

GREAT BARRINGTON HOUSING AUTHORITY

2 Bernard Gibbons Drive

Great Barrington, MA 01230

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MEETING MINUTES

Great Barrington Housing Authority Board of Commissioners

March 21, 2018

This meeting of the Great Barrington Housing Authority was held at Flag Rock Village, at 2 Bernard Gibbons Drive, Great Barrington, Massachusetts. The meeting was called to order by Chair Karen Smith at 2:30 PM.

Board members in attendance: Karen Smith, James Mercer, Jackie Sinico, and Diane Dillon. Also in attendance was Vera E. Cartier, Executive Director and Secretary of the Board as well as Michelle Loubert, the recording secretary.

Chair Smith brought forward the February 21, 2018 minutes for approval. There was no discussion or comments regarding the minutes. Ms. Sinico made a motion to approve the minutes, and Dr. Dillon seconded the motion. The vote was unanimous to approve the February 21, 2018 minutes.

The Chair called forward the Executive Director's Report. Executive Director Cartier opened her report with information regarding the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Association of Housing & Redevelopment Officials (MA NAHRO) 2018 Past Presidents Memorial Scholarship. She explained the details of the application including eligibility. Ms. Cartier informed the audience that additional information and applications are available in the office of the GBHA.

Ms. Cartier then moved on to discussing Spectrum Cable issues and solutions. She explained that currently, the GBHA is under a "bulk account." Added to tenants' rent is a \$17 charge for basic cable. This system worked years ago but today, many tenants are opting for streaming television shows and using services such as Roku. These tenants are paying for their internet service to stream shows; however, they are still paying for the basic cable. Ms. Cartier said she would like to discontinue Spectrum cable at Flag Rock and allow tenants to obtain the services they want on their own. The tenants would no longer pay the \$17 that is added to their rent. This change would not apply to Brookside tenants because that housing is in contract with Spectrum and that contract has not yet expired.

Chair Smith expressed the possible need to vote on any change with the Spectrum cable. She opened the topic to discussion among the board members.

Mr. Mercer asked if this change will be beneficial—will tenants be paying more than \$17/month.

Chair Smith responded that this would depend on the service the tenant chooses—some tenants will want one cable package; other tenants may just want basic.

Ms. Cartier explained that many tenants want more cable options and the \$17 per month does not cover the cost of these options.

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Ms. Cartier explained that the change won't occur for two to three months. Tenants will need to make arrangements as to their cable needs and have plenty of time to do so. Tenants will not be suddenly cut off from cable service.

Ms. Cartier moved on to the next item of her report, Dewey Court and explained that GBHA assuming Dewey Court is now in the hands of Berkshire County Regional Housing and the Department of Housing and Community Development.

Next on the Executive Director's report is the proposed, updated Personnel Policy. This is a draft. Ms. Cartier explained that the Board members received a copy of the draft prior to the meeting in order to review for discussion today. The personnel policy currently in effect is ten years old according to Ms. Cartier. It is out of date. She continued to explain that the proposed policy came from information issued by the DHCD and KP Law. A draft policy was issued to all local housing authorities for their use. Each local housing authority can customize the policy (personalize it) with their own information. However, certain laws or policies (for example, Sexual Harassment) which must remain in any housing authority personnel policy.

Ms. Cartier brought to the attention of the Board that there is one additional piece of information to be added to the draft personnel policy. This information was received just prior to today's meeting. The MA Department of Unemployment Assistance issued information regarding Employer Medical Assistance Contributions Supplement. This information will be added to the draft. She informed the Board that some laws do not apply to GBHA due to the number of employees employed by the GBHA. The information just received falls into this category.

Ms. Cartier asked the Board for their thoughts. She again explained that this copy of the personnel policy is a draft and not ready yet for Board approval. She will bring the final version forward for approval in April.

Chair Smith said that she reviewed the draft. She felt the sick time generous. However, if this is the state standard, it is fine. She said the proposed personnel policy seemed "boilerplate." She noted the policy regarding electronic communications.

Dr. Dillon stated that the draft seemed standard.

Mr. Mercer asked about fiscal year versus calendar year with regard to benefits and other employee-related matters. Ms. Cartier thinks that calendar year would be better (GBHA is on fiscal year at this time).

