

Minutes
Coventry Town Council Meeting
February 6, 2017
Town Hall Annex

1. The meeting was called to order at 7:30 PM.
Present: Richard Williams, Julie Blanchard, Thomas Pope, Andy Brodersen, Hannah Pietrantonio, Justin Trzaskos
Absent: Matthew O'Brien
Also present: John Elsesser, Town Manager; Beth Bauer, Finance Director

2. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

3. **Audience of Citizens:**

Jennifer Beausoleil, 221 Eastview Drive, was present as an education advocate. She asked the Town Council to consider sending a letter to State officials asking them not to pass on the 10% TRB bill to local municipalities. It is a difficult bill to receive in July after you've already passed your budget, and it could have a difficult effect not only on taxpayers but on school services as well.

Howard Haberern, 99 David Drive, noted the recent retirement of (Transportation Coordinator) Leigh Wajda, and asked whether she was recognized for her service. He said she was great for the Town – she did so much, including going out of her way to give each driver a gift at Christmas. She never wants recognition but he hopes the Town can do something.

Police Chief Mark Palmer was present to recognize the good work of several officers. The Police Department won the Law Enforcement Challenge award again as a result of our traffic safety and public education campaigns. Detective Spadjinske and Officer Carpenter attended the event. It is a very competitive award and we compete against quite a few agencies. Chief Palmer has issued a commendation to Jeff Spadjinske who has put the application together for several years. He said we have won the award 7 years in a row and it shows the hard work of our officers to keep citizens safe.

Chief Palmer also presented two special commendations for Officers Ted Opdenbrouw and Thomas Kuhns. He said this is the second year in a row that these two officers have received awards for perfect attendance. This is a significant accomplishment, as police officers are exposed to individuals who are sick and arrive to work in all kinds of weather.

Chief Palmer also presented a commendation to Officer Wayne Greener for activity in the field of traffic enforcement. He said this doesn't mean everyone who gets stopped gets a ticket. This is also an opportunity for positive contact such as a verbal warning. Tickets are also a reminder that we expect people to follow the laws. Chief Palmer noted that Officer Kuhns is also a top performer in this area. Officers Brian Flanagan and Kelsey Carpenter are also active in traffic enforcement, especially texting and the use of cell phones while driving. Officer Carpenter also has missed no time in her first 6 months.

4. **Acceptance of Minutes, January 23, 2017:**
Motion #16/17-127: Thomas Pope moved to accept the minutes of the Town Council meeting on January 23, 2017, seconded by Andy Brodersen. The following corrections were requested:

- Page 4, first sentence, add the last name of Sposito to the individual from the audience.
- Page 6, second paragraph, 3rd line: It was noted that the numbers shown in the minutes correctly reflect what was said, but the budget document has different numbers.
- Page 8, third line, change “that” to “than.”

The motion to accept the minutes as corrected carried on unanimous vote.

5. **Consent Agenda:**

Motion #16/17-128: Andy Brodersen moved and Hannah Pietrantonio seconded to accept the Consent Agenda. Hannah requested to remove item 6F5. The motion to accept the Consent Agenda as modified carried on unanimous vote.

6. **Reports:**

A. Council Chairwoman – June Blanchard: Julie has been in communication with the Board of Education for information we hope to have for the Finance Committee meeting regarding staffing numbers and reports and corrections to the audit. Thomas Pope asked if that included enrollment numbers, saying the Governor’s new formula is going to rely heavily on that. John Elsesser said he forwarded revised staffing numbers from (School Business Manager) Robert Carroll going back five years. He met with (Superintendent) David Petrone and asked him to look at enrollment numbers for the same years to be sure they are valid. We don’t know the date for the numbers used in the audit. Julie said when that information is received it will be discussed at Finance and brought back to the Council. Richard Williams asked for a clarification whether these numbers are for grades K-12. John replied it is more than that – it is all students we are legally obligated to educate, which includes ages 3-20 and those with a nexus in our town. The official numbers for the State of CT are available on State website. He will forward a link. Those numbers are official but they are usually about two years old.

