

Stimulus Dollars Hit The Road In Newtown

By JOHN VOKET
Based on the latest estimates provided to Newtown Public Works Director Fred Hurley this week, Newtown will receive enough federal economic stimulus funding, designated for transportation infrastructure, to complete three road projects.

The latest update Mr Hurley received through the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials (HVCEO), a regional planning agency that is coordinating these projects locally, indicates Newtown is scheduled to receive \$634,997 in the first round of funding. The public works chief said that amount is just short of the total estimates for the three projects Newtown requested funding for, which were estimated to cost \$705,657.

"It's enough to underwrite these three road projects," Mr

Hurley said. While many questions and much speculation swirled around the first round of stimulus funding, estimated to exceed \$800 billion nationally, Mr Hurley sought to clarify several important points.

First, he expects there will be more funding from a second or subsequent rounds of federal stimulus initiatives. Second, funding from the first round faced extremely tight qualifying stipulations, which actually eliminated at least one town in the HVCEO region from any funding.

And perhaps most importantly, Mr Hurley said although Newtown is receiving enough federal funding to complete the three designated road projects, additional money from the same stimulus initiative will likely end up in Newtown in

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How It's Done, One On One

Newtown Volunteer Ambulance Corps Chief Liz Cain offers one-on-one CPR instruction to Sean Wallace, while Dave McCarthy, background, also works to learn the life-saving skills Sunday, March 8. The expert instruction was part of the Hearts For Harmon fundraiser/memorial in the Edmond Town Hall Alexandria Room. More photos and a story appear on page A-6.

Election Officials Review Early Voting Measure

By JOHN VOKET
The more people who exercise their right to vote, the better. That is a concept universally accepted by Newtown registrars of voters, the town clerk and Connecticut Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz.

But while Secretary Bysiewicz is praising the General Assembly's Government, Administration and Elections Committee for moving a state Senate resolution that could make absentee ballots available to any registered voter without restrictions, voting officials remain wary of the financial implications to local taxpayers.

The Assembly Committee's 14-1 vote earlier this week will send the Senate resolution onto a vote by the full General Assembly.

"Millions of voters nationwide successfully cast ballots before Election Day in 2008 using early voting," said Secretary Bysiewicz. "This had the dual effect of increasing voter turnout to record levels nationwide, while at the same time reducing long lines at the polls and the strain on poll workers on Election Day."

But on the other side of the coin, Newtown Registrars Karin Aurelia and LeReine Frampton, as well as Town Clerk Debbie Aurelia, believe such a measure, if passed at the state level, will create significant additional taxpayer expense, at least initially.

"We know from experience how many absentee ballots to order from the printer every year," Ms Frampton told *The Bee*, after hearing about the measure Wednesday. "Since absentee ballots and on-site ballots are coded differently, and have to be ordered separately, this unrestricted system will make it difficult to estimate how many of each we will need to order."

Registrar Karin Aurelia, who is the mother of the town clerk, added that although the Secretary of the State says the measure, if passed, is intended to lighten the load on poll workers and shorten lines at the voting stations on voting days, it will initially make it nearly impossible to plan for staffing at the polls.

"We all share the goal of getting as many qualified Newtown residents out to vote as possible, but it will cost the taxpayers more, especially in the first couple of years," Karin Aurelia said.

The town clerk agreed, saying the number of absentee voters for the last Presidential election increased by nearly 700. And besides increasing postal costs to transmit and receive the ballots, each absentee form has to be individually processed by a town clerk's office employee.

"For the Presidential Election we [put in] an extra 23 hours, which cost local taxpayers about \$600 in overtime being paid to our three assistant town clerks," Debbie Aurelia said. "If we go to open voting, it will increase voter turnout, which of course we want, but it would cause us to order more ballots, which would cost more and could be wasteful."

Secretary Bysiewicz maintains that no excuse absentee balloting would be a secure and cost-effective way to give Connecticut voters the opportunity to vote early and at their own convenience.