Mr. Mercer pointed out that state funding is based on fiscal year. He feels staying with the fiscal year is best.

It was agreed among the Board and the Executive Director to remain on fiscal year.

Chair Smith then brought forward the employee benefit of Deferred Compensation as it is referred to under both the current personnel policy and proposed personnel policy. Of concern is the GBHA

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contribution to employee SMART Plan retirement accounts. These retirement accounts are “optional” and supplement the employee’s Social Security. The Chair stated that after speaking with the GBHA accountant from Fenton, Ewald it was determined that this employer contribution is “problematic.” She stated that the Great Barrington Housing Authority does not have enough funds to pay its account payables so it is not possible to contribute to employees’ retirement accounts. The Chair recommended suspending this benefit, not permanently eradicate it, until the GBHA finances are back in order. Chair Smith said that the GBHA can’t be giving away what it doesn’t have. She stated that she didn’t think there would be a vote today on this matter and that it was her strong feeling that there would be no employer contributions for at least 18 to 24 months until the GBHA finances are “squared away” due to some historical issues that have been inherited. Suspending the employer contribution is being fiscally responsible.

Ms. Sinico stated that it was her thought that the GBHA is “trying to do different things” because forever tenants have heard there is no money. She said the GBHA would receive more money with the change in the laundry service vendor. Ms. Sinico said items were needed such as paint. She said she wants to see money spent on things such as this; Ms. Sinico did not want money to be going into a retirement account.

At the time of this meeting, only one employee is participating in the SMART Plan. Discussion continued regarding this. The employee is due the employer contribution for 2017. Suspending the employer contribution, per the Chair, would not be retroactive, and therefore, this employee would receive his employer contribution for 2017. The suspension would be going forward.

Ms. Cartier explained that this is an “added benefit” to employees. It is a “discretionary thing.” The current personnel policy references this benefit and does say “as funds permit.” She reminded the Board that at a later time, they could to vote to reinstate the employer contribution but at a lower percentage such as three percent. She said that the Fenton, Ewald accountant will be at the GBHA for the April 18 meeting and will explain further the financial condition of the GBHA.

Mr. Mercer asked how far in arrears are we? Ms. Cartier stated that only one employee is in the plan at this time, but it is open to all employees. Mr. Mercer asked what the GBHA accountant says on this topic. Ms. Cartier stated the accountant said not to do it. Mr. Mercer again asked about arrears.

The Chair, by calling a point of order, ended conversation on this topic not wanting to discuss further a particular employee’s retirement account. The Chair said that “let’s just say we are in arrears.” The problem being if others get involved, the GBHA won’t be able to do what it has already promised. As a fiscally responsible move, the Board must do what it needs to do. She said that the Board would not be voting on it today. It will be coming up in April. She stressed that this benefit is in arrears and going forward, the arrears will only get “bigger and bigger.”

Ms. Cartier asked to clarify the action to be taken at this meeting and asked if this matter will be brought forward to the April meeting.

Mr. Mercer asked when the GBHA receives its financial statements. Ms. Cartier said the current statements will be available in April when the GBHA accountant attends that meeting.

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The Chair said she would take a motion on the deferred compensation matter.

Dr. Dillon made the motion to suspend the deferred compensation employer contribution at this time.

Mr. Mercer asked if the Board could review it in six months. The Chair reminded the Board that there had to be a second on the motion. Ms. Sinico seconded Dr. Dillon's motion. The Chair invited discussion on the motion. Mr. Mercer asked to amend the motion to add that the suspension of the employer contribution to the employee deferred compensation plan be reviewed again in six months and at six month intervals.

The Chair said she would not add this language as part of the motion but rather but rather would have it stated in the minutes as a procedural issue.

The Chair called for the vote on the motion as presented by Dr. Dillon. Smith, Dillon, and Sinico voted in favor of the motion with Mr. Mercer opposed.

Mr. Mercer then brought forward a motion to suspend the deferred compensation employer contribution at this time with a review every six months.

The Chair confirmed that the six month review would begin in September 2018.

Dr. Dillon seconded the motion.

The Chair called for the vote. The vote was unanimous in favor of the motion.

