

**Finance Committee Meeting Packet**  
**April 4, 2023**

Finance Committee Meeting Minutes – **DRAFT**  
Tuesday December 13, 2022

**1. Call to Order and Roll Call Vote** – P. Orenstein opened the meeting via Zoom at 6:30pm with a roll call: Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.” P. Orenstein stated Richard Geiler is attending the CPC meeting and may join later. Absent: Milena Cerna.  
Also in attendance: Town Manager Mark Pruhenski, Financial Coordinator Allison Crespo

**2. Committee Member announcements or statements**

a. P. Orenstein congratulated and thanked the organizers of the Sip ’n Stroll for a great event.

**3. Approval of Minutes**

M. Meagher made a motion to approve the November 15, 2022 minutes; A. O’Dwyer seconded. P. Orenstein asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: M. Meagher, “aye,” A. O’Dwyer, “aye,” P. Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 3-0.

**4. Town Manager Update**

- a. Welcome to new Financial Coordinator – M. Pruhenski introduced Allison Crespo, the Town’s new Financial Coordinator, and noted she is currently working on budget packets for department heads as the FY24 budget process gets underway.
- b. Salary Survey Adjustments – M. Pruhenski provided an update on salary adjustments stating that as a result of the FY21 salary survey, multiple department head positions were recommended for increases to bring them in line with their peers in other similar towns across MA/Berkshire County. Some of these recommended increases were implemented in FY22 and reflected in the FY23 budget. He continued to state in early FY23, another round of salary adjustments were made for some of the same positions to bring salaries further in line with other communities (salary adjustment list was distributed at the meeting and is attached to these minutes). These adjustments have already gone into effect, and will also be reflected in the FY24 budget, and no additional adjustments are anticipated.

He noted that FY23 funding for these mid-year adjustments came from existing salary lines/transfers where there was flexibility. He clarified that factors such as a competitive job market and inflation have had an impact - and second-round increases focused on getting titles/positions where they should be, including new hires, as well as job performance, experience/education, demands, etc. It was confirmed salary adjustments were consistent with the overall appropriation. Committee members asked for clarification that the Town Manager is responsible for setting salaries for specific Town positions/staff. M. Pruhenski added department heads are satisfied with these increases and grateful it was done proactively – he also noted he would be reviewing other staff positions for salary consistency with other towns.

- i. Steve Bannon clarified M. Pruhenski had kept the Selectboard informed on salary adjustments and that the total spent on salaries in FY23 is consistent with the total salary expenditures as was approved at the Town Meeting. He also reminded the committee that there are also funds in contingency, for just when such adjustments are decided. He also clarified that the Selectboard negotiates/determines the Town Manager’s compensation as per the Town Charter.
- ii. It was noted that the HR Director salary is unspent as salary/benefits are currently funded through a state grant.
- iii. P. Orenstein asked to have a detailed discussion on how to accommodate salary increases in advance of the budget process.

- c. Year-to-date Budget Reports. P. Orenstein asked about the budget report in the packet which shows a revised budget \$160,000 over from the original appropriation. It was stated later in the meeting that the overage reflects a number of encumbrances/carry overs from the prior year(s) which are unspent funds for projects in progress.

#### **5. Housatonic Water Works – discussion of 12/7/22 letter from Housatonic residents –**

- a. P. Orenstein stated there is a letter to the Finance Committee from three Housatonic residents in the packet with a request to discuss the points in letter at this meeting. P. Orenstein made the following statement:

Speaking for myself, I understand the distress and frustration of Housatonic residents over the quality of their water and health-related concerns – being told not to worry about the brown color of the tap water is not acceptable. The Haloacetic Acid levels are a similar cause for concern. The water quality problems are not unique to Housatonic Water Works, but its problems linger and persist - while the Great Barrington Fire District is mostly able to avoid these problems working with similar local water and climate conditions.

The Finance Committee has spent considerable time on this topic and most recently considered steps to accelerate a modest amount of emergency funding for low income affected residents. The Town recently received a state grant for this purpose - and thanks to everyone involved for getting that money to the Town. In August we expressed concerns to the Selectboard that HWW executive sessions prevented FC members from having any awareness of and ability to assist in their efforts. The Selectboard considered the FC request to have a representative in the executive sessions, and the matter was tabled due to legitimate open meeting law concerns.