Julie provided an overview of a tentative schedule for budget meetings with Town departments and the Board of Education and asked if the Council would like to see any other groups. Justin Trzaskos asked whether we should add the library. Julie replied she doesn’t feel she needs to; she doesn’t have any questions for them. She understands their budget and where they’re headed. Justin said ok. John Elsesser suggested taking a look at the Manager’s budget when it comes out and seeing if some questions arise. If so we could call in other departments.

8. **New Business:**

A. Motion #16/17-129: Thomas Pope moved and Richard Williams seconded to add an item to the agenda as item 8A, 16/17-39: Consideration/possible suggestions on Proposed Bill H.B. 6099, “An Act Concerning the Operation of Group Homes Maintained by the Department of Children and Families.” The motion carried on unanimous vote.

Chief Palmer joined the meeting to discuss this issue. Julie Blanchard said that John Elsesser had emailed information on the proposed bill, which has been introduced by our State Representative, Tim Ackert. Rep. Ackert has asked if there is anything we would like to see in the bill. People are also invited to speak at the Public Hearing, which will take place tomorrow at 10 AM at the Legislative Office Building. John Elsesser said if someone is interested in speaking there is a Connecticut Conference of Municipalities staffer who can sign people up to speak. He noted that this is a placeholder bill. Not all bills get hearings, but if they do it is important to show support or they go away quickly. We had a discussion about the Grant House on Dunn Road and other group homes a while back in terms of frequency of police and ambulance visits. Thefts by group home residents and neighborhood safety concerns have also been expressed by Coventry citizens. Rep. Ackert was here for those discussions and submitted a bill to begin improving those situations. This is a start. John sent several ideas for Council consideration in advance of this

meeting. He said we recognize that group home residents can leave, but once the home staff believes they are missing, they are required to report it to the Police Department. In a recent incident, a resident had outstanding warrants so maybe a process should be put in place to check for that before placement. There are also issues of ambulance transport – the home’s hospital preference is the CT Children’s Medical Hospital. That is a long trip and takes a lot of time for our volunteer ambulance personnel. While we can bill for services it is typically at the Medicare rate which does not cover expenses of going on that call. If ambulance calls are being used as a way of calming the child, they should come up with a different technique to cover the cost. We could consider whether we want to look at charging more for excessive police calls. Also if the home becomes a public nuisance (using a standard set for bars as an example) that they pay a penalty or lose their license. Each idea may have pros and cons.

Thomas Pope mentioned another idea suggested by (Council member) Matt O’Brien for a 24-hour live complaint hotline that neighbors with problems could use. This would establish a permanent record if there is a continual problem. John said also on his list was providing notice to the neighbors. Thomas said it seemed like a lot of the issue was the interruption of the neighbors’ ability to quietly enjoy their properties.

Chief Palmer said since the Council last discussed this issue, he called a meeting with both directors of the group homes in town. We had a lengthy discussion that included concerns of neighbors as well as the Town Council. He asked them to go home and watch the video of that Council meeting to gain a sense for the scope of the concern. He did get the sense that they will contact the Police Department as soon as they realize a resident is missing. Some residents do have the ability to leave the home, go to the store, etc. There are times they are allowed to do this and if procedures are not followed then staff is required to call. The Director of the Dunn Road home committed to providing her cell phone contact information to the neighbors. She also committed to following up once a month. Incidences can rise and fall based on the residents. Sometimes the fit is not good. They have kept up with the monthly contact that they promised. He thinks our concerns resonated with them. In terms of a statewide bill, he said it is difficult to speculate what other towns/police departments would like to see. Most DCF group homes had a policy of not reporting a child missing unless it had been several hours. We don’t know if other towns will want to operate the way we do. He knows what he would like to see and thinks we have made progress with improving lines of communication. We did have a couple of calls and had to make one arrest. He understands they have changed their ambulance policy to go to Manchester Hospital instead of CCMC in most cases. That should save some time and maybe some costs. There are no guarantees – it ebbs and flows with the clients. It is hard for him to pinpoint exactly what they would be looking for in a statewide bill. We want to know when the clients have gone AWOL. He thinks a hotline would be a good idea but doesn’t know if DCF will want to get involved in staffing it - they have a lot of responsibility now. We might be able to field it from our town. The Police Department motto is “no call is too small.” We respond. The group home on Dunn Road has given their assurance that they will try to keep the kids contained in the yard, although they have the right to go down the street, visit friends, etc. It is not a lock-down situation. Regarding sending children to the hospital for acting out – it is important to know that the group home has a policy of no physical contact by their staff. We have also decided we are going to be planning some activities where kids can come to the Police Department and chat with officers. Sometimes if there is an issue and a kid sees an officer they know we might be able to resolve the situation without ambulance transport or further escalation. The kids are not in these homes long term - they come and go, but it is a long-term model that we need to keep track of.

