

BOF March 24th, 2025
Special Meeting Minutes

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Minutes of Board of Finance March 24th, 2025, Special Hybrid Meeting - 03/24/25

Date and time: 03/24/25 05:30 pm to: 03/24/25 07:14 pm

Present: Brooke Stevens, Rec Secretary (* Ms. Stevens was not in attendance), Paul Maxfield, John T. Birmingham, Richard Steel, Lauren McNamara, Denise Hall, Chairperson, Scott McAllister, (Via Zoom)

CC: Dan Cunningham, First Selectman, Kevin Gervais, Finance Director, Jeffrey Newton, East Lyme Superintendent of Schools, Maryanna Stevens, BOE Finance Director, Eric Bauman, Board of Education Chair, Annaliese Spaziano, East Lyme Assistant Superintendent of Schools

Location: East Lyme Town Hall, Upper Conf. Room, 108 Pennsylvania Avenue
Niantic, CT, 06357.

Topics

1. Call Meeting to Order & Pledge

Note Chair Hall called the March 24th, 2025, Special Hybrid Meeting of the Board of Finance to order at 5:30 p.m. and led those assembled in the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. Delegations

2-1. Barry Sheckley of 21 Compass Court

Note Mr. Sheckley A retired professor, presented questions for the Board of Finance to consider regarding the Board of Education's budget. With the town Charter's charge to advance effectiveness and efficiency in town governance, he asked to what extent the \$64 million Board of Education budget proposal demonstrate accountability in effectively and efficiently advancing students' academic performance and academic growth?

His questions also focused school improvement plans, alignment with the Board of Education goals, and potential budget reductions.

He cited specific data points and benchmarks, including those from Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). He mentioned possible budget reductions, such as reviewing non-instructional contracts and fundraising practices. (See below attachment provided by Mr. Sheckley.)

 [25-03-19 budget questions 3.docx](#)

2-2. Timothy Dowd of 66 East Pattagansett Road

Note Mr. Dowd, a high school teacher and parent defended the Board of Education's budget. He emphasized that the budget is a "keep things at the level they're currently at" budget, not a growth budget.

He argued against budget cuts, stating they would negatively impact students.

He addressed the comments made by Mr. Sheckley and gave his opinion on the current state of education. The National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that as a country, we are in deep trouble regarding where our children are right now.

To look at ESLM scores and suggest wrongdoing, or that the district is not doing its best is a bit disingenuous. At the moment, everyone is on board with getting our kids to where they need to be. We are opening new pathways for people. The work Dave Fazulo has been doing to direct kids who may not see college as the best route for them toward other jobs is the kind of work we need to be doing. If we cut funding, he doesn't see how that will help some of the progress numbers that were cited.

3. Additions to the Agenda

Note There were none.

4. New Business- Budget Reviews

4-1. Board of Education

Note see attachment.

 [BOARD OF EDUCATION ADOPTED Budget 2025-2026.pdf](#)

Note The 2025/2026 proposed Board of Education budget was presented.

Eric Bauman, Board of Education Chair, highlighted the extensive process involved in creating the budget: He identified key cost drivers, including special education and transportation.

He mentioned budget reductions already made by the Board of Education, such as eliminating vacant positions and reorganizing technology services.

He cited the district's academic achievements, including the high school ranking as the 10th best in the state.

He warned that further budget reductions would necessitate staff reductions.

Note *The current busing policy provides transportation for students living one mile or more from school. It is emphasized that the BOE policy also requires consideration of safety hazards along walking routes, such as busy roads or dangerous crossings, especially for younger students.

*The bus system is designed to serve all three school levels (high school, middle school, and elementary) with each bus, meaning that cutting bus service for one level would negatively impact the others; therefore, there would be no actual cost savings from reducing bus services.

*The daily cost of the busses is mentioned as being \$377 or \$378.

Superintendent Newton discussed the budget in great detail and:

Thanked the administrative team and staff for their work on the budget.

Emphasized the district's focus on the "whole child" and highlighted various student and community programs.

Detailed the budget development timeline.

Expanded upon the cost drivers, particularly special education and transportation.

Announced a \$150,000 savings due to lower-than-expected insurance costs.

