

**SELECT BOARD MEETING MINUTES  
HYBRID MEETING  
MONDAY, APRIL 22, 2024  
APPROVED**

**SB Members Present:** Peter Cunningham, Chair; Becky Pine; Matt Pisani; Alison Manugian, Clerk;

**SB Members Absent:** John Reilly, Vice Chair;

**Virtually Present:** Mark Haddad, Town Manager;

**Also Present:** Kara Cruikshank, Executive Assistant to the Town Manager; Melisa Doig, Human Resource Director; Patricia DuFresne, Assistant Director of Finance/Town Accountant; Bud Robertson, Finance Committee Chair

Mr. Cunningham called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM.

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Mr. Cunningham announced that Election Day is Tuesday, April 23, 2024. The Polls will be open from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., and he encouraged everyone to go out and vote.

Mr. Haddad announced a change to the agenda due to the Charter. He said he needed to remove Arthur Cheeks's appointment as the Interim Fire Chief. After posting the agenda, he wanted to double-check with the Town Counsel to ensure they could make the Interim Appointment. Mr. Haddad was informed that the Charter does not differentiate between Permanent and Interim positions. Therefore, a Search must be conducted to bring at least two candidates to the Select Board, regardless of whether it is Interim or Permanent.

This decision has raised concerns as the Town needs a Fire Chief while any search takes place. Mr. Haddad suggested that they need to take some time to review the Charter to fix this problem, as it would come up again when there's a vacancy in the Offices of the Police Chief or Town Clerk. He said the Board or Town Manager should be able to appoint an Acting/Interim Police Chief, Fire Chief, or Town Clerk. Since an interim appointment cannot be made, Deputy Arthur Cheeks will manage the department as the Deputy while a Search is conducted. He said the next Select Board agenda will include an outline of the Search and the process to follow. Ms. Pine asked for an announcement on why a vacancy exists. Fire Chief Steele McCurdy has resigned to take on a new role as the Fire Chief in the Town of Littleton, effective May 31, 2024. Mr. Haddad thanked Chief McCurdy for his ten years of exceptional service to the Town of Groton and for leaving the department in a much better shape than he inherited. He wished the Chief nothing but the best in his future endeavors.

**PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD #1**

None

**TOWN MANAGER'S REPORT**

- 1. Consider Ratifying the Town Manager's Appointment of James Coughlan to the Groton Country Club Golf Staff, James Williams Jr. to the Groton Country Club Greens Staff, and Lynn Holdsworth as a Per Diem Van Driver for the Council on Aging.**

*Ms. Manugian made a motion to ratify the Town Manager's Appointment of James Coughlan to the Golf Staff for the Groton Country Club, James William Jr. to the Groton Country Club Greens Staff, and Lynn*

*Holdsworth as a Per Diem Van Driver for the Council on Aging. Mr. Pisani seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.*

## **2. FY 2025 Budget Update.**

Mr. Haddad explained that the GDRSD has revised its FY 2025 Assessment after the Override was defeated in Groton and Dunstable. The Town of Groton's Operating Assessment has been reduced from \$28,509,638 to \$26,412,384, a decrease of \$2,097,254. He wanted to make clear that the Town of Groton's anticipated FY 2025 levy limit has remained unchanged. The original proposed assessment from the Groton Dunstable Regional School District Committee (GDRSDC) and the proposed FY 2025 Municipal Budget created a deficit of \$1,478,254 for FY 2025. The \$1,478,254 deficit has now turned into an unexpended tax capacity of \$619,000. Mr. Haddad said he updated the Proposed Fiscal Year 2025 Operating Budget based on this. He has also made revisions to the Estimated Receipts based on the release of the House Ways and Means Budget. He noted that he would be attending the Finance Committee meeting on Tuesday, April 23, to discuss the following in more detail regarding the proposed FY 2025 Operating Budget:

- a. The proposed Municipal budget does not change. It remains at the original Proposed budget of \$17,271,660, an increase of \$381,271 or 2.26%.
- b. The GDRSD's Operating Assessment has been reduced by \$2,097,253 from \$28,509,638 to \$26,412,284.
- c. Mr. Haddad added a line item to the Proposed Budget entitled Groton Operating Grant in the amount of \$619,000.
- d. Mr. Haddad reduced the anticipated State Aid Number by \$18,744 to reflect the less than 1% increase proposed by the House Ways and Means Committee. To make up for this reduction, he increased investment income by \$ 18,744 to balance the budget.
- e. The new anticipated Tax Rate for FY 2025 is \$15.62 (based on FY 2024 values), which increases the average tax bill by \$368. Mr. Haddad confirmed that this includes the GDRSD's Operating Assessment and the Proposed Operating grant of \$619,000. This amount falls within the levy limit of Proposition 2 ½.

The School District reduced its Operating Budget by \$2.7 million, leading to 27 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) positions cut. Mr. Haddad said that if the 27 FTEs are laid off, the estimated cost of unemployment would be approximately \$800,000. To support the district in this situation, Mr. Haddad has proposed covering one-time costs related to unemployment or PFAS expenses for the next year (a proposed Operating Grant). The Board has received and reviewed the following Reports from Mr. Haddad for their review: the FY 2024 Levy Calculation as of April 13, 2024, the FY 2025 Proposed Budget of the Finance Committee to reflect the new Assessment from the GDRSD, the Proposed Operating Grant, and the FY 2025 Tax Impact Summary. (See the included Reports for your reference).

Ms. Pine inquired whether the Board needed to vote on the one-time Proposed Operating Grant. Mr. Haddad said he would attend the Finance Committee on Tuesday, April 23, to discuss the grant. He said the Finance Committee would need to approve the Proposed Grant, so he would like to attend the meeting with a vote of the Select Board in support of the Proposed Grant. Mr. Haddad noted that during the Select Board meeting on April 9th, he had asked if the Select Board was okay with him

attending the School Committee meeting on April 10th to propose the Operating Grant. They didn't vote but indicated they were OK with Mr. Haddad doing this. At their meeting, he told the School Committee that the Proposed Grant was subject to the Finance Committee approving it.

Ms. Manugian expressed her struggles and difficulty in supporting the grant proposal. She thinks that the Towns of Groton and Dunstable voters have made it clear they are not currently in favor of a Proposition 2½ override. She believes the voters will best understand the impacts of the failed Override once they see them, and the Proposed Grant of \$619,000 would soften the effect. For her to consider supporting the grant, she believes several steps need to be taken with the support and collaboration of the School Committee and Towns of Dunstable and Groton in conjunction with the grant. Ms. Manugian proposed five ideas associated with some costs that could be funded from the \$619,000. She read these into the record. She told the Board that she would need a commitment that those items are on the table and willing to be looked at to support this one-time gift.

Ms. Pine agreed with Ms. Manugian that there needs to be a commitment/change regarding the Regional Agreement to address the long-term problem. She also suggested joining Groton and Dunstable to create one municipality with a school system. Ms. Pine said she has one opinion that differs from Ms. Manugian's; she believes that the message from the voters was to live within your budget. She thinks giving the Proposed Grant to the School District is possible because it is under the levy limit. She also mentioned that the discussion of what the grant would fund has changed since the April 9th meeting. Initially, the Grant was going to support the operation of the Florence Roche Elementary School and have now shifted to helping with unemployment costs. Mr. Pisani said this could be an opportunity for change, and now is the chance to implement these changes. Ms. Manugian would like to determine whether the current Regional Agreement makes sense.

Mr. Cunningham said the money they are looking at is within the levy limit. Ms. Manugian is concerned about gifting the money to the district and doesn't think this is a long-term benefit. She believes it is difficult not to give the community what they voted for. Ms. Pine thanked Ms. Manugian for her ideas and said it was very clear that this was a long-term problem.