The Chair instructed the Executive Director to issue the proposed draft personnel policy to employees for review and make it available to tenants. She continued that then, the proposed personnel policy can be voted on at the April meeting. Before doing so, however, the Chair instructed the Executive Director to remove the language regarding the employer contribution from the policy. The Chair continued that with this language out, that is the draft to be presented unless the Board or anyone else comes up with anything else. She said she thought that all employees and the Executive Director should look it over and speak to anything they had objection to at the next meeting. If there are no problems or issues, the Board can act on it.

Next on the Executive Director's report was the Lead Certification for Board review, vote, and signature. Ms. Cartier explained that this Certification is received each year. It ensures GBHA compliance with state and federal lead paint laws and the GBHA is in compliance. The Executive Director presented documentation supporting this.

The Chair called forward for a motion to accept and sign the Lead Certification. Mr. Mercer made the motion with a second from Ms. Sinico. The vote was called and the vote was unanimous in favor of the Certification approval. The Certification was signed by the Board.

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Next, the Executive Director thanked the maintenance staff for putting in extra hours for the winter storm cleanup and doing an excellent job.

The Chair called forward agenda item Resident Advisory Board. Although there was no report to be presented, the Chair opened the floor to discussion. She commented that there have been some issues but hoped that now, those issues have been “squared away.” It has been decided that Flag Rock will have its own Resident Advisory Board and Brookside will have its own Resident Advisory Board. The Chair informed attendees that there would be two meetings—one on March 28 for Flag Rock tenants and the second on March 29 for Brookside tenants. The purpose of these meetings was to assist tenants in setting up their respective boards.

The Chair stated that state laws on such boards are quite lengthy. She would like to see this information reduced down to one page, possibly just a bullet list of what to do.

Dewey Court will have a board as well once it comes under the management of the GBHA.

A tenant asked if the family unit tenants are to be involved. The response was yes. Everyone will get a notice of the meetings and be invited.

Another tenant expressed concern with regard to people who are shut-ins and how to reach out to those people.

The Chair said that this is an excellent issue for the Resident Advisory Boards to deal with (outreach).

The Chair brought forward the agenda item of Financial Updates. The Executive Director explained that the GBHA budget has been increased in order to assist with projects such as ADA upgrades (handicap accessibility). This assistance is referred to “Amendment #7 to contract for Financial Assistance Work Plan 5001, State Improvement Plan.” This amendment increases Construction Costs by \$163,690.75, thus increasing the contract amount from \$866,729.52 to \$1,030,420.27.

The Chairperson of the Great Barrington Housing Authority and/or its Executive director shall be, and are hereby authorized and directed, on and after the execution of said contract amendments by the respective parties thereto, to take all actions necessary and proper on behalf of the Authority to perform fully all of its obligations thereon.

Chair Smith called for the above motion. Board member Dillon moved to make this motion with a second from Board member Sinico.

With no further discussion or comment, the vote was called. All in favor: Chair Smith, Board Member Mercer, Board Member Dillon, and Board Member Sinico. The vote was unanimous.

Ms. Cartier explained that the handicap accessible automatic doors should go in within the next two months, probably around June.

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The Chair brought forward agenda item Warrant signing. Ms. Cartier explained that the majority of the warrants have now been signed; Mr. Mercer has opted not to sign the warrants because he is a GBHA vendor.

Under Old Business, Ms. Sinico addressed the start time of the Board meetings; she would like the meetings to begin earlier such as 2:00 PM. Dr. Dillon explained that she cannot make a 2:00 PM meeting. After a brief discussion, it was decided to leave the start time of the meetings at 2:30 PM.

The April 18 meeting will be at Brookside. Every third meeting will be at Brookside.

There was no New Business.

The Chair asked that the Maintenance Report be presented. Richard Phair, maintenance supervisor, presented the report stating that maintenance has been very busy dealing with the winter storms. On apartment 109 that was damaged due to an air conditioner being left in a window, the new window has been ordered. Unit #4 is being painted and should be ready soon for a new tenant. Unit #11 is still having work done on it including painting.

There was also an issue with frozen pipes that had to be dealt with.

Mr. Phair also explained that there was an incident a couple of weeks ago when the Brookside sewer system was plugged due to “flushable wipes” being flushed down the toilets. Mt. Everett was called in to clear the main. Mr. Phair told tenants that if “flushable wipes” are being used, do not flush them down toilets!

