

TOWN OF STONINGTON
BOARD OF FINANCE SPECIAL MEETING
Virtual Meeting/Stonington Police Dept Meeting Room
Thursday, March 4, 2021
7:00 PM

The Stonington Board of Finance held a virtual/hybrid meeting on this date at 7:00 p.m. The meeting was also streamed on Facebook live and was available via audio on a conference line. Chairman Tim O'Brien was absent and Mr. Glen Frishman chaired the meeting. Ms. Lynn Young, Mr. Bob Statchen and Ms. Deb Norman were remotely present. Mr. Michael Fauerbach and Mr. David Motherway were unable to attend.

Finance Director Jim Sullivan was present remotely. Mr. Frishman called the meeting to order at 7:04 p.m.

New Business:

Budget Presentations:

Human Services Budget:

Human Service Director Leanne Theodore joined the meeting remotely to discuss her Department's budget. Noting technical issues, Director Theodore was unable to share her presentation and emailed the Board members the presentation for their review.

Director Theodore commented that the presentation summarizes the COVID programs and the amazing efforts of many of the community partners she acknowledged were in attendance this evening.

The Director noted the December 2020 unemployment rate in Stonington is at 554, up from 279 in December 2019 and the State programs reflect that as well with 1737 Stonington residents receiving food assistance vs. 1546 from last year. Director Theodore stated there has been a 45% increase in social services provided to residents this year. Because of the pandemic, Human Services staffing has had challenges and was required to redirect and change services and programs based on CDC guidelines. However, Director Theodore pointed out that through in person appointments and remote contact the department continues to provide the same level of service to residents seeking support. Additionally, virtual programming has successfully fostered recreational programs for residents.

Director Theodore highlighted the departments social services efforts within the community, noting that Stonington Feeds Stonington assisted over 800 households, in addition to services provided by the United Way ALICE Relief Fund, wellness check partnerships with the Stonington Police Department, UCFS Mobile Outreach, coordination of COVID testing events and remote and in-person intakes to screen residents in need for a variety of local, regional and federal supportive programs.

Director Theodore praised the partnership with the Stonington Police Department and First Responders for outreach and wellness checks within the community. The Director noted the department budget reflects a new full-time position request of Community Outreach Specialist for \$40,040. The Director stated that the new position request ties into every increase of services mentioned and the importance of the new position to continue to provide in home contact and a more personalized effort for those in need. Police Chief Darren Stewart submitted a letter of full support for the Director's request.

Ms. Young inquired if the position would still be needed once the pandemic is over and the Director confirmed the present needs of the department necessitate the position being filled. Currently the department has only one full time social services administrator and other team members have been pulled in to assist, but as the Director noted, this type of social services and mental health outreach is not within their job function and requires an experienced provider. Director Theodore stated that from the Human Services perspective, the new position would be a natural fit for an already struggling department, overworked and understaffed and would also in coordination with the Police Department Accountability requirements.

Mr. Frishman inquired if a part-time position would be of assistance to the Department. Director Theodore stated it would be, however from an applicant viewpoint it would be easier to fill a full-time position, and that her goal was to have the position be a long-term commitment to the department, building connections within the community as well as with the Police Department.

Mr. Statchen asked if the Director felt there could be COVID funds available to support the position adding he felt the community outreach specialist is in response to what has occurred and the social impact that COVID has had on the community. Director Theodore agreed and acknowledged this may be an opportunity to gain funding to create the new position.

Mr. Frishman asked Director Theodore if she saw the Recreational Department programming resuming so the appropriation listed and recommended in the budget would be used or would recreation be put on hold because of COVID concerns. Director Theodore informed the Board that the Department did open up recreational programs this fall and had over 1000 participants between clinics and enrichment programs. Fall Pre-School registration is already full, and the football and basketball programs have a lot of interest. Director Theodore stated that the Department has started to transition programming for seniors into St. Michael's Church in the Church Hall and also the Central Office gymnasium to keep those programs moving forward.

Capital Improvement Requests:

Human Services:

Line Item #77 - George Crouse Tennis Court Rebuild - \$441,000. Director Theodore notes that \$33,000 from the appropriated funds of \$159,000 last year have been used to hire a consultant for design plans and will have figures of an

anticipated cost shortly. The Director expects the \$600,000 initial cost expectation may come in a bit higher but adds the Ad-Hoc committee is very aware of the \$600,000 price point and are not looking for a grandiose project but to have a playable area with secure fencing and built-in windscreens.

