

State of Rhode Island

County of Washington

In Hopkinton on the ninth day of May 2022 A.D. the said meeting was called to order by Town Council Vice President Sharon Davis at 6:30 P.M. in the Town Hall Meeting Room, 1 Town House Road, Hopkinton, RI 02833.

PRESENT: Sharon Davis, Robert Marvel; Scott Bill Hirst, Michael Geary; Town Manager Brian Rosso; Town Clerk Elizabeth Cook-Martin. Absent: Stephen Moffitt, Jr.

The Special Town Council Meeting was called to order with a moment of silent meditation and a salute to the Flag.

**DISCUSS/REVISE PROPOSED FY 2022/2023 BUDGET, INCLUDING EXPENSE, REVENUE, CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN AND WARRANT ITEM**

The Council discussed the proposed FY 2022/2023 Budget, including expense, revenue and Capital Improvement Plan. The Financial Town Assembly which is the hearing on the budget was held on May 3, 2022.

Councilor Geary advised that he was happy with the proposed budget. Councilor Hirst wished the public to know that the education line item was determined by the ultimate budget that is adopted by the Chariho School District. Mr. Rosso noted that the town's ultimate budget was basically the prior fiscal year budget except for the education amount which they will revise when the new contribution to Chariho is determined. All contractual obligations will still have to be paid whether the budget is approved or not. Councilor Hirst noted that the Council wished to increase the grant given to the ambulance corps; however, if the budget was rejected it would revert back to the previous year's budget and they would receive whatever they received the previous year. Councilor Davis noted that this was her fourth year on the Town Council and the town's budget has always been very efficient. Councilor Geary asked Mr. Rosso to explain the recent property evaluations. Mr. Rosso explained that there is no increase in taxes when there is a revaluation. The increase in taxes would occur during the budget process. For an example, if your property value increases by 20%, the mill rate would decrease so

the tax levy would stay the same. If property values decreased then the mill rate would increase. The only time that would vary was if the increase in your property value was higher than the average due to additions you had made to your property. Councilor Marvel noted that the current budget called for a four cent increase to the mill rate and that was assuming the last proposed Chariho budget was passed; however, it did not pass and he now would expect there to be a decrease on the mill rate. Mr. Rosso noted that once Chariho decreases their budget he will insert the figure into the town's proposed budget. Clerk Cook-Martin noted that the deadline to advertise the town's proposed budget and warrant items was May 31, 2022. Councilor Marvel felt it was important to note that the current draft budget only resulted in a four cent increase in the mill rate and with a decrease in the Chariho budget it would result in an even lesser amount. Mr. Rosso noted that in recent years the tax rate increase directly correlated with the increase in the school budget and the municipal budget has remained level for several years.

Holly Greene of North Road asked if the four cent increase had taken into consideration that the school budget did not pass and Mr. Rosso explained that the four cents reflected Chariho's second revised budget which was rejected. Mrs. Greene asked if the school budget was defeated once again would that mean there would not be a four cent increase in the town's tax levy and Mr. Rosso indicated that was correct; the Chariho budget would revert back to last year's budget. He noted that he has never seen this happen and Clerk Cook-Martin stated that in 2013 the Chariho budget went to three votes and was approved on the third vote.

Council Vice President Davis acknowledged that there was one warrant item proposed for the June 14, 2022 budget referendum ballot which was to restrict the unspent balance remaining in the Legal Fees - Solicitor line item #01-000-5225 and the unspent balance remaining in the Litigation & Collective Bargaining line item #01-000-5226 to be placed into the Legal Fees Restricted Account.

There were no revisions made to the proposed budget.

**DISCUSS, CONSIDER AND VOTE TO ADOPT THE FY 2022/2023 BUDGET AND WARRANT ITEM FOR THE JUNE 14, 2022 BUDGET REFERENDUM BALLOT**

A MOTION WAS MADE BY COUNCILOR MARVEL AND SECONDED BY COUNCILOR HIRST TO ADOPT THE FY 2022/2023 BUDGET AND WARRANT ITEM FOR THE JUNE 14, 2022 BUDGET REFERENDUM BALLOT.