This has left the Finance Committee in an awkward position – we want to assist the Selectboard, but are not fully aware of the details being discussed. As a result, any comments or analysis that we might add could inadvertently cause problems with the ongoing Selectboard process. It is important for the Town's efforts to be as coordinated as possible. Our role in this matter should be as an advisor to the Selectboard which could include the evaluation of any transaction they may consider.

It is premature and potentially counterproductive to evaluate the hypothetical acquisition price described in paragraph one in the letter from the Housatonic residents. The Town Manager believes we could have results from an independent appraisal by the end of February. At that time, the Selectboard can determine if there is a potential transaction that the Finance Committee should review. I thank Ms. Crofut, Mr. Hollenbeck and Mr. Barends for their thoughtful letter which has been reviewed thoroughly, and while I do not agree with various aspects of the letter, we are open to further discussion.

- b. M. Meagher stated she shares the concerns of Housatonic residents, but stated it is not within the Finance Committee's purview to pressure the Selectboard to act. P. Orenstein replied we are not applying pressure. A. O'Dwyer responded it is the role of committees to promote action (by bringing issues to SB). M. Meagher raised concerns about A. O'Dwyer's participation in these discussions as a Housatonic resident – A. O'Dwyer replied she had reached out to the state/ethics hotline earlier in the HWW discussions. She stated she would contact the state again to confirm, but expressed strong interest in participating and noted that she is taking a reasoned approach.
- c. Committee members discussed the complexities for any transaction the Town may consider and the logic/practicalities of running a variety of models, acquisition scenarios and costs at this time. P. Orenstein recommended doing a comparison of HWW and GBFD to understand how the cost of water is incurred and how customers are charged to help guide how the cost of ownership might be shared. He also stated there are currently three levels of expenditure: (1) assistance to residents in the near-term; (2) improvements to the HWW filtration system for which testing is in progress;

- and (3) long-term infrastructure replacement. It was also clarified that connecting the two systems is driven by the state regulatory authority for emergency back-up purposes.
- d. Annie Crofut, 210 Cottage Street stated she understands the Selectboard has been working on this, but the Finance Committee should help by developing various financial scenarios to increase understanding for HWW and GBFD customers. She also noted GBFD has a water shortage – and highlighted a 2018 draft report included with the letter/packet regarding a potential combination of the two systems. S. Bannon replied there is no water shortage for GBFD – and connecting the two systems is being discussed because they must have a secondary connection for emergencies.
  - e. A. O'Dwyer raised questions about the 2018 report and stated it would be useful to consider options and their financial implications. P. Orenstein stated that hypothetical scenarios could confuse the situation and are very complex – he suggested waiting for a specific transaction to be presented. M. Pruhenski stated the Town has hired a firm to do an appraisal of HWW as a next step and should have a report/public presentation by February 27.
  - f. P. Orenstein addressed other questions from the letter including the use of discretionary local option revenue - 3% of cannabis sales – noting these funds have been used to reduce increases in the tax levy and if redirected would impact the tax rate.
  - g. Janice Gildawie, 185 Christian Hill Road, expressed disappointment in the GBFD's position and urged them to gather/analyze more information before discounting a potential merger to help make a more informed decision.
  - h. Sharon Gregory, 32 Hollenbeck Ave., stated the point had been made at GBFD meetings that it has problems meeting its demands for water and sharing the Long Pond water source makes sense. She encouraged more investigation into how the two systems can be connected and to collect data to develop a base case for financing a merger and infrastructure improvement.
  - i. A. O'Dwyer asked if the DPU can help the Town think through the financials. P. Orenstein stated HWW is a private company - GBFD is also private, and operates as an independent water district separate from the Town and governed by a board whose responsibility is to their customers. Any effort by the Town to acquire HWW and create a new entity would require an agreed upon purchase price – and so an appraisal is the first step. He reiterated the need to understand the two water companies' fee structures which will be helpful information if a transaction is being considered. He suggested inviting Buddy Atwood/ GBFD board to attend a Finance Committee meeting to better explain its position from a legal/ regulatory/governance perspective – and how they might help going forward.
  - j. Andrew Barends, 1079 Main Street, stated he too is frustrated by the GBFD's lack of interest in a merger and noted it is important to show the Town how it can be done by analyzing data/ financials. He also stated HWW customer meters are not checked/working properly and monthly charges fluctuate/vary by customer – so monthly fees may not capture actual costs. He also suggested a tax abatement for Housatonic residents due to the water quality. It was confirmed that HWW customers had filed complaints regarding excessive charges to the DPW, and that although the Town/Selectboard do not have jurisdiction, they should be copied on those complaints.
  - k. P. Orenstein stated the Finance Committee would attempt an analysis of the fee structures for HWW and GBFD and would reach out to GBFD to ask the board to publicly clarify points made at the Selectboard meeting.

