

Town of

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East Lyme

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East Lyme Selectmen:

Attached is the working draft of the town budget for the 2021-2022 fiscal year.

The world has changed quite a bit since my last budget to you. COVID-19 has re-shaped our world into one that was unimaginable just a year ago. Priorities have changed for the families that we serve and for the town that we collectively manage. Projects and progress have been met with the opposing philosophy of survival and “doing enough to get by”. I never dreamed I would have to shut down town buildings and services to the public. Never did any of us envision governing our town via internet meetings. Even during the dark days of last Spring, not many thought that a year later we would still be in this heightened state of quarantine and isolation. Sadly, the end is not near.

As we review this budget and plan for the coming fiscal year, it will be important to remember that we will be coming out of the pandemic during this coming budget period. We must strike a balance of maintaining a steady course but also answering to the rising demands of citizens who will be thirsting for normalcy and restoration of town services. This budget does just that.

Continuing the successful and steady progress the town has seen over the past 20 years is important. A real estate friend of mine is fond of saying that “East Lyme is the premier town in New London County. It is the gem of the Eastern Connecticut shoreline”. The value we deliver to our taxpayers is phenomenal. I believe our citizens choose to move here or choose to stay here for the quality of life that we have come to expect.

My message to you today, is the same message I have delivered for the past several years: When developing this budget, “value” for the taxpayers is the most important concept. Year in and year out we have always tried to find the balance between the taxes we must levy and the services we deliver. Diminishing state aid along with increasing state mandates and the natural rise in the cost of delivering municipal services forces us to strike a balance between raising taxes to pay for the services we value and eliminating services that we can no longer support.

As in the past six years, I have developed a bare bones budget. Our finance director, Anna Johnson and I met with each department head, agency, and commission to streamline all services that we deliver and expenses we must endure. Our largest investment every year is the people who work for our town and provide the services we value. Most of our budget goes to labor and the benefits that are provided to our workforce. In addition, we must continuously invest in maintaining our buildings and replacing equipment that has outlived its useful life. We must continue to invest in materials, equipment, maintenance, roads, and other resources, but we do so only after an exhaustive process of scrutinizing every detail and measuring each item’s value.

Outside of wage and benefit increases, there are a few items that have been included in this budget for your consideration:

Police Accountability Law: The new law in Connecticut that was passed last year included required mandates for each city and town's police force. They include increased training, testing, and equipment (body cameras). In addition there is an accreditation process that will take three years, require an outside consultant, and cost hundreds of manhours.

In addition, the budget includes two additional police officers. A recent study found that East Lyme ranks 4th from the BOTTOM in the number of officers per 1,000 citizens. (It doesn't even consider the seasonal residents we have in the summer). The Police Commission will make a presentation during the budget meetings for their plans to increase the force over the next few years. We have an obligation to meet these minimum requirements for those who work at the ELPD and for our citizens.

Building Department: This department has seen a record number of permit applications during the past 12 months. We have not been able to keep up with them. Statutorily, we have only 30 days to act on a building permit. We are often right up against the deadline. We have added money back into the account for more P/T inspector hours and administrative support. The department has a sizable revenue increase that will pay for these increases.

Information Technology: In last year's budget, we began to consolidate and control the growing IT issues in our town. We have made great progress bringing all our needs together under one budget thanks to the leadership of Joe Bragaw and our outside vendor, Star Computers. There are some increases in this budget mostly due to an increase in the cost for service from Star.

Inland Wetlands: I have included \$25,000 for an added Inlands Wetland Officer. This would obviously be part-time hours coming from the pool of planners at the SCCOG, our regional planning agency. The Inland Wetlands Commission recently enacted new regulations that expand the upland review area from 100 feet to 300 feet. It is anticipated that many, many permits and home projects will need to go thru a new process of approval. This will put an additional strain on the department head and admin team. There will be an added and separate fee for the additional applications to cover some of the added expenses. (This regulation is currently being appealed and could be reversed).

These are tough days for municipalities. We are faced with rising costs for goods and services year after year. Though Connecticut's binding arbitration laws allow for municipal and state employee wages to outpace the private sector, we have successfully negotiated small cost of living increases and also made improvements to the terms of the contracts. The employee/employer relationship throughout town departments is strong. We must continue to value those who serve our town.

Conclusion

We are quite fortunate to have department heads who remain dedicated to excellence. Along with their crews/teams, they do an incredible job with their respective departments and they inspire their teams to deliver first class service to our taxpayers. A great majority of them live in our town and they understand first-hand the struggles of balancing services with increasing costs. This is my seventh budget. Each year, my message to our department heads has remained the same: "This is going to be a difficult budget season". Like every other year, these leaders have found efficiencies to hold down expenditures in their departments. I am fortunate to work alongside these professionals and I am often amazed at their attitude, persistence, and ability to lead their departments through this economic hardship. East Lyme continues to deliver municipal services with less...our department heads deserve all the credit.

Anna Johnson is not only the town's Financial Director; she has earned a leadership position in the overall operation of the town. She is trustworthy, dependable and an amazing asset to all those who have the pleasure of dealing with her. I could not do the job I'm doing without her guidance and support. Her knowledge and expertise in all the town's functions is incredible. There is significant value when someone with her talent works in a position long enough to understand the bigger picture and is able to guide others. I am very grateful for her service to our community.

In closing, the budget is one of the most important things the Board of Selectmen does in the course of the year. Reviewing each department's past successes and future plans is an important part of the management process; and we do it quite well. I encourage and welcome your participation. I encourage debate and discussion. Through this process we will best serve the citizens and taxpayers of this great town of East Lyme.

Respectfully submitted,



Mark C. Nickerson
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