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Finance Board Sessions Conclude— Economic Trends Weigh On Local Budget Considerations

By JOHN VOKET
The Board of Finance was scheduled to complete its 2009 budget recommendation Thursday evening after the print edition of *The Bee* went to press. For links to all audio and available video transcripts of finance board budget meetings, and details about the outcome of deliberations, go to newtownbee.com. The final results of Board of Finance budget deliberations will also be delivered as it is happening to anyone following "TheNewtownBee" on Twitter.

Following a public hearing on the 2009 proposed town budget, finance board officials settled in for four nights of quizzing and vetting dozens of department requests and line items with a goal of justifying how every taxpayer dollar will be squeezed in the current ailing economy. Going into the four-night marathon of questions, and emerging with many answers, the board was poised Thursday to consider whether the proposal should be refined beyond what was delivered to its members by the Board of Selectmen, or whether to pass the 2009 spending package to the Legislative Council as is.

The Board of Selectmen has recommended a 2009 town budget of \$38,000,069, which represents a \$1.43 million or 3.63 percent decrease from the current year's municipal operating budget, while the Board of Education endorsed a budget proposal totaling nearly \$67.2 million, representing a 1.74 percent increase over the current operating budget.

Following are recaps of the municipal and school district meetings.

School Proposal Defended As A Worthy Investment

One by one over the course of two sessions the Board of Finance devoted to better understanding the \$67 million-plus school district budget proposal, teachers, parents, students, and education supporters repeatedly requested the board pass on the district's spending requests to voters to make the ultimate decision.

Middle school teacher Don Ramsey likened any further budget cuts on the school side to shooting a cannonball through an already struggling hot air balloon, with its "precious cargo, our students" in the basket.

High school guidance counselor Jan English suggested the finance officials might not want to "presume for the public that they would not accept the budget as presented."

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Finance Bd Reviews Pension Deficit, Discrimination Suit

Just when the finance board thought they had heard the worst of it during its first night of municipal side budget deliberations, when official learned the local pension fund might need as much as a \$1 million injection to counter a 20 percent loss since last June, Town Hall employees union Chapter President Karen Pratt-Szilagy dropped a bomb during public commentary at the beginning of night two.

"We are naturally concerned that the Board of Selectmen may be discriminating against our chapter on the basis of gender," the union rep said, confirming to *The Newtown Bee* after the meeting that her members were considering filing a discrimination complaint

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EDITORIAL INK DROPS

Making Affordable Housing Work For Newtown

At a time when town agencies are scrounging for every last dollar, Newtown's Planning and Zoning Commission has received a gift of \$50,000 from above — the State of Connecticut, that is. The grant will pay for a study of the P&Z's affordable housing policy, applicable regulations, and a review of local sites suitable for such high-density housing. Getting the money is great, but the real prize will be the knowledge and direction P&Z derives from this study over the next four months.

Affordable housing, or "incentive housing" as the state's Office of Policy and Management is now calling it, has been endorsed in concept by Newtown's Plan of Conservation and Development for years. That document long ago declared that it is not the intent or desire of Newtown to be exclusionary in its zoning practices. Aside from being a violation of state law, *de facto* economic restrictions on who may and may not live in a town are damaging to its social and economic culture.

Notwithstanding the good intentions, however, Newtown's Planning and Zoning Commission has approved only two housing projects under its affordable housing regulations: the 49-unit Riverview Condominiums on Bryan Lane in 1997, which had 13 affordable units for sale; and the 24-unit River Walk on Washington Avenue in Sandy Hook Center in January this year, which has eight affordable units for sale or rent.