**6. Review guidance on community impact fees and free cash** - P. Orenstein stated the Finance Committee had asked that Town Counsel, David Doneski, to advise on the amount of discretion the Town has to allocate the accumulated balance of Community Impact Fees not yet allocated to nonprofits and other recipients – the email response is in the packet. He noted this is relevant to upcoming budget meetings. The Committee acknowledged the definition of what falls under the CIF umbrella is somewhat narrower than had previously been discussed and that this has potential impact for the budget process. M.

Pruhenski stated a Community Impact Funding request will be presented during budget discussions again this year – assigning funds to free cash, capital or raise and appropriate – and expenditures will be assigned to appropriate categories as defined in D. Doneski’s email. P. Orenstein asked M. Pruhenski and A. Crespo for information on the amount of funds in free cash as Community Impact Fees not at the full discretion of the Town.

- 7. Update on Community Preservation Committee** – R. Geiler stated the CPC has been reviewing step two funding requests – the majority of which are in the affordable housing category. He noted CPC funds are generally used to fill gaps or as leverage to bring in other funding sources. He stated the next meeting is December 29 to discuss CPC available budget.
- 8. Future meeting schedule** – M. Pruhenski confirmed timing for budget meetings - February 28 and March 1; March 7 and 8 and March 22 for the public hearing – all meetings starting at 6:00pm. P. Orenstein stated the Finance Committee would leave open its meeting schedule for after budget meetings though perhaps a separate meeting would be held with the GBFD.
- 9. Citizen Speak Time** – No citizens asked to speak.
- 10. Media Time** – No media asked to speak.
- 11. Adjournment** - R. Geiler made a motion to adjourn; M. Meagher seconded. P. Orenstein adjourned the meeting by unanimous consent at 8:30pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk

## Attachment

### Department Head Salary Adjustments

1. Asst. Town Manager- \$10,550 (\$114,450 to \$125,000)
2. DPW Superintendent- \$8,865 (\$96,135 to \$105,000) \*Recent Hire
3. Fire Chief- \$8,060 (\$98,940 to \$107,000)
4. Collector/Treasurer- \$6,000 (\$77,520 to \$83,520)
5. Police Chief- \$6,000 (\$110,520 to \$116,520)
6. Library Director- \$3,800 (\$66,200 to \$70,000) \*Recent Hire
7. A/P Clerk- \$3,661 (\$18.73/hr. to \$21.00/hr.)
8. Assistant Collector- \$2,129 (\$51,115 to \$53,244)
9. COA Director- \$2,000 (\$65,025 to \$67,025)
10. Assistant Treasurer- \$1,589 (\$45,000 to \$46,589)
  
11. Town Manager Contract \$22,650 (\$127,350 to \$150,000) \*This increase was a result of contract renewal negotiations with the SB.

# DRAFT Finance Committee Meeting Minutes

## Wednesday, January 25, 2023

**1. Call to Order and roll call vote** - P. Orenstein opened the meeting via Zoom at 6:30pm with a roll call: Milena Cerna, “aye,” Madonna Meagher, “aye,” Anne O’Dwyer, “aye,” Philip Orenstein, “aye.”

