

Taxpayers take care of business in Old Lyme

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Old Lyme — Voters at a town meeting gave their unanimous endorsement on a host of items ranging from Halls Road improvements to pandemic relief to open space accessibility.

The authorizations included \$86,622 in spending.

Roughly 100 taxpayers at the meeting allocated \$45,000 for the Halls Road Improvements Committee to move forward with a framework laid out in a 2021 master plan for turning the outdated strip into a vibrant, walkable neighborhood.

The master plan, created for \$48,000 by the Glastonbury-based BSC Group engineering firm, called for zoning changes and streetscape improvements in keeping with the historic charm of Lyme Street. Monday night's allocation will include \$19,000 to come up with draft regulations to establish an overlay zone on the road, as well as \$13,500 for engineered drawings to be used in the application for a state grant.

The overlay zone concept was raised following the withdrawal of a previous zoning application criticized by some as too restrictive. Instead of creating a village district where anyone constructing a new building or renovating an existing one would need to conform to new regulations, this gives business owners and developers the choice to go with the overlay zone regulations or existing rules.

The engineered drawings for the streetscape side of the project will detail a plan for sidewalks, crosswalks, streetlights, walking trails, landscaping and a pedestrian bridge over the Lieutenant River.

Included in the appropriation is \$7,000 to secure an easement from property owner James Graybill to provide access to the old Lieutenant River bridge abutment for a pedestrian bridge and to allow for a trail to the Florence Griswold Museum.

The Halls Road Improvements Committee in a handout said the bridge and trail will help integrate Old Lyme's business district with the Arts District, which it described as one of the town's "definitive assets."

"It is important to secure this easement now, both to ensure future access to the bridge abutment and to make it possible to apply for grants to defray the costs of building the bridge and trails on the east side of the river," the committee said.

Pandemic relief

Voters approved up to \$20,000 in federal pandemic relief funds to hire East Hampton-based consultant George Krivda to administer a grant program for small businesses and nonprofits affected by the pandemic.

The town last fall convened a committee to make recommendations on how to spend \$2.1 million in federal pandemic-relief aid. Members have been working since then to create a survey, review 900 responses and identify community priorities. One focus identified by the committee involves helping to make up for revenue loss experienced by businesses and nonprofit groups.

The American Rescue Plan Committee voted last month to cap the grant award for each business or nonprofit at \$10,000. Krivda, who worked in the same capacity for East Windsor and Somers, will analyze applications for compliance and report to the committee about who qualifies for funding.

Voters at the town meeting also authorized \$21,622 as part of a request from Ledge Light Health District to its member municipalities for 1% of their federal COVID-19 relief dollars. The other municipalities in the health district are Groton, Ledyard, Lyme, New London, Old Lyme and Stonington.

Health district Director Steve Mansfield has said the money will be used for activities such as expanding epidemiological capacity, public communications and adding staff. In a letter to local leaders, he noted the American Rescue Plan doesn't contain a provision for direct funding to health districts.

Voters gave approval for an accounting method allowed by the U.S. Department of the Treasury that streamlines the pandemic-relief reporting process for smaller municipalities.

Open space

Voters also supported amendments to a conservation easement that had precluded the construction of parking areas on the town-owned McCulloch Open Space property. Language in the amendment allows three parking areas made of permeable surface material, and provides for garbage pails and composting toilets.

Prior to the town purchasing the 312 acres for \$600,000 in 2019, the swath of forest and fields had been restricted to the public because of the conservation easement placed over it in 1999. Open Space Commission Co-Chairman Amanda Blair prior to the meeting said getting changes made to the agreement is a laborious, legal process.

She said the change will allow for safe, public parking.

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