



# Town of Groton, Connecticut

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## Meeting Minutes

### Town Council Committee of the Whole

**Mayor Harry A. Watson, Councilors Peter J. Bartinik, Jr., Heather Sherman Bond, Catherine Kolnaski, Frank O'Beirne, Jr., John F. Scott, Paulann H. Sheets, James L. Streeter, and Elissa T. Wright.**

Tuesday, January 10, 2006

7:00 PM

Town Hall Annex - Community Room 1

#### REGULAR MEETING

#### 1. CALL TO ORDER

*Mayor Watson called the meeting to order at 7:07 p.m.*

#### 2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Watson, Councilor Bartinik, Jr., Councilor Bond, Councilor Kolnaski, Councilor O'Beirne, Jr., Councilor Sheets and Councilor Wright  
Members Absent: Councilor Scott and Councilor Streeter

*Also present were Town Manager Mark Oefinger, Assistant to the Town Manager Lee Vincent and Executive Assistant Nicki Bresnyan.*

#### 3. Calendar and Communications

*Councilor Bond read a communication that was received by the Committee of the Whole from 11 RTM members regarding fiscal matters. Councilor Bond expressed dismay with the letter's representation that this is a "general philosophy" of the RTM. She recognized Tom Vivirito who read a statement from RTM Republicans noting that they have not had an opportunity to discuss their views on the budget direction.*

*Councilor O'Beirne noted that he does not have access to e-mail until his home computer is fixed.*

*Mayor Watson noted that the department heads will be making a presentation on the impacts of a 5% reduction in their budgets for discussion purposes.*

*Councilor Bartinik reported on a meeting of the Shennecossett Golf Course Advisory Board that he attended.*

*Councilors received meeting dates for the Board of Education's deliberations on their budget. The public hearing will be held on January 26th at 6:00 p.m. at Fitch Middle School.*

*Mayor Watson reported that he has spoken to Mayor Popp and Beverly Washington about possible meeting dates.*

*Councilor Kolnaski noted various Board of Education meetings she attended. The Permanent School Building Committee will be visiting Stonington High School on January 12th at 4:00 p.m.*

*Councilor Bond noted that it was not her intent to have each department budget reduced by 5%, but the overall budget reduced 5%. Town Manager Oefinger noted that given the time constraints and direction by the Council, each department was tasked with the exercise. There was no discussion of a bottom line reduction because the Council hasn't had any discussions on the other areas of the budget such as the Board of Education and subdivisions. Councilor Sheets indicated she would not advocate a 5% across the board reduction since some departments have already had cuts.*

#### 4. Approval of Minutes

**2006-0011 Approval of Minutes (Committee of the Whole)**

## RESOLUTION ACCEPTING COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE MINUTES

RESOLVED, that the minutes of the Town Council Committee of the Whole of December 13, 2005 are hereby accepted and approved.

A motion was made by Councilor Bartinik, Jr., seconded by Councilor Kolnaski, to adopt.

The motion carried unanimously.

**5. UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

None

**6. NEW BUSINESS****2005-0311 FYE 2007 Budget****Discussed**

*Town Manager Oefinger noted all department heads as well as the Registrars of Voters were present. Councilor Wright asked for a synopsis of the department heads' presentations from the Town Manager. She suggested that the budget should be driven by what the taxpayers can afford and she feels the discussion of the revaluation should precede the budget discussion. Councilor Kolnaski opposed the suggestion noting that all department heads were present specifically to give their individual presentations.*

*Town Manager Oefinger noted that there has only been a \$41,000 increase in the Town Operations portion of the budget over the last three years. As a result, a zero increase or 5% reduction would mean a reduction in positions. He noted that a 5% reduction correlates to a 8-10% reduction in buying power once fixed increases are recognized (salaries, fuel, etc.) Benefit cost increases are in a separate part of the budget and will be discussed separately.*

*Mayor Watson recognized Patrice Granatosky who stated that she does not presume to speak for any members of the RTM and the letter submitted was specific to the members who signed it.*

