

**Ashford, Connecticut**  
**ASHFORD BOARD OF FINANCE**  
**REGULAR MEETING MINUTES**  
**Thursday February 8, 2024, 7:00 p.m.**  
Hybrid Meeting / In-Person - Ashford Town Hall, and Zoom

[Click here for documents referenced during this meeting.](#)

**1. Call to Order** was at 7:02 p.m. by Chairman Christina Davis; other members present were: Judith Austin, Keith Lipker, Holid Love, Timothy Rhodes, Paul Varga, Cathryn Silver-Smith, 1<sup>st</sup> Selectman and Ex-Officio BOF Member.

**Guests:** Sherri Soucy, Treasurer / Lynn Byberg, Assessor / Margaret Varga / Vincent. LaMonica / Rob Chernuk

**2. Roll Call and Seating of Alternates:** The roll call was taken.

**3. Communications:** The Chairman reported that the auditing firm today has all the financials, and their report will be ready to be reviewed by their management team by the end of the day. A letter dated 2/7/24 has been received from the town attorney at the law firm of Halloran & Sage regarding a conflict of interest issue.

**Ms. Austin moved and Mr. Lipker seconded a motion to add discussion of this 2/7/24 letter to the agenda after New Business 6h. Motion passed with one abstention from Mr. Varga.**

**4. Public Comments (3 minute time limit per speaker):** Mr. Varga, acting as a private citizen, expressed his objection to the above mentioned letter that focused on his position with the Fire Department. He indicated, via a letter he had written, that the conflict of interest was not specifically defined, among other statements. The letter was to be given to the Chairman. He then indicated he would leave the meeting.

**5. Approve Minutes of**

**a. Regular Meeting Thursday, Jan. 25, 2024**

**Mr. Lipker moved and Mr. Rhodes seconded a motion to approve the Minutes of the Regular BOF Meeting Jan. 25, 2024 as corrected. Motion passed with one abstention from Ms. Austin.**

Corrections: p.1, no. 1. Call to Order, include 1st Selectman, Ex-Officio BOF Member with member list – not as a guest / p.1 last line, should read... to replenish the CNR (that in part funds these projects).

**6. New Business**

**a. Review 2023 Grand List and Top 10 Taxpayer List:** Ms. Byberg reviewed the Grand List pages on the screen for those at the meeting in person. Those participating via Zoom could not see it. She went over each page explaining the data. She noted that \$370,000,000 represented a 1% increase from last year's figures. She also noted that revenue from motor vehicle taxes experienced changes: as an example, one car model in 2019 was valued at \$35,000 / 2021 \$40,000 / 2022 \$34,000 / but now \$26,000. Her research revealed that vehicle values went up during Covid and were now four years later beginning to settle. The last page reflects the summary on page one but expresses it in a different format. She indicated this is a snapshot in time and until February 20<sup>th</sup> appeals can be submitted to be heard in March.

Then the Top 10 Taxpayer List was put on the screen. It reflected a combination of tax revenue: real estate, personal property and motor vehicle taxes.

Ms. Davis asked how our 1% increase compared with the state towns generally? Reports received by Ms. Byberg indicated one with a .5% increase and others higher. She will provide a report for the Chairman when she has more data after she attends a meeting next week of the Windham Area Assessment Assoc.

Chairman Davis thanked her for her time and presentation.

**b. Selectman's Update:** Ms. Silver-Smith thanked Ms. Davis for her excellent explanation of mill rate in the February *Ashford Citizen*. BOS topics discussed began with leaks in the Fire Department roof that are to be evaluated and costs estimated. Cadlerock property is being asked to allow for a New England Cottontail Survey and

also being asked by an ACE Equipment logging company to be allowed to build a pathway through the property. The latter will require assurances that the property is left in proper condition per the Inland Wetland Agent. The Transfer Station is asking for a change in hours. This Saturday the BOS will do their budget review; more town staff are needed especially for finance, assessor and tax departments. The school roof project is continuing and has encountered an issue being investigated about installation of new air handling units. Capital Improvement planning continues.

At 7:44 p.m. it was noted by the Chair that an alternate should be seated for Ms. DeSanto. The Chairman then officially seated Tim Rhodes for Ms. DeSanto. She also welcomed Mr. Love.

A previous motion required restatement with Mr. Rhodes as a seated voting member:

**Mr. Lipker moved and Mr. Rhodes seconded a motion to approve the Minutes of the Regular BOF Meeting Jan. 25, 2024 as corrected. Motion passed with one abstention from Ms. Austin.**

Ms. Silver-Smith stated that she appreciated the links in the agenda to various documents.