Mr. Haddad said earlier that day, he met with GDRSD Superintendent Dr. Chesson, the Town of Dunstable's Town Administrator Jason Silva, School Committee member Lacey McCabe, and Executive Assistant Kara Cruikshank to begin the conversation of bringing a consultant on once the new Superintendent starts. Mr. Haddad emphasized that he does not want the GDRSD to use any of the \$619,000 on recurring expenses. Instead, he suggested that the district use the funds on one-time costs, such as hiring a consultant to explore other ways to improve the district.

Mr. Robertson agreed with Mr. Haddad and Ms. Manugian's points. He supported the one-time Proposed Grant of \$619,000 for the schools but mentioned that the decision lies with the Finance Committee. He also noted that the schools would still face a significant impact on their budget, even with the one-time grant. Ms. Manugian asked what the response should be to folks frustrated with "rescuing Dunstable." Ms. Pine believes that they are not rescuing Dunstable; they are rescuing the kids in the schools. She said they are slightly reducing the impact on the schools because they have the capability to do so.

The Select Board debated the one-time Proposed Grant of \$619,000 to the GDRSD for some time and decided to put a motion forward:

*Ms. Manugian made a motion to support a one-time grant to the district for \$619,000, recognizing that all parties will collaborate throughout the next year and hire a consultant to analyze and create a zero-based budget for the district. They will discuss municipal and educational finance, explore alternatives to amend the Regional Agreement and consider alternative arrangements for the municipality. Ms. Pine seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.*

### **3. Update on Select Board Meeting Schedule Through the 2024 Spring Town Meeting**

Tuesday, April 23, 2024	2024 Annual Town Election
Monday, April 29, 2024	Regularly Scheduled Meeting
Monday, May 6, 2024	Regularly Scheduled Meeting
Tuesday, May 14, 2024	Virtual Meeting
Saturday, May 18, 2024	Potential Date for Special Town Meeting
Monday, May 20, 2024	Regularly Scheduled Meeting
Monday, May 27, 2024	No Meeting- Memorial Day
Monday, June 3, 2024	Regularly Scheduled Meeting
Monday, June 10, 2024	Regularly Scheduled Meeting
Monday, June 17, 2024	No Meeting
Monday, June 24, 2024	Regularly Scheduled Meeting

### **ITEMS FOR SELECT BOARD CONSIDERATION AND ACTION**

#### **1. Call for and Open the Warrant for a Special Town Meeting (Date to Be Determined, either Saturday, May 18, 2024, or Monday, May 20, 2024).**

Mr. Haddad said that now that they have received the Assessment from the GDRSD, the Select Board can call for a Special Town Meeting to vote on the Budget and conduct the annual business of the Town. He said many factors were considered when choosing the proposed Special Town Meeting date. Mr. Haddad recommended that the Select Board call for a Special Town Meeting on Saturday, May 18, 2024, beginning at 9:00 a.m. The meeting will be held at the Gymnasium of the Groton Dunstable Regional High School, located at 703 Chicopee Row. To make this a successful Town Meeting, with an eye on affordability, the following steps will be taken:

- a. The gym has a capacity of 1200 individuals. 800 residents can sit on the bleachers, and 400 chairs will be rented at a cost of \$1,410.
- b. A sound system has been rented at a cost of \$530.
- c. The Town of Lancaster will loan Groton 500 electronic voting devices, allowing 1100 voters to participate.
- d. The full Warrant will not be printed and sent to all residences. Since the Warrant is essentially the same as the 2024 Spring Town Meeting, we will post it on the Town's Website. Each resident will receive a postcard announcing the meeting and providing a QR Code that will take them to the Warrant. Printing the postcards will cost \$685. The postage cost will be determined, but it is expected to be around \$2,000.

- e. We will print a Handout with the motions, the Budget Message from the Town Manager and Finance Committee, and the proposed Budget (the cost will be determined based on the number of pages/copies).

Mr. Haddad said the total cost of the Town Meeting should be less than \$6,500. He said should the Select Board agree with the Proposed date and process, he respectfully requests that the Select Board call for a Special Town Meeting on Saturday, May 18, 2024, beginning at 9:00 a.m., to be held at the Groton Dunstable Regional High School Gymnasium, 703 Chicopee Row.

