

**ASHFORD BOARD OF FINANCE
REGULAR MEETING
Thursday June 24, 2021
Virtual Online Meeting via Zoom
Ashford, CT 06278**

Call to Order was at 7:04 p.m. by Chairman Charles Funk. Members present were Garth Bean, Jesse Burnham, Angela DeSanto, Merrill Simpson and Paul Varga,

Guests

Ashford 1st Selectman, Cathryn Silver-Smith, **Meeting Facilitator**, John Guskowski

Seating of Alternates

Mr. Varga was seated for Ms. Austin and Mr. Simpson was seated for Mr. Kopec

Communications

Mr. Funk stated he will sign and return to the auditors a new contract similar to the current one. The Board of Education (BOE) has hired a new Superintendent who will start on July 1, 2021. A good transition and collaboration were noted as Dr. Longo leaves on June 30, 2021. A new Business Manager has been found, someone who had other options but chose Ashford. The person will begin at the School the 2d week of July.

Approve Minutes of Regular Meetings Thursday, May 27, 2021

MS. DESANTO MOVED AND MR. BURNHAM SECONDED A MOTION TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MAY 27, 2021 REGULAR BOF MEETING AS WRITTEN. MOTION PASSED WITH TWO ABSTENTIONS, FROM MR. SIMPSON AND MR. BEAN.

Public Comment, none

New Business

a. Selectman's Update, Including American Rescue Plan

Ms. Silver-Smith reported that Ashford would be receiving \$1,259,269.72 in two tranches (parts); the first of \$629,634.85 quite soon and the second \$629,634.87 spring of 2022. The Treasurer will set up a separate fund for this as the funds can only be used for specific federally approved Covid related purposes. The funds must have a plan for use by the end of 2024 and expended by Dec. 31, 2026.

It will be critical to follow the federal rules for use of these funds as if used for an unapproved purpose the town would be responsible for that expense. First, of course, we need to learn exactly how the funds can be used.

Ms. Silver-Smith then reviewed possible uses for these monies. Her first suggestion was to expand broadband access as apparently the town is not served completely; related to this would be MDTS speeds. This would fit with the overall focus of the funding to help underserved communities.

Her second idea was to improve HVAC systems in four town buildings, Town Hall, Knowlton Hall, Senior Center and Senior Housing Building. She will be meeting on Friday, tomorrow with a company to obtain a quote for each building for the cost to improve air quality, etc. This firm would only be doing an assessment not the actual work. The jobs would go out to bid per Mr. Funk. Having different companies do assessment and receiving the contract for a job is a policy of the 1st Selectman.

Another use might be to improve the way town meetings are held. Different equipment can hinder or prevent online meeting access. Many towns are experiencing these access difficulties. A hybrid system of both online and in person seems to be evolving. To have that working efficiently would take an investment. Since the Covid pandemic is not over (in opposition to some citizens' beliefs) we need also to make sure our building interiors are healthy and safe. EHHN reports that only 54% of Ashford citizens have been vaccinated and that Windham County has the worst vaccination rate in Connecticut. We need to be sure we could handle any future pandemic threat. This low rate effects having in-person meetings. This in turn requires that town employees have town computers to do work at home and good WiFi access. Use of a personal computer for town work is not allowed. Both the Senior Center and the Parks and Rec. Dept. have access issues. This appropriate connectivity including broadband access will require an investment.

Another area to consider is mental health. How is it best to help? Counseling, financial and other supports as well as offering recreational activities are possible ways to lessen the stress.

She also noted that Nutmeg Electric will be handling mold on the town ventilation system and humidity issues in the downstairs vault (a current job not part of the Rescue Plan).

Mr. Funk thanked Ms. Silver-Smith for her review. We need to think carefully about prioritizing what should be done with this fund and make prudent and informed decisions.

New Business

b. Selectman's Request, Review and Action for Senior Housing Public Lighting Repairs

Ms. Silver-Smith explained that she had just learned of an old lighting problem at the Senior Housing area that had not been dealt with for several years. Although both Mr. Varga and Mr. Burnham expressed concern that the request should have gone through normal channels, she explained that she too felt that way but that safety concerns were now uppermost in her belief that this matter should be attended to now. She explained that 17 outside road lamps need to have their top parts changed to include what is called "antilight pollution lighting." This LED lighting is located in a box at a 45 degree angle to the tall post so that the light points directly down to the road where needed. The BOS is requesting \$18,000 for this work. This contract figure is available for a limited time period. The BOS would like the work done as soon as possible.

Mr. Simpson suggested that electrical and lighting work at the area gazebo be included. Ms. Silver-Smith assured him that that work would be handled in the next budget year.

More concern with how this has been brought to the BOF without going through the 5-year Improvement Committee review process was expressed. Apparently, it was brought up years earlier but never went anywhere. This led to a concern that town entities need to better understand how to propose projects and should not be intimidated by the process. Citizens do not fully understand how to interact with the Improvement Committee or what the proper procedures are exactly.

Further explanation that much of the work will be done locally in order to keep the costs down helped to move to a motion. It was also explained that good business practices always allow for a bit over the actual contractor charges to allow for cost overrun. The BOF was assured that \$18,000 was adequate for the work.

MS. DESANTO MOVED AND MR. VARGA SECONDED A MOTION TO APPROVE \$18,000 FROM THE UNDESIGNATED FUND FOR SENIOR HOUSING PUBLIC LIGHTING. MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

Mr. Funk thanked the 1st Selectman; Ms. DeSanto also noted her appreciation and that Ms. Silver-Smith showed how good local government can be.

d. FY Annual Report Update

Ms. Silver-Smith assured Mr. Burnham that the BOS report would be ready tomorrow. He noted only two other reports outstanding: Fire Marshall and Fire Dept.

c. Expenditures and Revenue Review

Mr. Funk expressed that he wanted the BOF members to look carefully at the new format of the report created now with our new financial system software. At the next meeting the BOF can go over it with the Treasurer present. He liked the way things looked himself. If one finds specific concerns please contact him or the Finance Office.

e. Update on Combined Finance Office Study

Mr. Funk thinks it best if we wait until the new School Superintendent is in place to see what his opinions are concerning a joint or not combined office. Any plan will require the agreement and cooperation of the School.

Second Opportunity for Public Comment

It was thought keeping two places for comment advantageous.

Agenda Items for the July 8, 2021 Regular Meeting

Expenditure and Revenue Reports Review

Remarks for the Good of the Board

Mr. Varga asked when we will meet in-person? Mr. Guskowski reported that from now through April of 2022 towns must have meetings available via electronic means. The implication is that the town meetings will probably be hybrid for that period at least.

Mr. Funk expressed his appreciation for and commitment of his board members.

Adjournment

MR. BURNHAM MOVED AND MS. DESANTO SECONDED A MOTION TO ADJOURN AT 8:17 P.M. MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

*Respectfully submitted by,
Valerie B. Oliver, Recording Secretary
6/25/2021*