

MIDDLEFIELD BOARD OF SELECTMEN
405 Main Street
Middlefield, Connecticut 06455

Minutes of the December 17th, 2019 Regular Meeting

Call to Order

Ed Bailey called the meeting to order at 6:34 PM. Ed Bailey was present in person, Carol Bufithis and Bob Yamartino were present by phone. Jim Irish of the Board of Finance was also present by phone.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Approval of Agenda

Bob Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Carol Bufithis, to approve the agenda. Motion carried.

Public Comment

None.

Approval of Minutes of the Board of Selectmen

- a. December 5th, 2019 Special Meeting

Bob Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Carol Bufithis, to approve the minutes of the December 5th, 2019 Board of Selectman Special Meeting. Motion carried.

Ken Twombly: Middlefield Cemetery Association – Presentation

Ken Twombly has been the president of the Cemetery Association for about three years and began by giving some background information of financial issues the Association has been dealing with. In 2008 the association had an endowment of about \$355K. At that time financial advisors were very aggressive with the funds and when the market crashed, they lost quite a bit of money, leaving them with about \$190K. With that loss the advisors then became too conservative with the investment which had a poor return meaning the fund didn't grow. With annual expenses of about \$20K the endowment has been reduced to about \$140K. Ken said they have been able to reduce expenses this year to about \$6,000 but unfortunately that means the cemetery will not be plowed this winter. Ken explained that a large part of the loss in revenue is due to the popularity of Cremation. Cremations have not only effected cemeteries through out the area but also funeral homes, and casket and vault companies. He said that 25 years ago about 95% were full burials while today that number has decreased to 35-40% due to cremation. He said that's likely because cremains can go anywhere. Ken has spoken to other cemetery managers and they have also seen a rise where 60-70% of burials are cremation. He said that last year in Middlefield there were 19 burials, of which 12 were cremation and 7 were full burials, and only four lots were sold resulting in only \$4000.00 in revenue. Ken worries that this issue could eventually be very big with lack of income and he wants to address it before it gets worse. Ken has been doing some research to find ways to increase revenue and one option he's looking into would be to designate a section of the cemetery as a "Pet Cemetery" which has become very popular as of late. As part of his research Ken visited three Pet Cemeteries, one in Glastonbury, CT, one in Foxboro, MA and one in Middleborough, MA. Final Gift, a crematorium in MA does many cremations for people in CT but they do not have an associated cemetery in CT. During a preliminary discussion with Final Gift Ken spoke about partnering with them and they would in turn recommend Middlefield as a place to inter a pet. By Ken's research he feels that if a 48-foot square area could bury about 400 pets. He sited pricing from the Glastonbury cemetery and they collect \$1500.00 for a full burial and \$1100.00 for cremation and the lot size is the same for both. Ken also visited the Foxboro cemetery and liked the layout which included all "flush stones" meaning the grave markers were flush with the ground allowing for easy landscaping. Also, this cemetery only offers cremation. Ken was very impressed with the cemetery in Middleborough. He said that the building was like entering a Funeral home with a casket display room, cremation urns, and a viewing room. He went on to describe the layout which had specific sections for large and small pets, and an equine section which allows for burial of horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, and in this case even a giraffe. Ken learned that Geoffrey the Giraffe, the Toys R Us mascot, is buried at this cemetery. He felt that having the option of pet burial in Middlefield could be helpful for revenue. Bob mentioned that the cemetery where his parents are interred collects a fee as part of the cost of the plot that funds an annuity for the perpetual care of the cemetery. Ken explained that the endowment Middlefield had included funds collected for perpetual care, it was not separated to another account. Bob then asked if there is a way, going forward, that we could establish an annuity to fund in addition to the purchase of the plot itself. Ken said that our pricing structure is already at a high level in comparison with other local cemeteries. Ken has spoken to several people who