Twenty-one affordable housing units in a town of 27,000 people may seem like a token tip of the hat in the town's professed earnest effort to offer a range of housing stock for a population with varied incomes. Part of the problem is that affordable housing projects are approved by special permit, which makes the process somewhat *ad hoc* in that the layers of review of such applications is not standardized but unique to a property. This is good in that it sets the bar high for high density housing proposals that threaten the environment, like the ill-fated Edona Commons proposal in Sandy Hook Center near Dayton Street. (Its rejection by P&Z is still under appeal in the state courts.) Yet the special permit process is daunting to developers who want to work in good faith with the town to provide affordable units as part of their housing projects. Consequently, few have tried to negotiate the rigorous review process.

One exception is Michael Burton's River Walk project, a little to the south and east of the Edona Commons site in Sandy Hook Center. Unlike Edona Commons, the River Walk plan had the support of the residents and businesses in the area. Mr Burton worked with town and met all the tests applied by local regulators to the site. The project, which is on the verge of getting its final approval from the Water and Sewer Authority, makes the most of the interdependence of residents and businesses in the area — a relationship that should produce a benefit for the whole area that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The value of the \$50,000 from the state and the study it pays for will come in identifying sites like River Walk where high density/lower cost housing makes sense not only to the developer's accountant but to the town as a whole. Once those sites are identified, developers may be more willing to go through the affordable housing review process, knowing they will not be investing in a cause that it lost at the outset. And Newtown can make better progress in living up to the ideals outlined in its Plan of Conservation and Development.

Study To Target Ways To Foster Affordable Housing

By ANDREW GOROSKO
A planned state-funded study focused on increasing the local stock of "affordable housing" will address "a definite need" for such dwellings, according to the chair of the Planning and Zoning Commission (P&Z).

P&Z Chair Lilla Dean said this week that state officials have advised all municipalities in Connecticut that at least ten percent of their housing stock should be designated as deed-restricted affordable housing intended for low-income and moderate-income families.

Under the state's definition of affordable housing, less than one percent of Newtown's housing stock is considered affordable housing, Ms Dean

said. The state's definition requires that such housing have long-term deed restrictions placed on it to keep such dwellings "affordable" in the context of the regional real estate market.

While in practical terms some local housing, such as mobile homes and accessory apartments, may be "affordable," because those dwellings are not deed-restricted in terms of affordability, they do not meet the state's definition of affordable housing, Ms Dean said.

Local dwellings that meet the state criteria as affordable housing include some units at Riverview Condominiums on Bryan Lane, and also two

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Discussion Salon Invites Conversation On Broad Topics

By NANCY K. CREVIER
"I do have a sense that there is an unmet need to get out and talk about what's going on in the world," said Ben Roberts. "We've become somewhat isolated with little opportunity to let go of what's in our heads," he said.

With that in mind, Mr Roberts has initiated a weekly Discussion Salon at Mocha Coffeehouse on Glen Road where he hopes men and women of varied backgrounds, ages, ethnicities, and opinions can gather to offer different viewpoints on a variety of topics in a respectful atmosphere.

He put out feelers the first week in March via email, inviting the curious to join him at the initial meeting on March 9, from 7 to 9 pm, and to post topic ideas at his [website](http://www.consciousfinancialdirections.com) [consciousfinancialdirections.com](http://www.consciousfinancialdirections.com).

Nineteen people responded to the invitation. "I'm thrilled about the way it succeeded. It was beyond my anticipation," said Mr Roberts. The participants were fairly evenly divided between men and women, he said, and balanced among an age group of 40 years and up.

The group focused on three topics during the evening. "We touched on health care reform; and a bill to form a Department of Peace is up again at the federal level, so we talked about that; and the topic we elaborated upon during the second hour was the question of 'What do we make of experiences we or others have that challenge or defy our scientific or objective view of the world?'" Mr Roberts said.

"People really enjoyed having a forum to come together. It was fun, stimulating, and thought-provoking, I think," said Mr Roberts.