IN FAVOR: Davis, Hirst, Geary, Marvel

OPPOSED: None

SO VOTED

**ADJOURNMENT**

A MOTION WAS MADE BY COUNCILOR HIRST AND SECONDED BY COUNCILOR MARVEL TO ADJOURN.

SO VOTED

**WORKSHOP RE: FUTURE FUNDING OF VOLUNTEER AMBULANCE SERVICES**

At 7:00 PM the Town Council opened a Workshop to discuss the future funding of volunteer ambulance services in an effort to: Determine advantages of Fire Districts increasing/beginning to fund ambulances without absorbing them; Determine obstacles that would prevent the Fire Districts from increasing and beginning to fund ambulances by increasing fire taxes; Discuss ways to overcome these obstacles; Discuss what would be the next step.

Councilor Davis noted that during the Hopkinton Town budgeting process it had become abundantly clear that Hopkinton cannot fully increase its funding to the Ashaway Ambulance Association and the Hope Valley Ambulance Squad to meet their needs. Both ambulances were requesting grants of \$100,000 for the 2022-2023 fiscal year. Hopkinton has increased their grants to \$62,000; however, they will still need an additional \$38,000 each to meet their requests. This workshop was being held in hopes of finding a solution to the ambulances funding shortfalls and she wished there to be discussion concerning the fire districts increasing or beginning to fund ambulances without absorbing them, rather than increasing property taxes. Councilor Davis read a statement she had prepared.

Eric Perrin, the Treasurer, Paid Crew Administrator and Board of Governors of Ashaway Ambulance, addressed the Council noting that he has been asking for a meeting for several years. He noted that their biggest problem is the amount of money that they receive for insurance reimbursements. Last year Ashaway Ambulance billed out \$775,000 and recouped \$113,000 in insurance payments. Mr. Perrin advised that he was strictly a volunteer and his only goal was to keep the doors open. He noted that recently he has been publicly attacked and told that he and his wife were embezzling money. He stated that he has been a volunteer of the Ashaway Volunteer Fire Department and Ashaway Ambulance Association for a very long time. Councilor Geary advised that he, as well as the Council, did not condone any kind of harassment and apologized to Mr. Perrin. He asked how billing through the insurance companies worked. Mr. Perrin explained that the problem was not with the billing company but with the insurance company's reimbursement levels which are the worst in the country. Mr. Perrin noted that he does not handle the money or the billing; it is all done by outside agencies. He is a liaison; he presents information at the meeting every month to the members of the organization and they approve or disapprove the bills, he signs the checks and they are mailed by an outside agency. The problem is the reimbursements from the insurance companies. Councilor Geary asked what their payroll cost was and Mr. Perrin advised that it was \$12,000 a month and they are not full time. There is a full time crew on from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Monday through Friday and they try to have a crew on from 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. Monday through Friday as well. On the weekend they have one member on and they try to back fill with volunteers. Councilor Geary asked how it is decided if Hope Valley Ambulance will respond to a call. Mr. Perrin noted that they have mutual aid agreements and if their ambulance is on a call they will tone out Hope Valley or Westerly depending on where the call is located in town. Mr. Perrin noted that what was happening recently was that Hope Valley and Westerly are both busy and then the call will go to Exeter, Coventry, Charlestown, Stonington or North Stonington and therefore response time is going to go down. Mr. Perrin stated that they had a 2005 and 2011 ambulance. He noted that in the past several years they have expended more than \$40,000 in repairs and maintenance fees for these two

ambulances. He suggested that another problem was that the hospitals are further away now because Westerly Hospital is not the go-to hospital anymore. This costs them more for fuel and there is more wear-and-tear on their vehicles.

Councilor Marvel asked what a crew consisted of and Mr. Perrin noted that they try to run at least a driver and an EMT or two EMTs on a crew. Councilor Hirst asked what the short term goals of the ambulance association were noting that the Ashaway residents pay for both ambulance companies through the town taxes and then pay again for Ashaway Ambulance through the Ashaway Fire District taxes.