Explained the Board of Education's budget reduction efforts.

Identified staffing needs, including a school psychologist and a family and consumer science teacher.

Noted that that 98.8% of their \$64 million budget is associated with fixed costs, such as contractual obligations and health insurance.

Discussed fixed costs, per-pupil expenditures, and future enrollment projections.

Highlighted shared services initiatives with other districts, aimed at cost mitigation.

Explained the regional remote learning partnership.

Note Ms. Hall detailed the budget questions the Board of Finance had submitted to Mr. Newton, and his answers:

Note 1. Class size-

The BOF reviewed a chart comparing class sizes across several districts, including East Lyme.

Note *A key observation was that East Lyme High School's class sizes appeared relatively low compared to those of its peers.

*The districts compared were East Lyme, Woodstock, Clinton, Norwich, Rocky Hill, Mansfield and Waterford.

Note 2. Test Scores vs. Cost Per Student-

*The BOF inquired about a measure comparing student test scores to the cost per student.

A graph was provided, showing East Lyme in the "high outcome, high cost" quadrant.

The Superintendent acknowledged the goal of moving towards the "high outcome, lower cost" quadrant.

3. Bus Transportation & Savings-

*A Board of Education member had previously raised the question of whether enforcing stricter distance limits for bus transportation could result in cost savings.

Note The Superintendent explained that a past attempt to reduce bus services resulted in significant logistical problems and disruptions.

*It was noted that the lower-class sizes were predominantly at the high school level.

The middle school class sizes were considered to be within a "sweet spot" of 20 to 24 students.

Elementary school class sizes were also within the district's guidelines.

*The lower high school class sizes were partly due to a smaller student cohort currently in that school, a "bubble" that had moved up from the middle school.

Note *The accuracy of the comparative data was brought into question, because of the different core setups, and how the other districts share their numbers.

*AP courses have class sizes that range from 9 to 24 students.

Sometimes AP courses and non-AP courses are combined.

East Lyme High School offers approximately 20 Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

Note 4. Staffing-

Mr. Steel inquired whether the BOE's budget included provisions for replacing upcoming retirees.

*Mr. Newton clarified that one elementary-level position had already been eliminated through attrition (meaning they will not replace that person), avoiding any job losses.

*However, the budget does include the replacement of other positions, particularly at the high school level. The high school replacements are deemed necessary, especially for the technology position and the family and consumer science teacher.

*The need to replace the family and consumer science teacher is directly tied to a state-mandated financial literacy course that all students must take.

He characterized the financial literacy course requirement as an "unfunded mandate," meaning the state requires it but does not provide additional funding to cover the associated costs.

*It was clarified that there were not six retirees, but rather six vacant positions.

These vacant positions were positions that were budgeted for, but not currently filled.

*These vacancies occurred for various reasons, including employees leaving the district.

Of the six vacant positions, five were paraeducator positions, and one was a teacher position.

The teacher position was vacated due to retirement.

5. Technology reorganization-

*Mr. Newton explained that three individuals from Custom Computers were brought on board, a technology lead and two technicians.

All three positions are full-time.

*The contract amount with Custom Computers, was stated to be \$399,000.

The total salary and benefits for the three individuals who were brought onto the school district's payroll are around \$220,000 total; this does not include benefits.

6. Professional Development Costs-

*The BOF highlighted a significant increase in professional development costs from \$35,000 in 2025 to approximately \$120,500 in 2026, a 244% increase.

*The primary reason for this increase is the implementation of a new reading program, "Wit and Wisdom," mandated by the state.

The costs cover professional development for teachers to effectively use the new program, which involves on-site training with visiting experts.

*Most professional development is conducted on-site, with experts coming to the school district.

When off-site training is required, teachers can receive mileage reimbursement, although carpooling is encouraged.

*Professional development costs are covered by the school's operating budget.

Previously, some professional development was funded by the state "Right to Read Act" grant funds, which were one-time funds and are no longer available.

*Title funds, which are federal funds, have been reduced, and were also used to fund some of the paraprofessional professional development.

*The reduction of grant money, and the new state mandates are the reason for the increase in the professional development line item.

Note Mr. Birmingham inquired about the school's computer acquisition plan, specifically the lifespan and replacement cycle of notebooks and computers for students and teachers.