Scot Fritz of Danbury was one of those who attended the discussion group. An



Ben Roberts has initiated the Discussion Salon, a gathering that he hopes will generate enough interest to meet weekly at Mocha Coffeehouse on Glen Road. Topics will be proposed by participants each week and offer people of diverse viewpoints an opportunity to talk about current topics in a fun and respectful atmosphere.

acquaintance of Mr Roberts' from the Universalist Congregation of Danbury, he was there to offer support, he said. "And we love to talk," he added. Mr Fritz was impressed by the format. "The fact that Ben had a design for how things would go, went very well," he said. "I was surprised at the number of people who attended."

Having taken part in "conversation cafés" at financial seminars, and in visiting the continuing education discussion group to which his mother belongs in Texas, Mr Roberts has put together a format that he thinks will offer participants plenty of time to discuss three or four different topics and then to facilitate a more in-depth guided discussion on the particular points of one of those topics.

Choosing Topics

The plan to select topics by a vote at the beginning of each evening went very well at the first Salon, and Mr Roberts hopes that by doing so, people will have the chance to talk to and respond to each other. "It is very free form," he said, "but hopefully making sure that whoever wants to can express him or herself. I'd like to see us get away from 'minispeeches,' just talking at each other."

"It was very exciting the way Ben organized the discussion and kept the discussions up and running," said Susan Jackson of Georgetown, who also attended the meeting. She has taken part in many other discussion groups over the years, she said, but felt that the format put together by Mr Roberts was the best yet.

"There were definitely people there with diverse views," said Ms Jackson. Particularly when talking about the topic that

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the form of state Department of Transportation (DOT) road or bridge improvements.

He cited a Walnut Tree Hill and Glen Road bridge project as an example.

"The initial phase of that bridge replacement project has already been funded, and is in final design as we speak," Mr Hurlley told *The Bee*. "The construction phase is currently eligible for federal stimulus funding that will benefit the town, but will be passed through the state DOT."

Mr Hurlley is sympathetic to taxpayers locally who hope Newtown will see some financial relief through President Barack Obama's proposal, but urges them to sit tight.

"This initial program is very complicated because it contains so many programs under the \$800 billion umbrella," Mr Hurlley said. "I believe Newtown will see a lot more money coming through the school system, and the second round, which I fully expect to see, will contain funds for local brick and mortar projects."

Mr Hurlley suggested Newtown might even get more money from the first round.

"There's a lot of competitive funds available, and as application deadlines pass, or projects applied for become ruled out for various reasons, some additional undesignated funds could be turned back for us to get a shot at."

He said currently in Newtown, "a lot of roads that need a lot of work" do not qualify for the federal program because

they are not on the US Highway system — a funding stipulation requirement.

"But we have other road work to do that is planned and funded by Newtown taxpayers, and we will do the best we can to complete those projects," Mr Hurlley said. "And we already have identified many more roads which are on the US Highway system for consideration in the second round."

The three roads getting attention from this first round of transportation stimulus include:

*Castle Hill Meadow — estimated at \$255,902 for paving work to improve the overall safety of the roadway.

*Queen Street — milling and repaving estimated at \$157,880 (Possible second round funding will be pursued for sidewalk installation, according to Mr Hurlley)

*Castle Hill Road — construction work centering around what Mr Hurlley described as the "car eating curve" at the base of the north/south hill leading into town.

"That work will involve correcting some of the geometry, but it will still require drivers to apply some physics by controlling the excessive speed that contributes to so many motor vehicle problems there," he added.

Mr Hurlley said because town crews already completed the drainage work on these three roads, there will be no issue with delivery deadlines tied to completing work being underwritten by transportation stimulus funding.

Discussion Salon Invites Conversation On Broad Topics

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touched on people's spiritual beliefs, the discussion was emotional but went smoothly, she said. "It was not polarizing, at all. It wasn't arguing, it was discussing. It was great," Ms Jackson said, adding that she plans to make an effort to bring other people with her to the next meeting who hold different viewpoints from her own.

