteered to pull together data including pages 14-15 mentioned above for members to study prior to the next meeting.

7. Old Business

b. FY 2020-2021 Annual Report

Mr. Burnham noted 7 reports are still missing and a few are incomplete. He and Mr. Falletti will continue to attempt to get the reports completed.

8. Agenda Items for Next Meeting

Conservation Commission Open Space Fund Suggestion
2020-2021 Annual Report Update
Town Assessor Discussion regarding Grand List
Any Changes in Expenditures of Concern

If there are any other items, please let the Chairman know.

9. Remarks for the Good of the Board

Ms. Austin noted that the BOF had a good discussion and heard differing viewpoints. She learned more and appreciated all the input.

10. Adjournment

**MS DESANTO MOVED AND MR. BURNHAM SECONDED A MOTION TO ADJOURN.
MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY AT 8:16 P.M.**

*Respectfully submitted by,
Valerie B. Oliver, Recording Secretary
6/10/2022*