Mr. Newton explained that they utilize a four-year replacement cycle for devices, with some older devices being refurbished and passed down; the capital budget, separate from the operating budget, funds the acquisition of these devices.

Mr. Maxfield asked about state funding for educational cost sharing and special education reimbursement and Mr. Newton shared some of the following:

The school district is hoping to be "held harmless" regarding educational cost sharing, which is projected to decrease.

Special education reimbursement from the state has decreased from over 80% to 60%.

The Governor has released additional funding, but the school district's share is relatively small.

Mr. Maxfield also inquired about the school data center and if it was integrated with the town's.

Mr. Newton replied that it has its own data center, separate from the town's.

The district utilizes managed services from Custom Computers for technology support.

Mr. Maxfield suggested exploring external data center services to handle equipment upgrades and maintenance.

Mr. Maxfield asked about Sports Co-ops and Mr. Newton offered the following remarks:

The school district participates in sports co-ops with other schools, primarily for sports with low student participation.

Examples include boys' swimming, ice hockey, wrestling, and gymnastics.

Funding for these co-ops varies; some are funded by the school district, while others, like hockey, are primarily funded by parents.

The funding for the co-ops that the school is involved in, is minimal, and is used to pay for coaching stipends.

Ms. McNamara inquired about cost-sharing opportunities for professional development and software and Annaliese Spaziano, East Lyme Assistant Superintendent of Schools, said some of the following:

Cost-sharing for software licensing is generally not feasible.

However, the school district has collaborated with other districts, such as Waterford, for professional development through classroom observations.

The school district has tried to get cost sharing agreements for software, in order to get greater purchasing power, but has been unsuccessful so far.

In response to an earlier part of their discussion, Mr. Newton clarified that there are 12 teachers with bachelor's degrees, and 163 teachers with master's degrees.

Note Mr. Steel inquired about the following budget line-item changes:

1. Mileage (Middle School)-

*A mileage expense of \$775 appeared in the 2026 budget, whereas it was zero in 2025.

Mr. Newton said there was likely no travel budgeted for in 2025, and the 2026 budget accounts for increased travel for conferences and other events.

2. Software (Middle School)-

*A similar situation occurred with software at the middle school, with a zero expense in 2025 and \$1,950 in 2026.

3. Textbooks (High School):

*The textbook budget for the high school doubled from the previous year.

Ms. Spaziano attributed the increase to a textbook replacement cycle, particularly for science textbooks, which had fallen behind during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. The professional development budget for central office increased from zero in 2025 to \$10,000 in 2026.

Maryanna Stevens, the BOE Finance Director, noted this increase covers attendance at conferences related to software programs like Infinite Campus and Frontline.

5. Coastal Connections-

*Mr. Steel asked when the program was disbanded and if its cost of \$400,000 resulted in savings anywhere else in the budget.

Mr. Newton said the Coastal Connections program was transitioned to the Pathways program last year, and Ms. Stevens said the transition resulted in approximately \$40,000 in savings, primarily due to the absorption of staff and program supplies back into the high school.

Mr. Steel said it was initially created to serve students who struggled in traditional classroom settings and Mr. Newton replied that the Pathways program continues to meet the needs of these students, with a support center in the high school library.

Note Mr. McAllister inquired about the usage of counseling and mental health support services for students and staff:

*Mr. Newton reported a growing need for these services.

*The school district partners with CHC, an outside organization, to provide additional counseling services; 17 students are currently making use of the counseling services.

*The school also provides counseling through in school counselors at all levels.

Mr. McAllister questioned whether there's a critical mass of students in a class that negatively impacts performance at the high school level:

*Mr. Newton explained that optimal class sizes vary depending on the subject and classroom configuration.

*Lab-based classes require smaller sizes for safety reasons.

*Older classrooms in the high school have limited space.

*Student devices and backpacks also take up classroom space.

*Math classes can have up to 30 or 31 students, while other classes may have fewer.

*He's aware that some class sizes are low.

Mr. McAllister asked about the factors that contribute to teacher satisfaction and retention:

*Mr. Newton cited a positive climate and culture, reasonable class sizes, and professional development opportunities as key factors.