Also in attendance on Monday evening was Chris Mangieri, who lives in Monroe but works in Sandy Hook. "I didn't know what to expect, but it was pretty interesting," said Mr Mangieri. "There was a different mix of people, a lot of them not from Newtown." The atmosphere was overall amicable, he thought, with the variety of topics generally intriguing. "Everybody took the exchange of ideas with good humor. It was pretty good, and informative," he said.

Mr Roberts is not new to planting the seed for a new idea and encouraging others to run with it. A financial advisor based in Sandy Hook, Mr Roberts has also worked as a trader and institutional salesperson, and on Wall Street in foreign bond trading. A passionate golfer, after he left Wall Street he developed an idea for an indoor golf facility and opened the Golf Training Center in Norwalk, which he managed for eight years.

He then sought work that would be more meaningful, settling on socially responsible investing. He explains on his website, "It appealed to me as a way to act on many of the pressing issues facing us as a society, while making practical use of my financial expertise."

Broad Interactions

The Discussion Salon is a chance to broaden his own interaction with people of different viewpoints, and to bring together friends and strangers to talk about many of those pressing issues — everything from politics, to science, to spirituality, to local events. "Whatever the topics are that come up are fine with me," said Mr Roberts, who plans to act mainly as a moderator at the discussions, but throw in his two cents worth, as well.

"I see this as building community. The opportunities to do something like this are somewhat limited," he explained.

Will there be an interest in continuing the dialogue beyond the weekly salon? "I'll be satisfied if we just have fun," said Mr Roberts, "but I do have a vision of something more substantive that will come out of it. There are a lot of issues out there creating hot debate. Maybe the different viewpoints can take us to a point of mutual respect."

The next Discussion Salon is scheduled for Monday, March 16, from 7 to 9 pm, at Mocha Coffeehouse. There is no need to commit to attending every week, said Mr Roberts. Drop-ins are welcome, although he encourages people to RSVP at his website and suggest topics there. "But that's not necessary," he emphasized. "New faces will always be welcome and I expect sporadic attendance from some, regular attendance by some — it's hard to say. It's an experiment."

School Proposal Defended As A Worthy Investment

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Elementary teacher Sammy Suvanich told the board, "Obviously we will plead for you to invest in our students."

Parent Michelle Pankin asked the board to consider the financial consequences of putting forth a zero-increase budget saying taxpayers want value, and that in her assessment, the district proposal stands as providing "strong services at a good price."

School board Chair Elaine McClure related that the 2009 district proposal represented the lowest increase request ever presented during her dozen years of elected service. And she likened the process of whittling down the proposal to a limbo dance.

"We need to compete," Ms McClure said. "If the limbo bar gets too low, it breaks the backs of the kids."

While discussions during the district's first session March 5 centered around possible wage freezes versus the suggested furloughing (see related story), the second session March 11 devoted much time to receiving answers to nearly a dozen questions that were posed during the first meeting.

School Superintendent Janet Robinson defended the retention of staff, saying all classrooms are being utilized. Dr Robinson said she also strongly supports an unwritten rule capping class sizes even if it means driving the district's payroll and benefits overhead higher by retaining more teachers.

She explained that because virtually all special ed students in the district are mainstreamed, class sizes need to be somewhat more modest to accommodate the needs of each class's "diverse range of students." And as student populations shift from grade to grade, and level to level, Dr Robinson said simply, "The staff must follow the students."

During a budget overview presentation, the superintendent reminded finance officials she initially received requests from her principals and staff that would have escalated the 2009 budget by almost eight percent. Following her cuts, she presented a 2.7 percent increase to the school board, which further trimmed the district's proposal to the 1.74 percent finance officials were left to consider.

Finance Chair John Kortze weighed in, reminding supporters and district personnel that it was his board's responsibility to account for priorities on both the school and town sides of the overall budget package, and that previously reliable revenue streams coming back to the town from various sources presented a disturbing unknown this year, which greatly concerned his board.

Mr Kortze, on several occasions during the two nights of school deliberations, reminded those in attendance that line item authority to control spending on the district side rested solely on the Board of Education — his board could only pose suggestions and deliver a net figure to council officials to consider.