Outside Agencies and Libraries:

Westerly Public Library - Line Item #41 \$118,000

Ms. Bridgette Hopkins, Executive Director addressed the Board, thanking them for the opportunity to speak. Noting it has been 1 year since the Library closed its doors because of the pandemic, the library has converted many programs to virtual programs, added online card applications, and launched the library take out which started in May 2020. These programs still continue in addition to the library now being open with limited walk-ins for browsing and use of public computers.

Stonington Free Library - Line Item #42 \$227,000

Ms. Micayla Hall, Director and Ms. Karla Umland, Assistant Director presented to the Board highlights of the recent year at Stonington Free Library. Ms. Hall noted the past year the Library has been resilient and adapted programs and services during both a pandemic and a major construction and renovation project. All programs went virtual, including storytimes, reading programs, book, tech, and knitting groups. The digital library has been significantly expanded and offers streaming services and audio e-books at no charge. A successful curbside pickup service has been established and even with the building now open the option is very popular. Last year's CIP grant from the Town enabled the library to be fully ADA compliant with a ramp elevator and new bathrooms. Ms. Hall states an increase of \$15,000 in the Library's request will cover direct COVID related costs the library has incurred.

Mystic & Noank Library - Line Item #43 \$111,500

Ms. Christine Bradley, Director, states the Library has the same challenges the other Libraries mentioned. The Mystic & Noank Library has added new services that may last beyond COVID, such as curbside pick up which has been very successful, and the increase of streaming and downloadable items. The library is currently by appointment only, but Ms. Bradley states they are looking forward to increasing the Library hours and outdoor programs.

VNA of Southeastern CT: Line Item #47 \$20,000

Ms. Gail Haesche, Interim Director for the agency thanked the Board for their support. Noting an increase in the demand for providing subsidized and free healthcare, Ms. Haesche also notes the agency has also been taking care of many COVID patients in the community. In the last year not as many clinics were provided due to COVID concerns and the agency came in under budget, however, the increase in providing care to the indigent went over budget due to need. In the last year Ms. Haesche reports providing services to 224 Stonington residents, mostly subsidized care, which includes skilled nursing, therapy services and in home health aide.

Stonington COMO - Line Item #49 \$87,500

Ms. Beth Ann Stewart, Executive Director thanked the Board for their support and especially Director Leanne Theodore, for her assistance during this past year during COVID. Ms. Stewart noted to the Board that the COMO had a loss of over \$171,356 in program income and an additional loss of \$70,000 in cancelled events and decreased sponsorship directly due to COVID. The COMO did take advantage of federal funding through obtaining a PPP loan which has since been forgiven.

Ms. Stewart highlighted online preschool curriculum for 48 families, virtual, small group and private athletic, STEAM and educational programs offered by the COMO. The COMO served 68 families during full day distance learning child care and performed 6,794 health screenings at the facility. In addition, 331 face shields were distributed to local frontline workers through the Makers Space program. Ms. Stewart noted that the COMO provided over \$45,000 in program scholarships in 2020 even with fiscal challenges, as they recognize the need for families to afford childcare and programming.

Pawcatuck Neighborhood Center: Line Item#48 \$206,000

Ms. Susan Sedensky, Executive Director presented to the Board. Ms. Sedensky informed the Board that in FY2020 462,000lbs of food were distributed to Stonington residents. Last year 657 residents were enrolled to use the food pantry which has increased to 736 residents this year. Last March the PNC had 265 active volunteers working to distribute food, diapers and personal items. When they had to follow the Governor's directive to stay home and stay safe the PNC continued to provide those items to the community with a staff of 8. Two (2) full-time employees were hired to work in the food pantry. The PNC van delivers food each week to an average of 117 Stonington residents. The Weekend Backpack program provides weekend food for 147 children each Friday. At Thanksgiving the PNC provided turkey meals to 400 families and 222 Stonington children received Gift Cards for Christmas. The PNC continues to provides heating and utility assistance. Last March, Ms. Sedensky notes the Center did purchase a 12 passenger handicapped accessible bus which provides no cost senior transportation for an average of 22 senior residents to vaccine sites, medical appointments and food shopping.