Absent: Richard Geiler

Also in attendance: Town Manager Mark Pruhenski, Financial Coordinator Allison Crespo

**2. Committee Member announcements or statements** – No Committee members asked to speak.

### **3. Approval of Minutes – meeting of Dec 13, 2022**

M. Meagher made a motion to approve the **December 13, 2022 minutes**; A. O’Dwyer seconded. P.

Orenstein asked if any discussion – there was none. Roll call vote: Milena Cerna, “aye,” M. Meagher, “aye,” A. O’Dwyer, “aye,” P. Orenstein, “aye.” All in favor: 4-0.

### **4. Town Manager Update**

a. FY 2024 budget process update – M. Pruhenski stated the budget process at Town Hall is progressing with regular discussions with department heads to review budget line items. He noted as in the past, difficult budget decisions are being made. He noted collective bargaining is winding up and the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with all three unions should be signed soon. He noted there is no need to build in a contingency fund for FY24 as it will already be included in the budget. He also stated that budget books will be provided as much in advance as possible.

i. P. Orenstein asked if other towns are involved in the collective bargaining - M. Pruhenski replied it is just Great Barrington which has three unions – public works, libraries and police. He clarified that once MOAs are signed, they will be taken to the Selectboard in executive session for ratification and then the budget can be updated accordingly. He also stated budget books will provide the dates for each department’s presentation.

ii. A. O’Dwyer asked if the meetings would be virtual, in person or hybrid – M. Pruhenski replied that is up to the Selectboard and Finance Committee chairs – and it is possible to do hybrid.

### **5. Discussion with Buddy Atwood, Chairman, and William Brinker, Member, of the Prudential Committee, Great Barrington Fire District (GBFD), Water Department**

a. P. Orenstein introduced B. Atwood and W. Brinker representing the GBFD Prudential Committee, noting this conversation is a continuation of the November Selectboard meeting, with the purpose of gaining additional details and an understanding of the larger goal to improve water quality for all of Great Barrington. He continued with a statement:

*One way of achieving the objective of better water quality for Housatonic Water Works (HWW) customers is improvements to their filtration system, and that process is ongoing, albeit slow, and we will not address that here. The other potential avenue is a potential sale of HWW to some entity that perhaps has more technological and financial resources to provide better water quality. As indicated by HWW in its September letter, they are amenable to discussions about a sale at an agreed upon price. Obviously, a sale requires a seller and an agreement on price to move the process forward, and to determine that price, the Town has hired a qualified independent appraisal firm and we are on track to get a report in February.*

*The potential sale could be to a private entity, the most frequently mentioned is Aquarion Water Company, a subsidiary of Eversource, the publicly traded, for-profit utility. Or it could be sold to some public entity, probably connected in some manner to Great Barrington - and that is where we get closer to our discussion tonight. Hypothetically, the sale could be to the GBFD or a newly created entity controlled by the Town – perhaps an entity similar to the wastewater plant which is referred to as an enterprise fund and is controlled by the Town and Selectboard, The GBFD is unique in that it is a completely separately managed entity – it has Great Barrington in its name, but it is its own entity and mini-municipality created as a management district which has specific meaning in MA law backed by special act of the state legislature in 1865.*

P Orenstein continued to by stating he would like to pick up where the prior Selectboard meeting left off. At that meeting B. Atwood was asked if the GBFD has interest in acquiring HWW and the response was that GBPD has no interest in acquiring HWW– and that disappointed some and created more questions, but there was a good amount of thought and discussion on the Prudential Committee’s part to get to that opinion.

P. Orenstein asked B. Atwood if he would provide background on how that conclusion was reached and what were the considerations that went into it.

b. Atwood stated the topic was discussed at a couple of meetings of the GBFD Prudential Committee and the unanimous decision by the board that they are not interested. He stated that the reasons are multi- faceted:

- \* there is no avenue to finance without impacting taxpayers - the money would be borrowed;
- \* GBFD would have to request the state’s approval for a rate increase, just as HWW would do – which might get rejected and taxpayers and GBFD would still have to make payments on the loan; M. Cerna confirmed GBFD would borrow money at the same rate as the Town.
- \* GBFD also does not have expertise in dealing with the type of lake water HWW has and there is no interest in exploring that.