work with other cemeteries, like Ken Jay, and they say we can't really go much higher on the pricing. If Middlefield had the same number of burials as we did in the past it would be easier to separate out funds for the perpetual care but that's not the case. Ed stated that they're competing against cremation and if we raise the cost of the plot people will likely opt for cremation to save money. Ed continued by explaining that the oldest section of the cemetery is town owned and has a budget line item to cover maintenance and other expenses, those funds cover about 1/5 of cemetery costs. Ed also talked about the tree issues at the cemetery and the Old North Burial Ground. Carol inquired who owned the remaining portion of the cemetery if the town only owns 1/5 and Ken explained that it is owned by the Middlefield Cemetery Association which was formed around 1900 to expand what was then called the Center Cemetery. Ed mentioned that associations like this were established long ago and if it were to be done today it would likely be structured very differently. However, the town has an obligation to assist the association and live up to previous commitments. Ed continued to say that he had asked the Historical Society to advise on projects needed to maintain the cemetery and the group has put forward proposals for tree removal and fence replacement. Ed checked the assessor's records and found that the Cemetery Association owns the entire cemetery. He said that he has been waiting for the new Town Planner to come on board so that he can task her with doing the research to determine if the assessor's records are accurate.

Ken went on to explain that by state statute, if a cemetery is abandoned by its operating association the Town would then be responsible for it. Ken by no means wants that to happen but wants the board to understand the financial issues the association is facing. Carol wondered how many plots we have available and Ken said that there are probably enough plots for the next 200 years. Discussion continued around the fact that not enough plots are being sold to handle the expenses being paid out.

Ed suggested that one starting point might be to examine the Association by-laws to determine if some accommodation could be made and to have towns people on the board. Bob stated that he isn't so concerned with the board since it sounds like there aren't any operational issues it the financial issues that need addressing. Bob asked if the association is being audited and it is not. Bob also talked about the issues with the investment structure and perhaps new fund management would be appropriate. Ken explained that they did move endowment funds from low performing CD Accounts to a Blended Mutual Fund called the Wellington Fund which has been around for decades. He said that the fund is currently paying 9% which has been helpful but that return may not be so high next year. Regarding auditing, Ken explained that the balance sheet is pretty straight forward: they pay for mowing, plowing, and for Ken Jay to open and close graves. Ken Jay also is paid a stipend for being the cemetery sextan.

Bob commented that there are really only two courses of action 1) Ask the Board of Finance how to structure funds to cover expenses and move forward or 2) Wait until there is no more funds and no choice and go from there.

Ed said that it would be best to be proactive and Ken agreed stating that he is ultimately looking for a plan to help the Association, he doesn't want to just hand issues to the next president.

Bob asked Jim Irish for comment.

Jim agreed that reviewing by-laws and financial information would be helpful but he wasn't sure if it was appropriate for a municipal Board of Finance to offer financial review and advice

to an Independent Association. Ed said that he didn't see it being an issue. Bob then wondered if people might object to pets in the cemetery near people and Ken felt it would be very well received.

In conclusion Ed thanked Ken for his involvement in the Cemetery Association and his help at the Old North Burial Ground in conjunction with the Historical Society. Ken thanked everyone for their support.

Public Safety Radio Communication Equipment Update

Ed stated that the equipment orders have been placed and most equipment has been received. One item pending is pagers and hopefully those will be purchased by the end of January. Ed has executed an agreement to use the States 80mHz frequency.

L.E.D. Streetlight Conversion Update

The conversion has been finalized, equipment is on order and installation should begin mid to late January. Ed completed the purchase agreement with Eversource which was very complicated and time consuming. Bob commented that the lights look great.

Appointments

- a. Conservation Commission
 - i. Christopher Hurlburt – Term 1/1/2020 to 12/31/2023 1/1
 - ii. Robin Heath – Term 1/1/2020 to 12/31/2023 1/1
- b. Library Board
 - i. Melissa Marteka – Term 10/1/2019 to 9/30/2022 1/1

Bob Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Carol Bufithis, to approve appointments to the Conservation Commission and Library Board. Motion carried.