*Mr. Pisani made a motion to call for the 2024 Special Town Meeting to be held on Saturday, May 18, 2024, beginning at 9:00 a.m. at the Gymnasium of the Groton Dunstable Regional School District. Ms. Manugian seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.*

Mr. Haddad respectfully requested that the Select Board open the Warrant that evening and close it at 4:00 p.m. on Monday, April 29, 2024. To comply with the 14-day posting requirement, the Warrant will be posted on Friday, May 3, 2024, and will ensure the postcards are in the mail on Friday, May 3rd.

*Ms. Pine made a motion to open the Warrant for the Special Town Meeting on April 22, 2024, and close the Warrant on Monday, April 29, 2024, at 4:00 p.m. Mr. Pisani seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.*

**2. Approve the Creation of a Gift Fund for the Groton Historical Commission to Raise Funds for a LIDAR Scan of the Prescott House, 170 Old Ayer Road.**

Mr. Haddad said the Historical Commission is accepting donations to conduct a LIDAR Scan of the Prescott House at 170 Old Ayer Road. He respectfully requested that the Board vote to create a Gift Fund for this purpose so that they can collect the donations and pay for the Scan.

*Ms. Pine made a motion to create a LIDAR Scan Gift Fund for the Groton Historical Commission to raise funds for a LIDAR Scan of the Prescott House, 170 Old Ayer Road. Ms. Manugian seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.*

**3. Consider Approving a One-Day All Alcoholic Beverages License for the Friends of Prescott for the Gin and its Botanicals on Friday, April 26, 2024, from 7:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.**

*Ms. Manugian made a motion to approve a One-Day All Alcoholic Beverage License for the Friends of Prescott for the Gin and its Botanicals to be held on Friday, April 26, 2024, from 7:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Mr. Pisani seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.*

**OTHER BUSINESS**

**ON-GOING ISSUES**

PILOT's—Mr. Haddad said there have been ongoing conversations between him, the Groton School, and Lawrence Academy about PILOTS. He said there has been a robust citizens campaign in town. Mr. Haddad said they are doing everything they can. Ms. Manugian expressed her understanding of the interest in obtaining tuition funds from the local non-profit schools. She voiced concerns about the disorganized approach of the public towards these partners, which may result in reduced

willingness to pay for PILOTS. She and Ms. Pine informed everyone that if tuition money is to be paid, it should be paid to the district directly. She wanted to emphasize the need for thoughtfulness and consideration of alternative approaches. The municipal government respects the schools and does not request every member of the public to send letters to the headmasters. Mr. Cunningham stated that it is important for the Board members to have discussions with the non-profit schools. Mr. Pisani believes that the public perception is that the Board is not doing enough and that clear communication is necessary. Supporting these schools incurs significant costs, and they need to break even while maintaining the relationship. Ms. Manugian added that these schools bring tangible and intangible benefits to the town. Mr. Pisani said getting ahead of this issue was important and communicating that the Board is working with all of Groton's partners.

Mr. Robertson asked if there was a central location to send/mail ideas regarding the non-profits. Ms. Pine encourages private citizens to coordinate these efforts through the Town Manager's Office.

### **SELECT BOARD LIASON REPORTS**

#### **Public Comment Period #2**

None

#### **Approval of Special Meeting Minutes from April 3, 2024**

*Mr. Pisani made a motion to approve the Special meeting minutes of April 3, 2024. Ms. Manugian seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.*

#### **Approval of Regularly Scheduled Meeting Minutes from April 9, 2024**

*Mr. Pisani made a motion to approve the minutes of the regularly scheduled meeting of April 9, 2024. Ms. Manugian seconded the motion. The motion carried 3 in favor, 1 abstention (Manugian).*

The meeting was adjourned at 7:24 p.m.

Respectively submitted by Kara Cruikshank, Executive Assistant to the Town Manager