Mr. Rosso advised that there is legislation being proposed to change the insurance reimbursement rates and Mr. Hirst believed that Brian Patrick Kennedy was supposed to be scheduling a meeting with Blue Cross. Councilor Hirst felt the ambulance associations were going to continually have problems due to the reimbursement rates. Mr. Perrin advised that he was going to have trouble paying his bills for the next pay cycle without receiving additional funding by next week.

There was mention of the use of COVID funds and Mr. Rosso noted that on the next Town Council agenda they were going to schedule some workshop dates to decide how the ARPA money was to be spent. Mr. Perrin explained that he had applied for and received PPP grants but that was not enough. Councilor Hirst asked what the life span of an ambulance was and Mr. Perrin suggested less than ten years but it depended on the mileage. Councilor Hirst wondered what the Richmond Town Government was going to do for the Hope Valley Ambulance Squad. Mike Williams, the former Fire Chief in Ashaway and the Chairperson of the Ashaway Fire District wished to explain that they did not wish to drag the Hope Valley/Wyoming Fire District or other ambulance associations into this discussion; he noted that this was strictly an Ashaway Fire District matter. He explained that they felt, as a district, that the situation with the Ashaway Ambulance Association was dire and their charter allows them to run an ambulance service should they choose to; however, they really do not wish to do that. Over the past three or four years they have given the Ashaway Ambulance Association \$50,000 per year. It has become clear that they needed to do more so they appointed an EMS Study Committee to look into ways to keep the Ashaway Ambulance Association solvent. Councilor Davis asked if the Ashaway Fire

District was willing to increase the fire tax to help cover what the Ashaway Ambulance needs. Mr. Williams noted that the EMS Committee suggested that they fund Ashaway Ambulance with more money and \$250,000 was the number that they had mentioned. They will propose this and have it added to their budget and the taxpayers at the annual financial fire district meeting will vote. Councilor Hirst felt that if they were proposing a major increase to the ambulance association, they should put a letter in the newspaper explaining the amount that they are proposing. Mr. Williams stated that they were not trying to hide this but people do not come to any meetings or come out to vote. Councilor Marvel wished Mr. Williams to send them the details of their upcoming meetings so they could help get the word out. Councilor Hirst stated that the annual meeting of the Ashaway Fire District is the third Thursday of July at 6:30 p.m. and if you are a registered voter in the Town of Hopkinton or an Ashaway fire district taxpayer you can vote. Councilor Geary suggested that it is extremely hard to get volunteers and if people want to get involved they should go to the meetings. Ken Brasier of 150 Maxson Hill Road wished to ask the Ashaway Ambulance some questions because there were rumors on social media. He asked what support Ashaway Ambulance cannot offer because they have EMTs on board but no paramedics. Mr. Williams advised that they could not provide paramedic level service which includes administering a host of medications. Mr. Brasier suggested that there was an innuendo that the ambulance drives all over town on joy runs and his question was does the ambulance leave the building other than for an aid run or for fuel. Michael Oceau noted that he was a 39 year member of the fire and EMS service and the Chairman of the Ashaway Fire District EMS Committee. He stated that they allow their crews to go out to get a coffee, get meals, do driver training, get familiarized with the area and obtain familiarization of the equipment. Mr. Brasier asked why they could not take their own vehicle to get a coffee and Mr. Oceau advised that this would leave just one person at the facility and the ambulance cannot leave with just one person; they are a paid crew and they go as a team. It was also noted that on a routine call they cannot run their lights and sirens, even to the hospital. Mr. Oceau noted that hospitals have different protocols and different rules and there are different levels of EMTs -