First Selectman's Report; Legislative Issues Affecting Municipalities

Ed began by telling the board that he had attended the CCM Convention at the beginning of the month and then attended the Council of Small Towns meeting last week where they discussed Legislative issues and what would be on the council's legislative agenda for 2020. Many of the same issues they have focused on in the past will be the continued focus including the Resident State Trooper Program. Ed explained that he has fought to prevent cuts to this program in the past. The State charges the Town for unfunded pension costs and that has now been reduced to about 25%. Benefit costs was up around 115% and that has been reduced to about 95% which show a savings on that budget line item.

Another focus for Ed has been the Regional School District working group. This group promotes various legislation that would help regional school districts. One item they are working on is flattening out the fluctuations in our annual assessments to the school district as out enrollment changes. This has been proposed and there is some support from legislators. Ed first started with this group about three years ago and has been supporting this all along.

Ed explained that another matter they've been working on is transportation. Currently we fund 100% of transportation costs for our students and there are issues with regulations at the state level that they are working to resolve.

Ed assisted in the formation of a Finance Board for Regional School District with the help of the working group and Laura Francis. The hope is to eventually have the Finance Board have some authority over the School Budget for the District.

Ed felt that the most important among these issues is the flattening out of the annual assessment because it would allow for better predictability with our Mill Rates going year to year. He wasn't sure when this would happen since legislature is currently all consumed with the toll proposal. He said that our Town Aid Road Funding is being held up by the Governor for tolls. Ed did have the chance to speak to Governor Lamont at the CCM convention and asked about the Town Aid Road Funding and Lamont did say that he planned to push it to the Governor's Bond Council. Unfortunately, this hasn't happened as of yet. Ed said that we haven't gotten our Town Aid Road Funding that was due to us in August which is about \$96-\$98K and a payment is due to us again in March or April which hasn't been bonded yet. These funds are a big part of our road budget which is about \$350K per year. He said it does seem to be a little bit of a break through to get these funds out to the municipalities.

Mr. Bailey continued his report around the issues and fee increases at the Material Innovation and Recycling Authority (MIRA) in Hartford which could potentially impact our budget. Currently it costs the Town \$82.00/ton of municipal solid waste being transferred to MIRA. The fee per ton is increasing to \$145.00. Ed explained that what MIRA is looking for is a 30-year contract from towns at that level of cost. He is on the board for MIRA and they realize that Towns won't want to sign a contract for \$145.00/ton when there are less expensive alternatives available that will not have a term of 30 years. He said it's hard to project what future costs could be but we are definitely going to see an increase. The plant is quite old and has issues and will need to be rebuilt so maintenance costs are high and the cost to get rid of the waste is high. Ed then gave a little background about our landfills and said that the Federal Department of Environmental Protection closed all Connecticut landfills about 30 years ago because they were poorly constructed, managed, and regulated. As a result of the closure one solution to get rid of the waste was to burn it which is the method used today and is the preferred method. Disposal of our municipal solid waste would be best done here in the state however, the cost at MIRA is not attractive price-wise.

Bob asked if MIRA charges the some for disposal for municipalities and businesses and Ed explained that there is a whole menu of pricing for the disposal services they provide. He did say that we currently have some of the lowest pricing due to our contract that runs through 2027. The contract does have escalator clauses built into it so we are subject to increased costs based on MIRA's cost of disposal. We do have an "Opt-Out" option if the cost goes up too high,

we can opt-out and look for different disposal methods which are very limited within the state. If we choose to, we can ship our waste to Pennsylvania and MIRA estimates that they could do this for us for about \$95-\$105/ton. Doing so would have a greater environmental impact because of the truck traffic generated to move the waste. Mr. Bailey finished his report by saying that something has to be done with the plant and if MIRA doesn't get rebuilt, we are probably looking at shipping it since there isn't any other place to put it.

Adjournment

Bob Yamartino made a motion, seconded by Carol Bufithis, to adjourn the regular meeting of the Board of Selectmen. Motion carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Tonya Hogan

Tonya Hogan
Assistant Town Clerk

Minutes Approved _____

Confirmed by _____