Hannah Pietrantonio said we had discussed the age range of the residents. At this home they

started at a younger age and then it changed to older kids who started getting in trouble. It would be good to get some sort of notification that older kids are present. Wouldn't DCF want to find a more urban setting where there is more for them to do? Chief Palmer replied there are group homes in many settings. Our town has no public transportation so they either need to walk or get a ride. The way it was explained was through an intensive intake process, the counselor tries to make the best decision possible for the welfare of the child. It may make more sense to get them out of an urban environment in some cases. Justin Trzaskos asked if there is an age limit. Chief Palmer replied it can be up to age 21. The Dunn Road home is up to age 18, but up to the age of 21 there are programs to help them get jobs, etc. Justin said he has seen the change to older kids and increased loitering. He has had some of the kids show up in his yard. He would suggest an age cap. John noted that DCF doesn't do the younger ages anymore. Those ages are placed in foster homes now. Older aged youth need services but getting foster homes is more difficult.

Thomas Pope asked if responding to the home is a safety issue for our police officers. Chief Palmer replied it depends on the call. If there are any reports of physical confrontation two officers go on the call. If kids act out in a violent manner there is always a risk that an officer might get hurt. We try to use a great deal of restraint and the lowest level of force possible. Thomas asked out of our total number of calls what percentage goes to group homes. Chief Palmer replied less than 5%. Andy Brodersen asked if any of these residents attend our public schools. Chief Palmer replied yes. Richard asked if we see an issue at the schools. Chief Palmer said from time to time it may get to a point that the teachers can't handle. If it gets to the level of being violent we get called. This happens approximately 2-3 times per year.

Julie Blanchard asked how many group homes DCF can have in one town and whether we can put a cap on it. John replied the Town of Manchester is trying to do that. Not only do they have group homes but clusters of other facilities such as sober homes, etc. We got a promise that this would be the last one but then we got more. The State can do what they want. There is a growing need. Juvenile detention centers are being closed. Chief Palmer noted that youth in detention centers are hard-core criminals, and they are there for serious crimes. John said part of the philosophy is if you incarcerate someone who still has a chance of reform they will become hardened because that is what jail does. Survival skills developed in jail are not the societal skills you want when they get out.

Andy Brodersen asked if these homes are owned by the State. John replied no. They are privatized and bid out. People submit proposals. Andy asked if they are taxable. John replied generally not. One is but most are not. The workers are not state employees. Youth placements are given to the homes by the State and they don't always have a choice in who they accept. There are various nonprofit service providers. CHR is one in our town and they are one of the better ones out there. In other cases homes are going under because the State hasn't given them more money in years. Their employees aren't getting raises, professional development, etc.

Chief Palmer made a correction on the number of police calls to group homes, saying he wasn't thinking about non-arrest situations where our officers go to help medics get the residents into an ambulance. Thomas Pope said he had read somewhere that 60% of our use of force was in group homes. Chief Palmer replied he has watched a number of body camera videos where officers have had to go hands-on with "children." Some of these kids are big. Hannah said that school staff receives restraint training. She is surprised the homes don't have it. Chief Palmer said they do but staff uses caution in taking that approach. Many times a kid will calm down when an officer is present.