EMTS, Advanced EMT Cardiacs, Paramedics and EMRs. EMRs (emergency medical responders) are advanced first aiders who respond first and can provide some medications; EMTs (emergency medical technician) are the basic level of licensed responder who can provide medications, oxygen, defibrillation and who are the right hand person to the Advanced EMT Cardiac, who is allowed to carry a lot more drugs, provide defibrillation and intubate directly into the lungs, as well as having many other skills. The next step up would be a paramedic which requires more skills and a lot more training. Basic EMR training is about 80 to 100 hours; EMT training is around 300 to 500 hours; Advanced EMT Cardiac is around 800 hours; and, a paramedic would receive training of approximately 1,500 hours or up to two years depending on the classes that they attend. Mr. Octeau noted that he is a career firefighter and has worked at the T.F. Green airport for thirty years. He was also the town's EMS director for twelve years. He acknowledged that it is extremely difficult to get volunteers. He noted that there is a big problem with mental health and opioid addiction and suggested that there was an opioid settlement recently in Rhode Island where they handed out free Narcan to police departments and individuals; however, the ambulance associations did not receive any. One dose of Narcan costs them \$50 to \$75 and they sometimes have to use three or four doses on one individual. He suggested that the state gives money to police departments; however, the ambulance corps and fire departments need some as well. The EMS responders were on the front line during COVID and he felt they should receive some of the ARPA monies given to the town. All EMTs had to get the COVID vaccine or they would have lost their license. Mr. Williams explained that when the Ashaway Fire District first started granting money to Ashaway Ambulance one of the benefits to the taxpayers was no more subscriptions. They still bill the insurance companies but they only accept what the insurance company pays; they do not ask the patient to pay anything further. Councilor Marvel asked what the projected increase to the fire district taxes would be if they were to fund the Ashaway Ambulance \$250,000 and it was suggested that taxes would increase two cents per every \$10,000 in property value. If they received this funding they would be able to have a crew on 24/7. Holly Greene of North Road advised that she remembered

four years ago when Mike Williams asked for \$50,000 for the Ambulance Association from the Fire District, noting that it was supposed to be a one-time thing and he had made a statement that if they got this money they would be all set; but this has been a yearly grant since then. She asked if the \$250,000 grant was going to be an every year grant and Mr. Oceau suggested that yes, it would be, because the cost of a full time crew was approximately \$289,000 a year, without paying them any benefits. Mrs. Greene asked about the legality of the town granting money to a private organization. Town Manager Rosso noted that the town has always made contributions to nonprofits for as long as he could remember and he did not believe there was any legal issue with that. Mrs. Greene indicated that Mr. Perrin had stated that they were in dire need and wondered how much money they were asking for tonight. Mr. Oceau noted that this was only a workshop and he did not believe they were asking for any money tonight.

Councilor Davis noted that the town has budgeted \$62,000 for each ambulance association and Ashaway, in addition to that, already receives \$50,000 from the Ashaway Fire District. Mrs. Greene asked Councilor Davis if that would be double taxation since they received money from the town and money from the fire district. Councilor Davis advised that she did not think of it that way. Councilor Marvel suggested that the town provides them a grant every year to help offset their operating costs but it is not sufficient, so they are looking to get money elsewhere. The Ashaway Fire District was looking at increasing their funding to the Ashaway Ambulance to help offset their deficit. Dan Sherman, the Chief of the Hope Valley Ambulance noted that they are operating twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and they are at the paramedic level. Currently their payroll is approximately \$19,000 per month. Hope Valley has three ambulances, a 2017, 2014 and a non-transporting unit that is a 2009 and they are on a seven year replacement plan so they will be looking to buy another ambulance soon. He noted that the cost for a new ambulance was approximately \$280,000, of which Fifty Thousand Dollars was out of their control due to state mandated power loads which cut down on personnel back injuries. Other mandatory equipment needed in order to operate at a paramedic level are IV pumps (\$10,000), IV warmers and monitors (\$35,000); they need to replace one monitor and they will need one for