Always Home: Line Item #50 \$6,000

Ms. Betty Smith, Executive Director thanked the Board for their previous support. Ms. Smith noted that the mission of Always Home is to prevent family homelessness. Last year 22 Stonington families were provided services which included rent payments, utilities and transportation expenses. These 22 families represented 72 Stonington residents which included children. Approximately \$7,400 in expenses were paid on each family's behalf, allowing them to remain in their home, diverting them from entering a shelter or experiencing homelessness. Ms. Smith stated that this fiscal year to date, eight (8) Stonington families have been assisted with rental and childcare expenses. Noting the figure may be artificially low, Ms. Smith feels that once the Eviction Moratorium comes to an

end, she expects a wave of families who will need assistance to remain in their homes.

Pace of Rhode Island: Line Item #52 \$10,000

Director Theodore notes PACE of RI extends their gratitude for the Board's support but will not be presenting this evening.

Westerly Area Rest Meals (WARM): Line Item #51 \$6,000

Director Theodore notes the WARM Shelter extends their gratitude for the Boards support but will not be presenting this evening.

Olean Center: Line Item #53 \$4,000

Did not present

TVCCA Meals on Wheels: Line Item #54 \$8,000

Mr. Eugene Theroux, Director of Nutritional Services for the TVCCA thanked the Board for the opportunity to speak. Mr. Theroux stated the goal of the organization is to provide a meal to those unable to obtain one themselves. This reduces sickness, food insecurity and malnutrition. By volunteers personally delivering a meal, relationships are developed and loneliness and social isolation is reduced. Due to COVID concerns and the safety of the seniors, meals are now handed off and a wellness check is administered at the senior's front door. This allows seniors to be socially distant while still receiving nutritional support and human contact. Delivery drivers are trained to spot changes and report emergencies or the need for professional intervention. Mr. Theroux acknowledged the program is partially funded through the State and although voluntary contributions are accepted but not required from recipients, the average contribution is .44 cents per meal, down from an average of .73 cents per meal last year. This equates to a cost of over \$99,200. Last year 18 volunteers delivered meals to 82 homebound Stonington seniors which is an increase of 21 seniors over the previous year. Mr. Theroux thanked the Board for their consideration and past and future support.

Safe Futures: Line Item #57 \$4,000

Ms. Katherine Verano, Chief Executive Officer spoke to the Board noting that Safe Futures was deemed an essential agency and has remained open throughout the COVID pandemic. They did receive a gift of plexiglass doors at the shelter and counseling areas allowing face to face counseling sessions with children and adults. The agency's needs increased tremendously, serving 7000 victims and shelter requests saw an increase of 716%. Domestic violence incidents increased and when the shelter is full the agency had additional hotel costs from March 2020 to January 2021 of \$126,411. A local hotel does provide a discounted rate as

the hotel was not receiving guests, due to COVID. Also, due to COVID, two major fundraising events did not take place, however Ms. Verano notes the agency did apply, receive and was forgiven a PPP Loan. Currently there are 64 children in the shelter program, housed in a hotel with food and basic needs being delivered. Ms. Verano admits it is a very challenging time but adds that the assistance provided by the community and all of the non-profits presenting this evening helps immensely in times like this.

Sexual Assault Crisis Center: Line Item #58 \$1,000

Did not present

Stonington Cemetery Association: Line Item #60 \$3,000

Did not present. Mr. Frishman noted a letter from President Lynn Callahan had been received by Board members.

Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center: Line Item #61 \$7,500

Ms. Davnet Schaffer, Executive Director of the Nature Center, thanked the Board of Finance, First Selectman Danielle Chesebrough and Director Leanne Theodore for continued support of the Nature Center. Ms. Schaffer noted in the past the Town has supported the Center in its Wildlife Rescue and Rehab operation which is what the request is, but noted this year's increase in funding is to support the Giving Garden operations which provides fresh produce to the Gemma Moran Food Bank. Anticipating an increased need in providing fresh produce, the additional funding will enable the garden to expand. Noting the food pantry serves an average of 212 individuals per month in the Town of Stonington, last year during the pandemic participation was as high as 107 individuals in a single day. Ms. Schaffer stated that without contributions from the Giving Garden on many days the mobile food pantry would have had no produce to distribute. Produce production was lower last year mainly due to COVID restrictions on the ability to have volunteers and staff working in the garden. Ms. Schaffer states it is the Center's priority to bring production back up to previous years and expand the Garden to help meet the need of residents.

New London Homeless Hospitality Center: Line Item #56 \$2,700

Ms. Cathy Zall, Executive Director, expressed her thanks to the Board members and the Town of Stonington for their continued support. The Hospitality Center provides a regional resource for emergency shelter, assisting Towns making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring.