- i. P. Orenstein asked if the financial burden would be on all Great Barrington residents not just GBFD customers. B. Atwood replied payback on the loan would be on GBFD members only – and would require raising taxes or water rates. It was clarified that the GBFD can charge for water and raise funds via property taxes (as allowed by its charter)
- ii. A. O’Dwyer asked if having 800 more customers paying for water would offset cost of purchasing the water company. B. Atwood stated it would not – as state approval is required for a rate increase and if that is due to taking on Housatonic the state would not likely look on it favorably. And even if it was approved [by the state], GBFD still would not be interested.
- ii. A. O’Dwyer asked for confirmation that GBFD is a public entity overseen by the state – B. Atwood replied yes, there is oversight by Department of Revenue and other state agencies. She asked about if there are other similar situations with water systems in other towns – B. Atwood replied Williamstown and Dalton - and in Adams the district serves part of the town. He continued to state the only way to expand GBFD to include Housatonic is through a method where everyone must join creating one continuous district. It was clarified this situation is unique to a water district. He again noted because GBFD can raise funds via taxes, it requires approval by every member of the water district to be added to the GBFD. It was also noted as there are other towns served by HWW, this further complicates the situation.



- iii. A. O'Dwyer asked for additional information on the Prudential Committee's discussion/decision about HWW. William Brinker—also a member of the GBFD Prudential Committee--replied the topic was discussed at length. He raised concerns about if a change in management would be able to improve water quality. He noted HWW's significant infrastructure issues and that the plan to remedy those issues is very costly and long-term.
- iv. P. Orenstein noted one of GBFD's concerns are various uncertainties in the process. B. Atwood stated he does not want to be in the same position as the Mercers as far as public perception/ reaction and believed the GBFD could not make improvements quickly enough to Housatonic residents' satisfaction.
- iv. P. Orenstein asked if the water sources are similar, how can the water quality be so different? B. Atwood replied the state classifies GBFD and HWW as surface water – GBFD draws water from the Green River and HWW draws water from Long Pond through a filter system – but both treat the water the same. M. Cerna asked if the issue with Housatonic water relates to source, different filtering methods or infrastructure – B. Atwood replied he does not know the infrastructure of HWW in detail, but supposed the water quality is similar before it get to the filter system and after is likely the same, but perhaps when it gets in the pipes it is different. It was noted the GBFD occasionally has contaminant problems, but they are usually addressed within 24 hours.
- v. There was a discussion about approaches to replacing pipes and B. Atwood stated replacing old pipes might help in Housatonic, but if the main is replaced there could still be issues with lines going to individual homes. He noted new pipes are increasingly costly and difficult to obtain. A. O'Dwyer asked about how GBFD handles pipe upgrades – B. Atwood replied they try to coordinate with the GB DPW to do upgrades when there are street repairs. He added that GBFD staff know the approximate age/condition of its pipes though leaks can happen at any time and are hard to detect.
- vi. There was a discussion about staffing levels and B. Atwood noted GBFD has four full-time staff including three who are licensed by the state. P. Orenstein made the point if an enterprise fund was created, there would likely be issues finding staff to operate it.
- vii. P. Orenstein asked B. Atwood to clarify that the connection being planned between GBFD and HWW is driven by state regulators for emergency back-up purposes – and that would not enhance the ability to provide cleaner water to Housatonic. B. Atwood explained the steps required to make the emergency backup connection and confirmed that mixing the water systems would not address Housatonic's issues especially related to manganese.
- viii. P. Orenstein asked about GBFD's meter reading practices – B. Atwood replied it does get questions from customers, but issues are investigated and meters replaced as needed.
- ix. Public Comment
  - Sharon Gregory, 32 Hollenbeck, compared the water intake systems noting the differences between the filters process/techniques used. She also noted for the distribution systems, the information in the engineers' report regarding older pipes/replacements for HWW and GBFD and related costs – and encouraged efforts to find financing. P. Orenstein clarified the report was high level with incomplete information regarding pipes.
  - Debra Herman, 373 North Plain Road disputed B. Atwood's characterization of HWW customers' as unfair to the Mercers, stating customers basically want safe water.