**c. Landing page on website for FY 24-25 budget does not work.** To locate this information, go to: Ashfordtownhall.org > Documents > Board of Finance > Budget Information 2024-2025.

**d. Discuss timeline for submitting questions regarding Board of Ed., General Government and Capital Improvement budgets:**

Town budgets were due to Treasurer January 12

**BOE budget** to BOF Feb. 16<sup>th</sup> – questions submitted by Feb. 19<sup>th</sup> to BOF Chair - Feb 22 formal presentation

**General Govt. Budget** to BOF March 1 – questions by March 4<sup>th</sup> to BOF Chair - March 7<sup>th</sup> formal presentation along with that for Capital Improvement Plan

Ms. Silver-Smith noted that a summary, explaining reasons for large budget increases, should be included with each budget. She will insure this is done for next year. The proposed budgets (BOE, Gen. Govt./Cap. Improvement Plan and R19) will be provided to BOF members either electronically or in print. These initial budget proposals are not supplied to the public.

**e. Review FY24-25 Budget Calendar:** R19 budget is due tomorrow Feb. 9<sup>th</sup>. It is a very large document.

**f. Update on the Audit for FY 2022-2023:** The Chair has the most up-to-date information on the audit. It will hopefully be ready for our next meeting

**g. FY 2022-2023 Annual Report:** A Status Report link was provided. All reports are not in yet.

**h. Update on Special Town meeting to fill the Board of Finance Alternate vacancy:** The meeting was held, and Mr. Holid Love was appointed. He was welcomed to the meeting.

**Added to the agenda: Discussion of 2/7/24 letter received from town attorney regarding conflict of interest:**

The issue concerned the fact that Mr. Varga, a BOF member, is also paid approximately \$15,000 annually for HR and administrative duties at the Ashford Volunteer Fire Department (AVFD), which is a private nonprofit that receives funding from the town through its General Government budget. He is also Fire Chief of the AVFD, which is an unpaid position. Ms. Davis provided the following background:

Last year the issue of the conflict of interest came up also, and Ms. Davis was told at that time that the town attorney said there was no conflict of interest. She requested a copy of this opinion from the current First Selectman in January 2024 to be prepared if the issue came up during budget season. The First Selectman could not locate any such opinion and the town attorney said that he did not have a record one. As a result, the First Selectman requested an opinion on Jan. 29, 2024. The opinion from the town attorney was shared with the board of finance on Feb. 8, 2024 via email. It states the following: "...it is our belief that Mr. Varga should not present the annual budget

proposal for the AVFD to the Board of Finance. Furthermore, he should not partake in any Board of Finance discussion or decision specifically directed toward the proposed AVFD budget. Notwithstanding, we do not believe it would be a conflict for Mr. Varga to vote on the overall general budget or on any proposed reduction to the overall budget since these issues are not specifically related to AVFD but rather deal with overall budgeting issues.”

Mr. Varga earlier in this meeting read his letter stating his salary was not from the town. Ms. Davis stated that she appreciates Mr. Varga’s service on the Board and as Volunteer Fire Dept. official and that he has done nothing wrong; she supports him.

Ms. Silver-Smith stated that it was the perception of a conflict of interest that was important to avoid.

In Mr. Varga’s case, he would be free to present the AVFD budget to the BOS, but that Board would then present it to the BOF as part of the General Government Budget.

Ms. Austin wanted the members to realize that it is difficult to get volunteers for the Fire Dept., and caution should be taken. Having citizens agree to run to serve on town commissions and boards is also difficult.

Mr. Rhodes stated that the letter from the attorney provided a clear statement of what is and is not allowed regarding conflict of interest, especially regarding the Bd. of Finance. Ms. Austin suggested the BOF craft its own policy regarding conflicts of interest to avoid these issues in the future. Any board policy should not conflict with the CT Gen. Statutes per Ms. Silver-Smith. Ms. Davis stated that she will investigate further and that she appreciated the dialog.

**7. Agenda Items for Next Meeting, Feb. 15:** Audit Presentation / reminder - BOE Budget to be presented on Feb. 22, 2024

**8. Remarks for the Good of the Board** – none

**9. Adjournment:**

**Mr. Lipker moved and Ms. Austin seconded a motion to adjourn. Motion passed unanimously at 8:34 p.m.**

*Respectfully submitted by  
Valerie B. Oliver, Recording Secretary  
2/9/2024*