*Michael Murphy, Director of Planning and Development, noted that in FYE 2007 salaries will increase approximately 3.2% with an overall budget increase of 4.5%. About 91.3% of the OPDS budget is Personnel Services with a number of other items outside of the department's control. Overall, the operations portion of the budget (8-9%) has remained flat for a number of years. To achieve a zero dollar increase, \$53,000-\$55,000 must be addressed. Key areas affected are housing rehabilitation, clerical overtime needed to staff boards and commissions, and inspector overtime to address building emergencies. A 5% reduction would require an additional \$58,000-\$59,000 reduction further affecting house rehabilitation; overtime; operating costs; and administrative and technical support personnel which would impact processing applications, public service, and long-range planning. There are a significant number of projects coming up that have been programmed for years including the Mystic Streetscape Project; economic development initiatives following finalization of the Economic Strategic Plan Update; changes to the land use regulations; the Thomas Road Bikeway Project; the POCD Update for the City of Groton; Historic District Commission grants; housing program grants; and the sourcewater protection initiative. The school project will require an additional building inspector, who will be paid for by the grant, but the position will appear in the OPDS budget.*

*Councilor Wright asked what percent of the department's time is spent reviewing land use applications. Mr. Murphy responded most of the department's time. Councilor Wright then questioned the status of the part time City Planner. Mr. Murphy stated that the town continues to staff the City with 50% of a planner's time, but the department anticipates putting more time in at the City.*

The FYE 2006 OPDS Budget is \$1,138,581. Mr. Murphy confirmed that land use application fees have not changed in a number of years, but as part of the financing plan, he is looking at revising the fee schedules, which will have to be approved by the Town Council. Councilor Sheets expressed the public's concern with the amount of development and the need for balance. She suggested that one way to get a handle on the issue might be to increase the fees to a point where developers think twice. Mr. Murphy noted that overtime is approximately \$11,000, but he cannot plan for emergency situations.

Mr. Murphy briefly described the housing rehabilitation program. Councilor Bartnik asked why Mr. Murphy would choose not to fund the Housing Rehabilitation Specialist position. Mr. Murphy explained that in the hierarchy of priorities, building safety is of the utmost priority. Town Manager Oefinger explained the history of the Community Development division and previous cuts to the program. It is a good program, but labor intensive. The Town has not been able to fully participate in the program because of cuts and changes in the state program. The state is less interested in maintaining an ongoing program. Councilor Sheets stated she would like to see OPDS generate more revenue to cover expenses.

Marge Fondulas, Director of Human Services, noted the three divisions in the department. Costs are primarily associated with personnel required to provide programs and assistance to clients, therefore budget cuts equate largely to cuts in personnel impacting availability of services. Seven full time positions including all supervisory level positions have been eliminated over the last four budgets. The department budget is \$465,000 less than three years ago. A level funded budget would require elimination of a part time counselor at the Family Support Center placing an added burden on the full time counselor and requiring institution of a waiting list. A 5% reduction would require elimination of another full time position. The department has already implemented an appointment system rather than taking walk-ins and a waiting list for Family Support Center clients. Groton has an excellent program and reputation with a steadfast commitment to human services, while other towns have abandoned their programs. Groton also networks with other area programs.

Chief of Police Kelly Fogg noted past budget reductions and the impact that they have had on the department including elimination of the SWAT team, the civilian and youth policy academy, bike patrols, the police K-9 program, and the drug task force along with reductions in community policing, DUI patrols, the youth division, marine patrol, assembly safety, schools, and special training and enforcement teams. In personnel, a sergeant position and a detective position were reduced to patrol officer positions and a youth officer was returned to patrol. A patrol officer and office assistant were also eliminated. There was a very modest budget increase this year to maintain the status quo. A zero percent increase equates to a 2-3% reduction and a 5% reduction equates to a 7-8% reduction. A 5% reduction would be a total reduction of \$367,000 plus \$150,000-\$200,000 of salary increases for a total of \$567,000 that would have to be reduced. The Police Department operating budget is \$607,000, so a 5% reduction would mean personnel as well as elimination of two remaining programs. Seven full time positions would be eliminated (10% of the police department). A zero percent increase would eliminate the community policing program and motor vehicle enforcement team, eliminate one patrol officer position, and reduce animal control services. A 5% decrease would also eliminate a part time office assistant; a patrol sergeant position (meaning less supervision as new officers are coming on board); a youth officer (requiring the use of remaining youth officers for investigation of time consuming child sexual abuse cases); the DARE middle school program; and four patrol officer positions (requiring six rather than seven officers on the road during a shift). This change would increase response time, increase caseload, and decrease available backup. A 5% decrease would also lead to a reduction in the animal control division. The department would not be able to move forward with necessary items such as task forces to deal with gun and drug related homicides. The Town should be increasing its efforts in drug investigations. A budget reduction would negatively impact public

safety.

Doug Ackerman, Director Administrative Services, noted the divisions in his department and stated that he would have to cut approximately \$250,000 from his budget to achieve a 5% reduction. Over 75% of the Administrative Services budget is personnel costs; \$250,000 of the operating budget is software maintenance; and \$75,000 is for phone system maintenance. A 5% reduction would require the elimination of four positions and a zero dollar increase would eliminate two positions.