The finance board recommendations will be sealed and delivered to the council by March 17, but Dr Robinson said that will be the day she would be informed about how much Newtown could expect to receive in supplemental federal economic stimulus funding. She will be attending a statewide meeting of all state school superintendents that day in Hartford to hear about government stimulus distribution.

Night two of deliberations started with a presentation by Mary Griffin of the school's benefits firm TR Paul, who told the finance board that currently 86 percent of school district health plan participants have chosen a "buy-up option" to a health plan versus a base plan that is also offered for about \$1,000 less per person annually. She said her company is currently shopping for other options that could provide the same level of coverage at a lower cost.

Mr Kortze zeroed in on a five-year pattern of final benefits costs coming in substantially less than the figures finance officials have approved, because the district tends to lock in rates as close to the end of the previous year's contract period as possible. The finance board has been told that holding out until the last minute has worked in the district's favor by establishing a longer history of claims experience, which has resulted in lower subsequent benefit contract rates.

The finance chair referenced a \$153,000 transfer from the benefits line in 2008 after the rate increase dropped from five to two percent after his board already voted on their recommendations.

Over the course of the second night of finance board / school district deliberations, Dr Robinson also attempted to clarify spending patterns or specifically answer questions about custodial staffing ratios; building and grounds maintenance; technical services and educational assistants; projected utility costs; refuse removal; possible retirement-related savings; the introduction of a world language teacher; and even proposed expenditures for day-to-day supplies.

Most of the final hour March 11 was spent debating the potential accuracy of student enrollment predictions, and local population trending in relation to class size ratios in the district's spending requests. Finance official Michael Portnoy reviewed several years of projections versus actual end of year student enrollment numbers illustrating that during the past three years, school officials had overestimated districtwide enrollment by an average of 77 pupils.

Mr Portnoy argued that by increasing some class sizes by a single student could result in the net reduction of ten teachers, six more than Dr Robinson proposed cutting in her final recommendation. But the superintendent countered that in a flagging economy, more parents who previously paid for private school or full-day kindergarten might switch their children to public school as an economic necessity, and Dr Robinson needed to be prepared for such an eventuality in September, long after the final budget will presumably be passed.

As the district's meeting concluded, finance board member Martin Gersten asked the question that was also posed to First Selectman Joe Borst one night earlier: "If the budget is rejected, does the Board of Education have a plan to cut?"

Dr Robinson replied: "When 80 percent of the budget is people, it would have to be people."

Study To Target Ways To Foster Affordable Housing

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houses on Philo Curtis Road, which were built by Habitat for Humanity, she said. Of the 49 dwellings at Riverview Condominiums, 13 units are classified as affordable housing.

In January, the P&Z approved local developer Michael Burton's planned River Walk condominium complex on Washington Avenue in Sandy Hook Center where eight units of the 24 units will be designated as affordable housing.

In contrast, in 2007, the P&Z rejected a Danbury developer's application for Edona Commons, a 26-unit condo complex proposed for Church Hill Road in Sandy Hook Center where eight dwellings would be designated as affordable housing. In rejecting that proposal, P&Z members cited a variety of physical constraints at the site as reasons for turning down the application.

After that rejection, developer Guri Dauti appealed the matter in court under the terms of the state's Affordable Housing Land Use Appeals Act. That law provides developers with legal leverage in gaining approval for affordable housing complexes.

That appeal is pending in New Britain Superior Court. Mr Dauti also has appealed the Water & Sewer Authority's (WSA) 2007 rejection of his application for sanitary sewer service.

Local Need

Ms Dean noted that there is a definite local need for affordable housing. "It's a multifaceted problem," she said.

"People who grew up here can no longer afford to live here," she observed.

Those people, often in their mid-20s need to leave town

and live elsewhere where living costs are more affordable than in Newtown, she said. When young adults leave town, it hurts the local workforce, as well as diminishes local buying power, she said.