John noted that the meetings Chief Palmer has held have had some positive outcomes. Some of

the situations here may apply to others. Maybe instead of us trying to craft something that works just for us, it would be best to develop a task force made up of police departments, fire departments, neighbors, etc. in developing solutions for group homes to be good neighbors. There may be a lot of lessons we can learn from each other that could become a series of best practices and group homes might be willing to work on those task forces. It might be effective in solving a complex issue.

Thomas Pope said the issue of an AWOL child - and repeated number of times where an individual might be missing - demonstrates a lack of proper supervision. If the same kid keeps going missing the home might not be watching him/her enough or giving them too much freedom. Chief Palmer said it depends on who is there. We had one kid who walked out a couple times a day. The home's policy is not to restrain but to contact the police. Female residents go missing in the Hendee Road home more often which is a real concern in terms of human trafficking. There are sanctions on kids who don't follow the rules but he is not sure how effective they are. Thomas expressed concern for the kids but also the neighbors. If there is a pattern, he feels it demonstrates a lack of supervision that should be addressed by this law. Richard Williams said it is not a fair comparison. These kids are going through a rough time. Thomas agreed but said you can't take it out on the backs of the neighbors. It's not acceptable. Chief Palmer said it has been fairly uneventful lately but it depends on the kids. Sometimes it is a drain on our resources.

Justin Trzaskos said in terms of suggestions for Tim's bill - enforcement is important but he also thinks we need community outreach to connect kids with opportunities in town, so kids are made to feel more welcome. Chief Palmer said the majority of kids there are not criminals. They have had some sort of traumatic event in their lives. The recent round of thefts brought this discussion to a head but that is not usually the reason why they're there. There is some connection in the community now, such as going to library, but Coventry is not an urban area where they can hop on a bus and go where they want. He likes John's suggestion for a task force. If we're looking at a state law we need to get buy-in from other communities.

Julie Blanchard asked if we can communicate our suggestions at the public hearing tomorrow. John replied it is at 9 AM so he would have to write something up quickly. In his experience attending and sharing your concerns is more effective. We could write up something and try to get it submitted. He could clear his schedule but he is working on the budget so if someone else could go that would be helpful. Thomas Pope said he has arranged for one speaker to go and could go himself if need be. He offered to work out details with John after the meeting. Council consensus was to recommend the concept of a task force.

6. **Reports:**

E. COVRRRA – John Elsesser:

John Elsesser said that (DPW Director) Mark Kiefer has put three recycling grant applications together to seek funds. One of them is a new program that offers rewards for having unit-based pricing. We hope we qualify with our different sized tipper barrels. Another program is a home composting bin initiative. The third is to work with the school system to create a large composting system for the cafeterias. These are small grants - \$20,000 each - but it is unlikely we will get all three. Thomas Pope asked how the third program would work, and what happens to table scraps. John replied you take vegetable matter and put it into a bin or barrel. There needs to be some way to stir it and turn it over and then eventually you can use it for your own gardening needs. A lot of towns have done this type of program. It's a lifestyle, and a major commitment. Andy Brodersen asked if it would be mandatory. John replied no. The School has talked about doing it. If they do it we could save money on the use of dumpsters. It would save fuel because

we wouldn't have to dry it to burn it. The State's goal is trying to get us to 60% diversion. We haven't even hit the current goal of 40. Statewide that's a lot. Thomas Pope questioned the initial cost of residential compost bins – which shows as \$10,000 for 50 households. John will double-check, saying it might be 500 and if so we should correct the application.