Information Technology has been at the forefront of the increase in productivity which has allowed departments to maintain zero increase budgets. A 5% reduction would mean the elimination of two positions in IT and possible abandonment of software systems that the Town has already invested in. Productivity gains would be lost. Human Resources/Risk Management has already experienced the loss of two positions. Elimination of an additional half person in Human Resources will impact training; reduce the ability to do in-depth analysis of issues that results in cost savings; move the Town from a proactive approach to a reactive one; and eliminate program enhancements. The overall effect would be an increase in risk for the Town, higher claims, and higher insurance rates.

Emergency management is in the forefront of homeland security. A 5% reduction would eliminate 1.5 positions, increasing the number of shifts at minimum staffing levels and reducing the effectiveness of the center. Significant funding that is available in the form of reimbursements would be lost because the Town couldn't upfront the costs in a reduced budget.

Director of Finance Sal Pandolfo noted the four divisions in the department. A level service budget would require a \$45,000 cut resulting in elimination of a full time position. A 5% reduction would be 1.5 positions (out of 20) and elimination of operating expenses (\$110,000).

Mr. Pandolfo pointed out that there are bargaining unit work issues that involve bumping rights and shifting work to other employees, so in some case the work may have to be eliminated entirely. Finance currently has no vacancies. Mr. Pandolfo noted that the Town has the highest tax collection rate in the last ten years, which would be impacted by personnel reductions.

John Silsby, Director of Parks and Recreation, described his four divisions and noted that three are funded through the General Fund; Shennecossett Golf Course is funded through a Special Fund. There is also a separate fund for self-funded/self-supporting programs. In 2005, 738 program sessions were offered with 660 funded through the special revenue fund. Only special needs and senior programs remain in the General Fund. A zero dollar budget would require a reduction of \$76,000; a 5% decrease would require a reduction of \$200,000. Recreational Services would require a \$63,000 cut to achieve a zero dollar increase and impact the size of Discover magazine; training; development; field trips; office supplies; a part time position; the scholarship reimbursement program; boating programs; software upgrades and equipment requests; and result in elimination of one special needs program and the Sunshine Camp summer program. A 5% decrease would require another \$55,000 in cuts and would eliminate two positions; require reconfiguration of programs; impact customer service; and eliminate a programmer impacting approximately 200 programs with 2000 participants.

In Parks and Forestry, a zero dollar budget would require a \$34,000 reduction resulting in elimination of the tree maintenance program; reduced maintenance of parks; elimination of flower planting; reduced line painting and maintenance of athletic fields; elimination of small equipment purchases; and elimination of Esker Point Beach concert clean up. A 5% reduction would cost another \$33,000 resulting in the loss of one employee in a division that previously lost a maintainer position despite having more areas to maintain. A 5% budget reduction would impact the department's ability to be cooperative with other departments and agencies such as the Board of Education. Cemetery maintenance would be minimal.

*The Senior Center budget will already show a decreased due to negotiation of a favorable Meals on Wheels contract so there would be no impact with a zero dollar budget. A 5% reduction would impact the food service program due to the loss of a food service provider and eliminate a fitness program.*

*The Shennecossett Golf Course budget is a work in progress because some figures are not yet available. The Golf Course is already looking at a 5-6% increase for FYE 2007 as a result of recommendations from the Advisory Board. A zero dollar budget would require a \$65,000-\$80,000 reduction impacting personnel; service; irrigation; utilities; supplies and materials; and small equipment which in turn would impact the course's quality, playability, and hours of operation. A 5% reduction equates to \$120,000-\$135,000 and would also require the elimination of a full time maintenance position.*

*Barbara Tarbox, Town Clerk, noted her priority is retaining existing personnel to perform mandated functions. To accomplish a 5% decrease, Ms. Tarbox would eliminate all non-mandated services (including those that provide revenues) such as notary service; passport service; lunchtime hours; overtime hours; and Citizenship Day. There would be fewer recognitions, awards and proclamations; fewer updates to the Register of Town Boards and Commissions; and less money available for training, mileage, professional publications and materials. Ms. Tarbox added a request that the IT division not be cut because they provide support for all of the software systems that are in place. It was noted that the fees charged by the Town Clerk are set by state statutes.*