Some of those who leave town relocate to the White Plains, N.Y., area, while others relocate to Danbury, Southbury, New Milford, Waterbury, and the Naugatuck River Valley, she said.

Ms Dean said it is unclear what effects the current economic hard times are having on young adults leaving Newtown to find affordable housing elsewhere.

"I think that we really better make a 'good faith' effort to create as much [affordable housing] as we can," she said, adding that unless the town pursues such a goal, state officials could impose affordable housing complexes on the town.

Ms Dean said the P&Z's recent approval of the River Walk condo complex gives the town credibility in terms of allowing affordable housing to be constructed locally.

The River Walk proposal met the terms of the P&Z's existing regulations on affordable housing.

The Edona Commons proposal, however, did not meet those regulations and its developer sought to revise the rules to allow his project to be built. The developer's proposed rule changes would have allowed a much more densely built project than the P&Z would allow under its rules, resulting in the project's rejection.

Although the P&Z will soon receive a \$50,000 state grant to study increasing the local stock of affordable housing, Ms Dean said the town's pending study would not reduce the state's pressure on the town to increase such housing.

Ms Dean said she hopes the

planning consultants who perform the study will show the town how best to increase the local stock of such dwellings. Those consultants also will address the issue of public transportation as it affects affordable housing, she said.

The P&Z would hold a public meeting to discuss the housing study. The project will produce a planning document, as well as some model regulations on affordable housing, she added.

George Benson, the town land use agency director, said this week that Harrall-Michalowski Associates (HMA), a Branford planning and development consultancy, will perform the housing study for the town. The study must be completed by the end of June. The firm will start work as soon as possible, Mr Benson said.

HMA is expected to do at least 60 percent of the project, with other firms performing the remainder, he said. Other aspects of the study include legal research and financial analysis.

Of the planned study, Mr Benson said, "I think it shows that we're trying...We're moving in the right direction" in terms of increasing the local stock of affordable housing.

Much of the need for affordable housing stems from people who are starting their lives as young adults who need an affordable place to live, he said. Public employees represent some of the demand for such housing, he said. Also, some people, as they age, want to live in smaller quarters, reflecting some of the demand for such dwellings, he said.

"I think there's a demand for it," Mr Benson said.

Mr Benson said that the town would not be bound by any of the recommendations that the consultants make in the housing study.

At a March 5 P&Z session,

Finance Bd Reviews Pension Deficit, Discrimination Suit

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against the town, after the Board of Selectmen declined to extend her unit's current contract an additional year, as they had done for the town highway workers' union.

"As I am sure you are aware, the Board of Selectmen agreed to a similar contract extension for the union representing the town's highway department workers in December, and ratified a three-year contract with the town's Parks and Recreation Department with similar wage increases in November," Ms Pratt-Szilagy said reading from a statement. "It should be noted that the membership of the highway department's union is exclusively male and the Park and Rec's Department is all male with one exception; ours is three-quarters female."

Additional commentary came from representatives of the C.H. Booth Library Board. Library board President William Lavery said as the local economy tightened, patronage and requests for library services exploded.

With that in mind, he requested the finance board consider returning the same town-side contribution to the library's budget as the current year.

Considering the town budget proposal is about 60 percent less than the school district's request, finance officials were forced to drill deeply into budget lines looking for dimes versus the dollars that might be needed to bring in the school side of the budget at a number voters might embrace on the first referendum attempt. This goal was seldom mentioned, but never far from the surface during much of the nearly ten hours of talks held by the finance board over four evenings.

Night one posed questions on the town side concerning the costs of the Lake Zoar and Lake Lillinonah Authorities; the town's economic and community development official; and the selectmen's decision to construct a leaseback arrangement to fund demolition and parking lot construction at Fairfield Hills, versus pitching the project for capital funding to be bonded.