the new ambulance. The biggest issue they are facing is the lack of insurance reimbursements and this issue is currently before the legislation. He indicated that they handle more runs than Ashaway Ambulance Association so their collections are a little higher; suggesting that they bill out close to Two Million Dollars and they collect roughly \$350,000. He noted that unlike Ashaway Ambulance, Hope Valley is not in dire straits at the moment and they are doing okay financially; however, he believed this may become an issue in the next few years. Mr. Sherman stated that he has had some discussions with Chief Lee to see what they can potentially do with the fire district but that is not going to happen overnight. He added that this has been their busiest year so far and they are looking to add a third person for the summertime; therefore, their payroll will be increasing approximately \$54,000 for the summertime. Councilor Geary asked the hours of their crews and Mr. Sherman noted one shift was 5:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and the night shift was 5:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. Mr. Sherman noted that they cover all of Richmond and half of Hopkinton. They do have mutual aid agreements in place to assist other towns. He noted that they do receive funds from Richmond; however, this year they were level funded. Regarding EMTs, if they pay for a person's schooling that person will sign a contract to provide Hope Valley Ambulance with two years of service but there is a very large turnover. Chief Justin Lee of the Hope Valley/Wyoming Fire District noted that he has been in the department for twenty-seven years. Chief Lee stated that the ambulance companies in Connecticut receive twice the amount of insurance reimbursement than Rhode Island, which is a federal mandate set in 1975, so he felt Rhode Island should push for similar legislation. He realized that Hope Valley Ambulance and Ashaway Ambulance are struggling to get members for if someone went to Westerly or Exeter Ambulance Corps they can receive benefits and retirement funds. Chief Lee explained that in 1942 the Hope Valley Fire District was formed and in 1936 the Carolina Fire District was formed. Times have changed since then and they have to work together more; he felt the way that Ashaway Fire District was supporting the ambulance was great; however, the Hope Valley/Wyoming Fire District's charter does not allow them to fund the ambulance corps. Councilor Hirst asked if the Directors of the Hope

Valley/Wyoming Fire District and Carolina Fire District would support a change in the charter to either incorporate the Hope Valley ambulance or fund the ambulance. Chief Lee advised that without a long term plan in place he could not say yes and his three concerns were: (1) we need to look at what is best for the community; (2) what is best for their volunteers; and, (3) making sure whatever they do is financially sound for the community. Councilor Davis noted the reason for this workshop was due to the short fall to the Hope Valley Ambulance of \$38,000 and felt it would be helpful if the Hope Valley/Wyoming Fire District would be willing to fund that \$38,000 shortage through increasing the fire tax. Chief Lee indicated that Hope Valley Ambulance had come before their Board last year with this request and the Board denied it for several reasons; he did not feel that they would agree to a request this year. Councilor Davis asked Chief Lee what he felt the next steps would be and he felt the five organizations should get together to do little things, such as purchasing supplies together and to look for a long term solution. Councilor Geary noted that the legislation should be pushed for they cannot wait six months or a year before something was changed. Chief Lee stated that they needed to push legislators to provide adequate funding for EMS services for they are number 50 out of 50 states. Mr. Rosso noted that the two bills being proposed are House Bill 7180 and Senate Bill 2311. Councilor Davis asked Mr. Rosso if the town should send a Resolution in support of those bills and he indicated yes. Councilor Hirst suggested that everyone has to step up to the plate, the Carolina Fire District, Hope Valley/Wyoming Fire District and the Ashaway Fire District in supporting that legislation; he believed this issue was a multi-town issue. He did not feel that it was unreasonable to request the Hope Valley/Wyoming and Carolina Fire Districts to ask for a charter change. Chief Ronnie Sposato of the Ashaway Fire District noted that he has been a volunteer for 41 years. He felt that people need to understand that Ashaway Fire District started this in order to help Ashaway Ambulance because they were the ones in the biggest trouble. He agreed that in the long term the other districts were probably going to have to help out as well, but it is not as dire for them as it was for Ashaway at the time. He wished to note that by no means did Ashaway Fire District ever have the intention of forcing the other fire districts to get involved