*Alan Benkert, Director of Library Services, agreed that increases in productivity have come from automation. After salary increases, lease and postage increases, the Library's budget would increase 3% overall if all other lines items remained the same. A zero dollar increase would cost \$52,000, which would be one full time employee. A 5% reduction would be an additional \$89,000, which to do the least amount of damage to the core functions of the library, would eliminate another full time employee and two part time positions with the same consequences described by other department heads. There are no vacancies at the Library. Mr. Benkert further noted that Library staff is down about 15% from its peak level and the materials budget is down from \$100,000 to \$80,000.*

*Alan Palmer, Registrar of Voters, noted the Registrars' budget is unique and impacted by the number of election events in any given year. The largest component of the budget is personnel (90-95%). Approximately 40% of the operating budget is attributed to running elections with the remaining funds used for voter services and the annual canvass. The FYE 2007 budget request will be 26% higher than FYE 2006 due to an additional election event. When compared with the FYE 2005 budget, the FYE 2007 budget request is approximately 8% higher. Mr. Palmer stated it is not possible for the Registrar to achieve a zero dollar increase budget due to the additional election event. To achieve a zero dollar increase from FYE 2005 (the last year there were three election events), the Mr. Palmer would reduce the number of poll workers to the minimum mandated by state law resulting in longer lines and a longer voting process. A 5% reduction would mean a reduction of hours for the office clerk resulting in closure of the Registrars' office from one to three days per week.*

*Gary Schneider, Director of Public Works, noted that increases in fees for other areas such as subdivisions, outside agencies, utilities, etc. are accounted for in the Public Works budget. Most of the Public Works budget is fixed, with any new work located in the Capital Improvement Program.*

*The FYE 2007 Public Works Budget will see a \$250,000 increase in Personnel Services, a \$187,000 increase in utilities, and an increase of \$64,000 in other miscellaneous costs. A zero*

dollar budget would require cuts of \$534,000 impacting external and internal customers. Specifically, contracted tree work would be cut in half; roadside mowing eliminated; free weeks at the transfer station eliminated; Sunday hours at the transfer station eliminated; waste removal in parks and street cans eliminated; cleaning of parks facilities eliminated; street sweeping overtime eliminated; and the pumpout boat program eliminated. These services would affect the least number of people. Internal impacts would be not using the Pleasant Valley frame building for storage; eliminating overtime for winter building checks, pothole calls and front counter service; elimination of consulting engineering work in operations; reduction of building materials for mechanical, electrical and plumbing resulting in a less proactive approach to building maintenance; reduction of sand/salt materials; elimination of temporary help during extended employee leaves; no replacement of "wear surfaces" (carpet, exterior painting, etc.); and elimination of three full time employees resulting in slower information processing and reduced commission support.

A 5% reduction would require cutting an additional \$323,000. The custodial contract would be cut by one-third; sidewalk and parking lot snow removal would be done on straight time, not overtime; an additional three full time support staff positions would be eliminated; and some reduction in operations staff not affecting public safety.

The wastewater function is fully supported by fees. No fee increase is proposed for FYE 2007. A zero dollar budget would require deferral of equipment and maintenance. A 5% reduction would require more deferral of mechanical, electrical and plumbing equipment and the elimination of one full time employee. If there is a problem at the treatment plant, it is a violation that carries with it substantial penalties.

In the solid waste function, costs have been reduced because the Town has moved to one commercial hauler. To achieve a 5% reduction in this function where all expenditures are billed out would require a projection of less waste being collected.

The recently completed Fleet Management Study recommended a vehicle replacement schedule modification with \$1.3 million worth of replacements. Mr. Schneider is estimating approximately \$1 million in replacements. To achieve a zero dollar increase, less vehicles would be replaced. A 5% reduction would mean eliminating support to outside agencies to eliminate one full time mechanic. Although it seems like a savings, but outside agencies and subdivisions would have to increase their internal budgets for vehicle repair.

Mr. Schneider stated the department is at minimum staffing and maximum efficiency. The department has the same number of staff in the Highway Division as in 1966, but there are a lot more roads. The Town has 91 miles of roads. The cost per mile is difficult to estimate because different towns include different services in their calculations, such as snowplowing.

If Councilors have additional questions for department heads, they should submit them to the Town Manager so the answers can be distributed to the entire Council.

**2005-0301**

**Council Goalsetting**

**Not Discussed**

**2006-0012**

**Implementation of 2005 Revaluation**

**Recommended for a Resolution**

Director of Finance Sal Pandolfo provided an update on the preliminary estimated grand list to the Committee. Assessor John Philip reviewed the document and pertinent figures. Mr. Pandolfo described an exercise estimating the change in 2005 taxes utilizing the estimated unadjusted net grand list and estimated mill rate.