First Selectman Joe Borst, Finance Director Robert Tait, and Town Attorney David Grogins were on hand during the second session of town side talks March 9, attempting to answer questions posed March 4. Officials from the Economic Development Commission and the Fairfield Hills Authority spoke during public participation, recommending the town retain the community development director.

A representative of the Lake Zoar Authority attended to explain the ways his group was working to make underwriting lake services more fair and equitable among the four participating towns, while representation by the Lake Lillinonah Authority was conspicuously absent.

When facing questions about the leaseback versus bonding the demolition of Greenwich House and construction of a Fairfield Hills parking lot for the Newtown Youth Academy, Attorney Grogins told finance officials that in many situations, lessees or tenants perform work for, and are reimbursed by, landlords. The finance director confirmed, however, that in the long run, bonding, which is now in the plan for the outstanding debt, would be the least costly way to pay for the work.

The meeting continued with the board and town officials discussing the possibility of seeking wage concessions from local unions. Mr Borst confirmed that town side units would not come to the table to discuss concessions unless their counterparts on the school district side were willing to do the same. When asked what he would do if taxpayers rejected the budget proposal in a referendum, the first selectman said he would have to look at wages, personnel cuts, or reducing capital costs.

Finance Chair John Kortze countered that talks about wage concessions should be initiated now, not at the point when the budget is facing rejection at referendum.

In the final hour of night two, finance board members even turned attention to possibly cutting the contributions being made to nonprofit agencies in town and throughout the region, which serve Newtowners. Finance board member Joe Kearney expressed concern that his board had woefully little information about how many of the nonprofit and service agency recipients operated, and that he wanted more financial information before he would feel recommending the same types of increases that were normally issued year after year as a matter of tradition.

Ms Dean said that after the affordable housing study is completed, the P&Z could seek out developers and builders who would be inclined to construct such complexes.

At that meeting, Mr Benson said that developers are now disposed to construct affordable housing complexes because the demand has dropped for other forms of housing, such as age-restricted dwellings for people at least age 55.

A key part of the planned housing study is identifying geographical areas in town that would be best suited for affordable housing complexes.

In a typical affordable housing complex, a land use regulatory agency offers a developer a "density bonus" as an incentive to create affordable housing which is intended for moderate-income and low-income families.

Such a density bonus allows the developer to build a larger number of dwellings than would be normally allowed at a site, provided that a significant fraction of the units are

designated for moderate-income and low-income families and are sold at prices significantly lower than the market rate for such dwellings. The higher prices of the market-rate units on the site subsidize the affordable units.

On the topic of affordable housing, the 2004 Town Plan of Conservation and Development states that the town lacks an adequate supply of housing for a broad spectrum of ages and incomes. Also, many people who work in town do not have an opportunity to live in the town where they work, it adds.

"Due to the lack of affordable housing, some Newtown residents will not continue to reside in town, as their personal circumstances, incomes, and housing needs change over time," it adds.

A goal of the 2004 Town Plan is to: "Strive for a more balanced supply of housing types that will accommodate the housing needs of Newtown residents and those working in Newtown."

Election Officials Review Early Voting Measure

(continued from page A-1)

"This system would also allow early voting without imposing the significant cost of setting up early polling stations or compromising the security of our elections," she said. "I commend lawmakers of both parties for taking this prudent first step toward early voting in Connecticut, and I urge full passage by the General Assembly."

If approved by a three-quarters majority in both the State House and Senate, the resolution would put a Constitutional question on the ballot for voters to consider in 2010. If

that Constitutional question is passed, the legislature would be empowered to remove the requirements of physical absence, disability, or sickness that currently restrict who can use absentee ballots on Election Day.

In the meantime, Newtown's registrars remind voters that absentee ballot order forms are available year-round on the town website: newtown-ct.gov.

"People with a local address can request absentee ballots anytime, even this early. By doing that it could help eliminate some of the waste," Ms Frampton said.

Need Something To Do This Weekend?

See The Weekly Calendar In The Enjoy Section