Ocean Community Chamber of Commerce: Line Item #62 \$2,000

Did not present

Stanton Davis Homestead: Line Item #65 \$3,000

Did not present

Stonington Ambulance Corp: Line Item #67 \$70,000

Mr. Nishant Sahoo, Vice-President, shared a presentation with the Board members. Highlighting the operations overview, Mr. Sahoo stated that the Corp averaged 570 911 calls per year over the last two years and approximately 1/3 of those calls are mutual aid to Stonington areas covered by Mystic River or Westerly Ambulance. The proposed EMS Agreement with the Town represents an increase in insurance requirements for the Corp of \$1,079 annually and staffing requirements for 24 x 7 coverage, almost three times the current coverage. This change would require significant financial support from the Town.

Mr. Sahoo discussed the income of the Corp, showing a continual decrease in Fees/Medicare income over the last two years, likely due to COVID. Mr. Sahoo was uncertain about future years income. The financial overview shows a request of \$74,000 which Mr. Sahoo confirms is higher than the amount in the budget. An increase in salaries, a lower reimbursement rate on services, and a higher rate of write-offs is what is leading the additional \$34,000 increase in requested funding this year.

Mr. Frishman invited Mr. Sahoo to attend the public hearing stating that the Public needs to hear the concerns of the organization and it is indeed a very difficult time for volunteer organizations.

Mystic River Ambulance: Line Item #68 \$50,000

Mr. Ray Munn, Vice-President, thanked the Board for the continue support. Mr. Munn reports that the Mystic River Ambulance Corp services approximately 1/3 of the Town of Stonington and 1/3 of the Town of Groton. Noting that the funds received by the Towns help cover operational costs, additional funding requested from both Towns this year will support infrastructure fixed costs, the addition of one full time employee, non-operational expenses, and additional expenses incurred by the pandemic. Mr. Munn noted the Corp spent close to \$12,500 last year on COVID related expenses. The Corp will decrease the monthly contribution to the new ambulance fund to keep the budget in line.

Westerly Ambulance Corp: Line #69 \$50,000

Mr. Ronald MacDonald III, thanked the Board for providing the opportunity to address the Board. Mr. MacDonald agreed with the other Corps that COVID expenses had impacted their budget. Additionally, overall call volume loss from both Westerly and Stonington was 1,342. Some of those lost calls were summer 911 type calls but also a decrease in calls out of the Westerly Hospital as the agency provides routine and interfacility transports. In 2020 there were 939 calls, 2019

there were 974. This year, Mr. MacDonald advises the agency is starting \$100,000 in the red. Last year, there was a substantial loss of income and this year's budget has been decreased to bare bones. Mr. MacDonald realizes that all the Town's are in financial distress due to the pandemic and notes the Ambulance Corp is asking for only a slight increase in the budget this year.

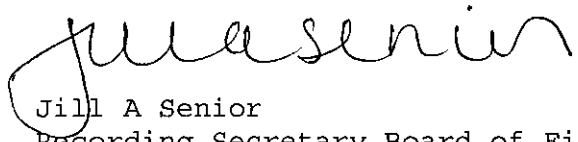
Capital Improvement Request:

Stonington Historical Society: Line Item #117 \$50,000

Ms. Elizabeth Wood, Executive Director thanked the Board for the opportunity to speak this evening. The initial request was for \$50,000 for each year for three years to support restoring the Old Lighthouse Museum. Ms. Wood was pleased to report that the total restoration for lighthouse proper has been completed. The inside had been taken down to bare studs and replaced all beams and structural components. The group hopes to embark on the second phase of the restoration this Fall. This phase includes the construction of a new visitor center, an addition on the rear of the building, creating universal access to the building and property. This will include handicap parking, accessible walkways that will help preserve the building itself, as well as climate control for the artifacts within. When asked about private funding, Ms. Wood reports they have raised over \$1 million dollars to date, adding they have another million to raise. Noting that funding from the Town would enable leveraging for additional support, Ms. Wood stated the Lighthouse is an iconic structure that means something to virtually everyone in Town in addition to being an economic anchor drawing visitors to Stonington who then proceed to shop, eat and stay locally.

Hearing no other requests for presentations, Ms. Lynn Young motioned to adjourn, Mr. Bob Statchen seconded. Motion carried, meeting adjourned at 8:30PM.

Respectfully submitted,



Jill A Senior
Recording Secretary Board of Finance