with the ambulance corps. Paul Schaarschmidt, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Hope Valley/Wyoming Fire District noted that this was something that the Board would take into consideration to see what was possible if it was indeed necessary. He suggested if they were to start the process it would take a considerable amount of time to get the charter changed. He believed the federal government had given every town and city a sum of money for COVID and that money was supposed to be spent, not hoarded or saved; it appears that there are COVID funds in Hopkinton and Richmond that are just sitting there. Right now there seems to be an emergency situation and the ambulance companies need to be funded now or somebody is going to die. He noted that it costs approximately 58 cents per mile to run the ambulances. Mrs. Greene wished to clarify that the low insurance reimbursements was not just to ambulances; it was the whole medical establishment. She noted that she had a procedure performed at South County Hospital with a bill was \$6,200 and Medicare paid \$1,300 and this needs to be put on the legislators to change the reimbursement rate. Robert Greene of North Road stated that if Hopkinton had COVID funds he wished to know how much and why they were not releasing some money to an ambulance association that needs help. Mr. Rosso responded that the town has received \$2.4 Million in COVID Relief Funds and he believed Richmond received about the same amount. Generally speaking this issue is an ongoing issue and you do not put a one-time source of revenue on an ongoing expense. The problem is they need to try to find a way to fund and fix the problem; whether it is the billing or short fall revenue but just throwing money at it will not fix the problem. Mr. Rosso felt the ARPA money should be used for things like buying a new vehicle because that was a one-time source of revenue. There are a lot of parameters that need to be met in spending the COVID money since they are federal funds and they only recently received that information. Hopkinton plans on holding workshops with the Town Council to determine how they want to allocate those funds and they are looking at this money as a one-time gift which will never happen again. He noted that the town's Capital Improvement budget is \$135,000 which will go towards town equipment. They have tried to keep taxes low and have neglected the town's resources for decades and now they are at a point

where the town needs its resources as well. They will sit down and evaluate all the issues in town and decide how to spend that money. Scott Barber, Chief of the Richmond Carolina Fire District felt that they were not going to solve this problem in the eleventh hour and their fire district budget had to be submitted by May 1<sup>st</sup>. This is not a new problem and he felt the Town Councils should be lobbying for this legislation, noting that their fire district did not have the base that the town does. In order to change their charter there would need to be a Petition submitted by the voters of the fire district. The ambulance funding has always been done through the towns and they have never formally been asked to do any funding. The reason that they went to fire districts was because they had to beg the towns to survive and he did not feel a public service agency should have to beg for money. Chief Lee noted that the fire districts all work very closely together. Councilor Davis noted that the point of the workshop was to alert the public of the problem and also to find out what possibilities there might be to resolve this matter. Councilor Hirst wished to have a Resolution supporting those bills to approve at the next Council meeting. Peter Gingerella of Wich Way stated that he was new to this situation and was always aware that Ashaway Ambulance Association was having some problems; however, he did not know how bad this situation was until Mr. Perrin got up and spoke about how dire the current situation was. Mr. Gingerella noted that he was a member of the Ashaway Ambulance and Ashaway Fire Department in the late 90's and early 2000's and then he moved on to a full time firefighter career in the Town of Coventry for the Central Coventry Fire District which is also having similar conversations. He wished to clarify that if Ashaway Ambulance did not receive money in the near future they would not be able to operate and he was advised yes, that was correct. He asked what would happen if at the end of June Ashaway Ambulance could not put their trucks on the road. It was his opinion that under the mutual aid guidelines in the State of Rhode Island, Hope Valley, Westerly, Charlestown or North Stonington had zero obligation to send a rescue to the Ashaway section of town if Ashaway Ambulance could not reciprocate. Their obligation is to their taxpayers. Mutual aid is only if we can go to them and then they will come to us; however, if we cannot assist them they are not legally obligated to assist us.

Central Coventry in 2010 experienced this issue and it was testified in court by numerous fire chiefs in surrounding communities in Coventry that they would not be sending a rescue from the Towns of West Warwick or East Greenwich to Central Coventry to handle their runs because the West Warwick and East Greenwich taxpayers pay to have a rescue in that area for themselves. He felt that the town would be liable if someone died due to there being no ambulance service.

**CLOSE WORKSHOP**

A MOTION WAS MADE BY COUNCILOR GEARY AND SECONDED BY COUNCILOR MARVEL TO CLOSE THE WORKSHOP.

SO VOTED

The workshop was closed at 8:45 PM.

Elizabeth J. Cook-Martin

Town Clerk

Marita D. Murray

Deputy Town Clerk