F. Town Manager – John Elsesser:

1. Projects Update:

- We are still working on the Bolton sewer study. We got more information today and are still fine tuning it. WPCA is meeting Thursday.
- The culvert work in front of Meet Me on Main restaurant started up again to our surprise. That is not a bad thing because the restaurant had closed during the week for the winter. The work that's coming will be more disruptive than the work last summer so the more they get done now the better. Over the next few weeks, weather depending, they will be clearing out the existing area, laying out the sides and pouring a bottom. Then they will go across to the Bidwell side once the hot asphalt plants open. Then they will move on to the hill which should go pretty quickly. We almost had that done last fall but Frontier had not moved the utility poles yet. The big walls will be put in by cranes. The project became more complicated due to the requirement for an impervious surface that will allow bacteria to rise through the surface, which is a food source for microscopic organisms.
- The Lake gate footers are in. We are making progress. As long as we can close the gate April first we are still on target. Then it's up to nature to refill the lake. Some work will continue past April first such as landscaping, seeding, etc.
- We are being inundated by proposals at budget press conferences by the Governor. They are looking at a proposal to shift a third of the cost of teacher pensions to towns beginning next fiscal year. The order of magnitude for Coventry is \$1.2 to \$3 million. Ten percent of certified payroll would be 1.2 mils for us, which would be a shock to local property taxpayers. We did not negotiate this and it is being given to us to pay. Today's statement is that the Governor is reforming the ECS program. This affects Husky A and the reduced school lunch program. We don't have sense of the impact yet. He also reduced the foundation grant. This hasn't been increased in a decade and is only half of what it should be. They are also getting rid of excess cost special education reimbursement and rolling it back into ECS. We will have to watch to make sure they don't skip a year, but it transfers the volatility onto us. They are also changing other factors in the poverty scales. The bottom line is they are going to significantly shift the money towards urban areas and take money from us. We should have figures on Wednesday. We get about \$9.8 million in ECS currently. The proposed changes would be very bad. He is also changing the formula for ability to pay. We don't know what the new formula is. We are on the poorer side of the spectrum of that measurement but we don't know. There seems to be a daily drip of transference. Whether it is really going to happen depends on what our legislators do, but the Governor is trying to propose a budget that doesn't raise State taxes. We have always used the Governor's budget as a starting point. We will be doing that again because anything else is just a guess. Historically the Governor's budget has always been a worse-case scenario and we think that will hold true. Thomas Pope said it demonstrates the depth of the financial situation we are in as a State, but transferring liability from the State to local municipalities doesn't solve the problem, it just changes whose pocket we are taking it from. If we don't change the direction of what we are doing, we are all going to be in deep trouble. We can't just reduce expenses – the hole is too deep. John agreed, saying that opportunity has passed. We will figure it out as we move forward.

- The Ag Viability grant was funded for the Farmers' Market.
- A reminder about the opioid workshop on February 8th at 5:30 PM at Tolland High School. The information is on our website and a Facebook reminder will go out again tomorrow.
- Funds for the handicapped lift at Tracy Shoddy Mill were approved.
- The deadline to apply for the Finance Director position was today. It appears we have a good group to interview. We are setting up interviews for next week.
- The annual report for FY 2015/16 is out. We will do printed copies on demand. It is available online. We will have a highlights presentation at the next Council meeting.

2. 2016 Grand List Totals: John Elsesser said the Grand List has to be filed by January 31st and it was filed on time. In compiling the top ten taxpayers list something didn't look right. The Assessor went back and looked at it and discovered that the number of outbuildings was calculated incorrectly. The good news is we caught it now. The corrected number for real estate \$950,981,468, which represents .1 % in growth over last year. It is positive but not exciting. Thomas Pope noted it is not very helpful this year. Andy Brodersen asked if crumbling concrete foundations are affecting this. John replied yes. The senior tax credit is not shown. Compared to other towns, one went up significantly because their hospital status changed and they are now paying taxes. The Hebron grand list went negative due to real estate, as ours did. Of note: a lot of the names on the top 10 taxpayers list weren't here a little over 10 years ago. CT Natural Gas (CNG) is on the list for first time and that is only partial based on what they had in place October first. Eversource is now the number one taxpayer as they improved their system. Had we objected to everything they wanted to do we wouldn't be where we are. We try to always mention the issue of balance, and with only 3% of commercial/industrial properties we are not balanced. The Plan of Conservation Development calls for that (type of balance). Getting sewers on Rt. 44 is a significant issue for us to consider in the future. The CNG project gave us growth where we wouldn't have had any.