*Councilor Sheets asked if the dollar amount of the shift from commercial/industrial to residential has been calculated. Town Manager Oefinger stated 3.5 to 4%.*

*Mr. Pandolfo reviewed the options to implement the revaluation: continue, delay for one year (with additional costs of approximately \$200,000), or phase in, which has three options associated with it.*

**A motion was made by Councilor Bond, seconded by Councilor Sheets, to recommend a resolution to not institute the revaluation of 2005 pursuant to the Connecticut General Statutes 12-62I.**

**Councilor Bond suggested that an additional year would allow the Town to lobby for tax reform. Councilor O'Beirne would strongly oppose delaying implementation for the following reasons: the Council deliberately chose to conduct a revaluation at four years rather than five years to reduce the step change; a delay will result in a significant cost to the Town; and there is an issue of fairness with people who would see a reduction in taxes continuing to pay more than their fair share. Housing costs may level in the next year, but they won't come down and in a year from now, there will be another increase. Councilor Bond stated she originally opposed doing the revaluation and she stated there will be a significant increase to taxpayers if the revaluation is implemented. Values were calculated at the peak of the real estate bubble. Councilor Bond suggested that "fair share" is subjective. The Town should pressure its legislative representatives to make changes at the state level. Councilor Sheets stated it is not fair to tax unrealized gain. Revaluations used to happen every 10 years when values did not skyrocket and 10 years was a closer link to the cycle of families as they moved through the system. Councilor Bartinik does not believe the Town will get any help at the state level and it is a disservice to the public to lead them to believe that there will be a change in the system in a year. Mr. Pandolfo recommends going forward with the revaluation. Councilor Sheets suggested that another year would allow people to make decisions, modify their budgets, etc. Mayor Watson agreed with Councilor O'Beirne, noting that the Town has already paid \$350,000 for the revaluation. Councilor Wright feels that an additional \$200,000 will be worth it in light of potential economic dislocation. Delaying will put the Town back on a 10-year cycle. Councilor O'Beirne favors property tax reform, but the state has mandated the process and change will not occur in the next year. It is wrong to postpone the revaluation, thinking the numbers will look better a year from now. Mr. Pandolfo noted that by statutes, the revaluation can only be delayed for one year. Councilor Sheets noted that in a year there will still be the option to phase in over three years. Councilor O'Beirne stated he has a greater objection to phase in because it requires people who are paying more than their fair share to pay more even longer.**

**The motion carried by the following vote:**

**Votes:** In Favor: 4 - Councilor Bartinik, Jr., Councilor Bond, Councilor Sheets and Councilor Wright  
Opposed: 3 - Mayor Watson, Councilor Kolnaski and Councilor O'Beirne, Jr.

**2006-0007 Legislative Policy (2006 Standing Referral)**

**Discussed**

*Representative Winkler and Senator Cook are available to meet next week prior to the Town Council meeting (6:00 p.m.). Assistant to the Town Manager Lee Vincent asked for topics for discussion to be e-mailed to him by the end of the week. Councilor Bond requested a letter be crafted asking that the State budget surplus be returned to the towns.*

**2005-0275 Voting Machines for 2006 Election**

**Recommended for Deletion**

*Town Manager Oefinger updated the Committee on the requirement for electronic voting machines, which has been delayed for one year. The Secretary of the State has indicated she has enough money to buy all the machines required for all towns in Connecticut. The Town Manager recommended deleting the referral and the Council concurred. Councilor Sheets indicated she will monitor this issue.*

**2005-0209 Water Pollution Control Facility Expansion**

**Discussed**

*Mayor Watson spoke at the DEP public hearing to seek assurance that Groton's facility will*

*remain on the priority list. Town Manager Oefinger added that the Town hopes to hear about DEP's technical review of the plans in the next couple of weeks so that a bid package can be issued in the next couple of months.*

**2005-0231 Regional Sewer System Issues**

**Discussed**

*Mayor Watson reminded the Committee of the special meeting with the Water Pollution Control Authority, Stonington's Board of Selectmen and Stonington's WPCA on January 12th at 7:00 p.m.*

**7. Consideration of Committee Referral Items as per Town Council Referral List**

*None*

**8. OTHER BUSINESS**

*Mayor Watson noted he has spoken to Dennis Popp about possible meeting dates for a joint meeting with the City Council.*

**9. ADJOURNMENT**

*A motion was made by Councilor Sheets, seconded by Councilor Kolnaski, to adjourn at 10:45 p.m.*

*The motion carried unanimously.*