*The school district has conducted surveys to gather teacher feedback.

*The school district believes that it does a good job of retaining teachers, even when neighboring districts offer higher pay.

*There are differences in the challenges faced by teachers at different grade levels.

Mr. Birmingham inquired about the number of administrative staff, certified teachers, and paraeducators:

*Mr. Newton reported that there are approximately 17.5 administrative staff members.

*There are 298 certified teachers in the district.

*The number of teachers has remained relatively stable over the past few years, despite a decrease in student enrollment at the high school.

*There are 114 paraeducators in the district.

*Paraeducator salaries are significantly lower than teacher salaries.

The BOF highlighted the fact that student enrollment has decreased, while teacher staffing has either increased slightly or remained relatively level:

*Over the past five years, student enrollment at the high school has decreased by 135 students.

*Student enrollment went from 1,025 students in the 2020-2021 school year to 890 students in the 2024-2025 school year, while the number of certified staff (FTE teachers) at the high school has slightly increased from 105.5 in the 2020-2021 school year to 106.8 in the current year.

*Mr. Newton reiterated that a bubble of students moved from the middle school to the high school, which meant that staff that had been reduced at the middle school and was not able to be reduced to the same degree at the high school.

Mr. Birmingham questioned the number of buses and their usage:

*The school district uses 21 regular buses and 7 smaller vans.

*The smaller vans are used for preschool and individual student transportation.

*The school district officials confirmed that there are spare buses that are not used on a daily basis.

*Mr. Newton noted the location of the busses is not suitable.

Mr. McAllister suggested tracking bus usage to optimize deployment and the possibility of using Gen AI to analyze bus usage data.

Note Ms. Hall said and discussed some of the following:

There has been substantial growth in the Board of Education's operating budget over the past few years-

2021-2022- \$52,097,000

2022-2023- \$54,108,223

2024-2025- \$64,025,000

*The Board of Education is requesting an additional \$4,32,725,000 increase, bringing the total to \$64,057,400.

She emphasized the significant impact this budget increase will have on residents, particularly those on fixed incomes.

*She expressed concern about the year-over-year growth of the budget, especially considering the recent Consumer Price Index (CPI) of 3% compared to the proposed 6.72% increase.

She questions the sustainability of such large budget increases for the town.

She acknowledges the significant increase a few years prior, which can be attributed to COVID-19 related expenses.

She noted the collaborative efforts between the town and the Board of Education, particularly regarding the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), to avoid duplicating efforts.

*She also acknowledges the town's own budget increase, from \$18,472,000 to \$22,000,000, attributing it to investments in public safety.

*She also mentioned the town trying to focus on maintaining current infrastructure, versus new projects.

*She acknowledges the need to retain teachers, as the town was previously in the lower range of competitiveness.

*She also notes that they knew that increasing teacher salaries would come at a cost.

She indicated that the Board of Finance will be completing its review of the town's budgets and then begin deliberations on the Board of Education's budget.

She expressed a desire to reach a compromise that is acceptable to all parties involved.

Note Mr. Newton expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to present the budget.

4-2. Capital Projects

Note Ms. Hall acknowledged the work of the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) committee, particularly Mr. Lund's efforts in prioritizing projects. The CIP committee's recommendations were forwarded to the Board of Selectmen and then to the Board of Finance.

Ms. Hall asked if there have been any updates to the projects since the last CIP meeting, and it was confirmed that there were no updates.

Mr. Newton expressed his thanks for the renewed collaboration between the various town boards on capital projects.

5. Public Discussion

Note There was none.

6. Board Comments

Note There was none.

7. Adjournment

Decision MOTION (1)

Mr. Birmingham moved to adjourn the BOF March 24th, 2025, Special Meeting at 7:14 p.m.

Mr. Maxfield seconded the motion.

Motion carried, 6-0-0.

Note Respectfully Submitted,

Brooke Stevens, Recording Secretary

Next Meeting

Meeting title: Board of finance march26th, 2025, special hybrid meeting
Date and time: 03/26/25 05:30 pm to: 03/26/25 09:08 pm
Location: East Lyme Town Hall, Upper Conf. Room, 108 Pennsylvania Avenue
Niantic, CT, 06357.