It was noted that this is a very expensive issue. Mr. Mercer recommended that a flyer be done reminding tenants not to flush these “flushable wipes.” He said there is a flyer on the Town of Great Barrington website.

The Chair offered that perhaps the Resident Advisory Boards could help with outreach regarding the wipes issue.

The Chair brought forward Citizen Speak.

Tenant Annie Bushka expressed the concern that there isn't enough handicap parking and could more handicap parking be created?

Ms. Cartier explained that there are guidelines on this; right now, only four spaces are allowed in compliance with this guideline. Mr. Phair also explained that handicap parking spaces are wider than the standard parking space and this must be taken into consideration.

Tenant Carol Piontek asked about the old books that are at Brookside for tenant reading. She wanted to know if she could box these up and get rid of them.

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Tenant Jane Green said that she is working with Select Board member Ed Abrahams (also a member of the Friends of the Libraries) on getting rid of old books and obtaining newer books for Brookside.

Tenant Marlene Koloski spoke regarding Spectrum billing. Ms. Cartier explained that she is working with them on the cost. When cable is turned over to tenants in accordance with previous discussion, the \$17 charge will be removed from the rent due (rent plus \$17 for cable).

The Chair called forward Board Speak.

Ms. Sinico stated that she didn't know who is telling workers to park here. Tenants are unable to find parking due to this issue. She requested that there be signage indicating resident parking only.

Ms. Cartier said that if she sees someone parking where they are not supposed to be parking, she does remind them to park in the visitor lot. However, if the person is only here for a few minutes, such as assisting a tenant, she allows this.

The Chair said that this, too, is an issue the Resident Advisory Boards can address. Tenants who use PCAs should inform the PCAs where it is appropriate to park.

Tenant Mary Warford brought up the issue of recycling. Chair Smith said this is another issue the Resident Advisory Boards can take on.

Tenant Joanne Iarocci asked if cars can be ticketed. The response was no. The Chair stressed that parking is an issue that the Resident Advisory Boards should be dealing with.

Mr. Mercer asked the status of the new laundry. Ms. Cartier is in the process of coordinating the old laundry being removed and the new laundry going in.

Mr. Mercer asked who handles garbage removal. Ms. Cartier responded, Republic Services. There is no contract. Looking for a less expensive alternative. There is no contract with Republic. Currently, a lower bid is coming in. Chair Smith agreed that the GBHA should check out what else is out there.

Dr. Dillon asked about finances and what was meant when the Chair stated that it would take 18-24 months to meet the GBHA fiscal responsibilities?

The Chair, referring to her experience in financial issues number one and number two, the GBHA has expenses such as Lodestar and National Grid which are very high as are other expenses. Thus, the 18 to 24 months to get the GBHA finances in order.

Mr. Phair asked if the Board could address heating and cooling. Example: a policy regarding air conditioners being left in windows year round.

It was asked of Mr. Phair when there was an energy audit performed at the housing. Mr. Phair responded about eleven years ago.

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Chair Smith ordered that an energy review of the housing facilities be done. The cost is “astronomical.” She wants to see if we can get heating/cooling expenses down.

Ms. Cartier explained that there are no accustats in apartments. Mr. Phair said just on the boilers. The boilers must be set at 70 so boilers are running year round. He explained that Flag Rock is propane; Brookside is electric.

Chair Smith said that this needs evaluation. She instructed the Executive Director to place the topic of Energy Audit on the April agenda.

Chair Smith instructed the Executive Director to also place on April’s agenda the issue with the window damaged by the air conditioner being left in year round. She also instructed that an energy audit be placed on the April agenda.

The Chair also stated she would like to “get a grip” on all of the vendors such as what the vendors do, how long they have been under contract, and so forth. The Board needs to look at this. The Chair would like to do this in an effort to stop the “hemorrhaging” at the GBHA.

Chair Smith requested that agenda packets be issued to the board in separate files: Agenda, Minutes, Financial, and Other.

Board members agreed.

Mr. Mercer asked if there was any money available for computers.

Ms. Cartier stated that in the next fiscal year (2019) budget, money will be available for iPads for maintenance and a laptop for the office.

The Chair called for a motion to close the meeting. Ms. Sinico made that motion and Dr. Dillon seconded. It was unanimously voted to adjourn the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 3:39 PM.