3. UConn MPA & MPP Graduate Intern Support: John Elsesser indicated he is interested in this opportunity and asked the Council for guidance. The deadline to submit is February 7th. Some towns who are using these interns find them to be highly effective. He used to have interns in his office but stopped because they started charging. We would have to look at it as part of the budget process, but he is finding it difficult to keep up with all the projects we are doing and the analysis he would like to be doing. He is concerned about loss of capability with (Finance Director) Beth Bauer's departure. Thomas Pope said it is something to look at during the budget process. We need to see how bad the budget environment will be. John replied we could submit an application and see what happens. Richard Williams asked to clarify that we are under no obligation. John said that is correct. There are less students than internship opportunities so even if we ask we may not get one. We have had some really good ones in the past, including Jean Nelson who started the farmers market. Another former intern heads up Riverfront Recapture, another one is the Town Manager in Windsor and another was the Assistant Town Manager in Glastonbury. They are high caliber people. It is a full academic year so they can do more in-depth projects. They are capable of doing sophisticated analysis.

4. Opioid workshop: request for donations: John Elsesser said that Eastern Highlands Health District is asking for sponsors for this event. They have been able to cover the cost but are asking for buy-in from towns if they are willing. Their budgets are much smaller. The Council has a public relations line item and we could authorize a small contribution of \$200-\$300. **Motion #16/17-130: Richard Williams moved and Andy Brodersen seconded to authorize a \$300 contribution for the Eastern Highlands Health District from the Council's Public Relations**

line item to support the Opioid workshop on February 8, 2017. Thomas Pope said he thinks it is important we do this. It shows the commitment we have to work on this problem. It is a far more serious problem than many people realize. Justin Trzaskos agreed that it is a real issue.
Motion #16/17-130 carried on unanimous vote.

5. CRCOG Crumbling Concrete Foundations Statistics Flyer: Hannah Pietrantonio asked that this item be removed from the Consent Agenda. She went to the coalition meeting on the 28th. There were legislators, mayors, attorneys, homeowners, and it was fast paced agenda. She went with neighbors and friends from town who are affected. Bills are being proposed that are on CRCOG's legislative agenda too. The crux is getting rest of state to understand the huge impact on our region. It is a natural disaster that nobody can see, unlike Hurricane Sandy that people could see. It's almost like post-traumatic stress because you are experiencing significant loss. The meeting was quite emotional. People in the western part of the state don't even know what the issue is. It's devastating for these families - they are living a nightmare. It's not a partisan issue. (Congressman) Joe Courtney brought up possible use of CDBG funds. FEMA was mentioned. A lot of people want insurance companies to get involved and indicate what part they will play. It was a good program. John Elsesser noted that an updated flyer in today's folder shows 9 towns with 4700 homes affected by the problem. We still don't have Vernon or Ellington which are both hugely impacted. Replacement cost is estimated at \$783 million and will be over a billion dollars soon. He spent most of Thursday at the public hearing – there are lots of bills, and lots of holes. They are trying to get into an omnibus bill. It has to be one bill for a public hearing. This is a slow-moving thing, not everyone has to address it this year or even in 5 years. If we just get an amount in it will help. There is money for testing but people need to see that someone will help with repair costs, otherwise they will not test. Once repair money is in place people will start coming out of the woodwork. We are trying to get CRCOG to hire a communications specialist to get the word out over a wider area of the state. Hannah said that people are having difficulty selling their homes in our region.

7. **Unfinished Business:**

A. 16/17-32: Consideration/possible action: Creation of a special fund for preschool expenditures and revenues: Not ready for action. Referred to Finance Committee for review.

8. **Adjournment:**

Motion #16/17-131: Thomas Pope moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:08 PM. The motion was seconded by Andy Brodersen and carried on unanimous vote.

Respectfully submitted,

Laura Stone
Town Council Clerk

Note: These minutes are not official until acted on by the Town Council at its next regular meeting. Those meeting minutes will reflect approval or changes to these minutes.