## **6. Letter from Chip Elitzer regarding proposed regional school district merger**

- a. P. Orenstein opened the discussion stating this is an important issue for the area and Town, but noted that the Finance Committee has not spent much time on this topic recently and is not at the

point for a larger discussion. He stated the 8-Town District Task Force is in the process of developing what they want the Finance Committee to respond to as to the proposed way of financing the new school district. He introduced C. Elitzer who had submitted a letter to the Finance Committee regarding his proposal for changes to how school district financing is determined.

C. Elitzer stated this is early on and there is ample time for discussions, but how the regional school district is financed is an important issue from a financial and taxpayer perspective. He pointed out the disparities in tax rates depending on the town within the district which is based on student enrollment - and stated the method should change.

He suggested transitioning to a single tax rate for all towns over a 10-year period. He used the example of Great Barrington which is currently paying \$11.20/thousand of assessed property. His approach would be for towns like GB that are paying more than the single rate would not see an increase, but towns currently paying less would see an increase in their tax rates pro rata and incrementally - and over ten years with budget increases/inflation those towns would rise to the level of a single rate across all school district towns: his proposal suggested a single rate of \$6.91/thousand.

He noted this proposed change in how towns' contributions to the school district's budget are calculated would have a significant effect of equalizing tax rates across the district towns, as 75% of taxes collected in GB currently go to Berkshire Hills. He also noted that based on the outcome of past Town and school votes, there is existing local support for a single school-district rate. In discussion he clarified under a single rate there would be two tax bills – school and property. He suggested as a next step to do additional education/outreach and signaling to the 8-Town Committee that a single rate is a good prospect for the district – and he requested that the Finance Committee make that recommendation to the Selectboard. He continued to question why student enrollment is determinative since in most places public education is financed by property taxes regardless of the number of students per town.

**b. Public comment –**

- i. Michael Wise stated Essex is another district that follows this approach – C. Elitzer replied that it is likely that in Essex the ratio of assessed property values is equal to students.
- ii. Sharon Gregory stated she agrees with C. Elitzer's assessment/position and that towns not paying as much should have incremental increases. She emphasized there are educational benefits to the 2-district, 8-Town Merger currently being considered committee which would enrich program quality/offerings.

**7. Citizen Speak Time** – No citizens asked to speak.

**8. Media Time** – No media asked to speak.

**9. Adjournment** – M. Meagher made a motion to adjourn; A. O'Dwyer seconded. P. Orenstein adjourned the meeting by unanimous consent at 8:10pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Stacy Ostrow, Recording Clerk

Charles Burger  
Chief

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**TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON  
MASSACHUSETTS**

**FIRE DEPARTMENT**

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**RESERVE FUND TRANSFER REQUEST**

March 31, 2023

TO: Finance Committee  
FROM: Chief Burger, Fire Chief  
RE: Reserve Fund Transfer Request

I am respectfully requesting a transfer of funds from the Finance Committee Reserve Fund to the Fire Department Repair & Maintenance budget.

	ACCOUNT NAME	ORG	OBJ	AMOUNT
From:	Reserve Fund	01131	57800	\$ 15,000.00
To:	Repair/Maintenance	01220	52450	\$ 15,000.00

\*See attached YTD budget to actual report.

Department Head Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 3/31/2023

Town Accountant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Town Manager: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Finance Committee:

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

To: Finance Committee

From: Chief Burger; Great Barrington Fire Department

Date: March 31, 2023

RE: Reserve Fund Transfer Request for Fire Department Repair & Maintenance

I respectfully request \$15,000 be transferred from the reserve fund to the Fire Department Repair & Maintenance budget. Currently there is only \$1,000 remaining in the line item with a \$7,000 invoice pending and a \$5,000 repair required for our aerial ladder to pass its annual certification. There are several causes for this need. First, inflation is causing costs to rise even faster than expected. Second, I typically spend many hours working late at night troubleshooting problems and making repairs which saves thousands on labor. I have been unable to do that the past few months because I have put my effort into organizing and preparing for the transition to a new chief. So, much of what I did had to be contracted at \$135/hr for an emergency vehicle technician. Third, there were unplanned expenses including \$3,000 to replace the batteries on E-4, the pending tightening of cables on our ladder truck, and \$4,000 for new rear springs on E-5.