

Bedford Council on Aging Board

Minutes

October 10, 2023, 10:30am

COA Computer Room

Board members present: Sandra Hackman-Chair, Lewis Putney, Roberta Ennis, Karen Moore, David Santos (arrival 10:38am*), Paul Fath, Thomas Kinzer, Mary Lou Barsam

Board members absent: Allan Morgan-Vice Chair,

Other participants: Alison Cservenschi, COA Director; Susan Schwartz, Board of Health; Rick Rosen, Taxation Aid Committee; Nancy Wolk, Board of Assessors; Matt Lanefski, Assessor

*All attendees present in person.

Call to order/welcome and chair's remarks:

Ms. Hackman called the meeting to order at 10:31am and asked all those present to introduce themselves briefly.

Approval of minutes:

Board members suggested typographic corrections to the September minutes. Ms. Ennis moved to approve them as amended. Mr. Putney seconded.

- Vote of Board: 7-0-1

Director's report:

Ms. Cservenschi reported a great turnout at Bedford Day. Senior Center attendance rose from 64 per day in August to 80 per day in September.

A program presented by the LGBTQIA+ History Project, scheduled for Saturday, October 21 and presented in collaboration with Minuteman Senior Services and the Aging Project of Boston, has five signups so far, with hopes for more. COA social worker Danika Castle continues to devote half her time to supporting refugees at the Bedford Plaza Hotel. The COA has been approved to use town funds from the American Rescue Plan Act to replace those hours each week.

Ms. Hackman noted that data on Bedford Local Transit "turndowns", requested rides that could not be fulfilled, are an important metric for future transportation planning. The board discussed interest in expanding available rides, including medical rides. The BLT has received no applicants for the Saturday driver position, and the director noted it has been difficult to hire drivers in the area. Discussion considered the possibility of sharing a driver with another town, which has been done before. The board suggested posting this job in the COA newsletter.

Tax abatement programs for seniors:

Tax Work-Off Program

This state program allows seniors to work off real estate taxes through employment within town departments. Qualifying senior residents may reduce their property taxes by \$1000. The income threshold is \$40,000 for a single person and \$55,000 for a couple.

A senior employment program has been available through the COA for a number of years, with little financial qualification required for limited positions. However, earnings from this program were considered income and were therefore taxable. Income from the tax work-off program, in contrast, is not considered income as the earnings are applied directly to taxes. Funding for program would come from the town's overlay account.

An article asking Bedford to adopt this program is on the warrant for Special Town Meeting on Nov. 6. Ms. Hackman encouraged board members and others to attend to support this program.

Mr. Kinzer moved to express support for this program at town meeting. Ms. Ennis seconded.

- Vote of the Board: 8-0-0

Ms. Hackman asked any board member interested in preparing a statement of support to get in touch with her.

Voluntary taxation aid fund to benefit seniors and residents with disabilities

Former COA Board member Rick Rosen has long advocated for this program, which Annual Town Meeting approved in 2022. He now chairs the committee overseeing its implementation.

He reported that 30 percent of Bedford residents age 65 or older are cost-burdened--that is, they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing. What's more, 32 percent of such households have an annual income of less than \$50,000. Rising property taxes, reflecting increases in home values, have made keeping up with taxes more difficult for these seniors. Spousal death also makes it challenging to meet the annual tax bill.

Under this program, Bedford residents will receive an insert with their third-quarter real estate tax bill 2024 asking if they wish to voluntarily contribute to the fund. Residents can apply to receive funds collected through this program to help pay their property taxes.

Ms. Barsam asked how this program differs from the state circuit breaker provision. Mr. Rosen responded that the latter does not have an asset limit: MA residents 65 and older simply check a box on their state tax return to receive a \$2,000 reduction in state taxes. Mr. Lanefski, Town Assessor, noted that the assessors' website has a list of all available tax exemptions.

Ms. Barsam asked if the Town would provide a link on the website to allow residents to donate to the fund. Both Mr. Lanefski and Mr. Rosen noted challenges to doing this through municipal websites.

Ms. Barsam asked if the Friends of the Council on Aging (FBCOA) could assist with raising funds for this program, such as by posting information about it on its Facebook page. Ms. Ennis, president of the FBCOA, said she would raise this question at its next meeting.

Clause 41C½

Assessor Nancy Wolk reported the Board of Assessors is exploring whether Bedford might adopt this program, which would allow more seniors to qualify for a reduction in property taxes than the existing local tax exemption. This clause, if adopted, would raise the income cutoff to that of the aforementioned state circuit breaker program, and eliminate consideration of assets. The taxes of other Bedford residents would rise to cover lower tax payments from qualifying seniors. Ashland is the only community so far that has adopted this program.

Adoption of this program would require a majority vote at a Town election in March. The Assessors are looking at a ballot proposal in 2026, allowing time to educate the community and build support. The assessors plan to propose applying the clause to residents 70 years and older, but Town Meeting could vote to apply it to residents age 65 and older.

(Mr. Putney left the meeting 11:43am)

Liaison reports:Susan Schwartz, Board of Health

- Town flu clinics are scheduled, available via online registration.
- High-dose shots are available at the Senior Center and at the Town-wide clinic on 10/21.
- The town's multifaceted response to supporting the refugees at the Bedford Plaza continues. Interested parties can view the emergency response tab on the Town website to support these efforts. Ongoing needs include medical transportation, culturally appropriate items, and translators who speak Haitian Creole.
- Ms. Schwartz thanked the FBCOA and COA Board for supporting a proposal to create permanent outdoor performance space (POPS), scheduled to be presented to the Select Board this evening.

Ms. Hackman asked about where COA Board members and residents can find information on FBCOA fundraising efforts. Questions and suggestions include:

- Where to send dues? When they are due?
- Using email to announce FBCOA meetings and support membership growth.
- Posting more information on the COA website. Ms. Ennis and Mr. Fath will bring up these questions and ideas at the next FBCOA Board meeting.

Bedford Embraces Diversity

Marilou Barsam outlined BED's Faces of Bedford project and asked for suggestions for seniors to interview for the project.

Next meeting and adjourn:

The next COA Board meeting will be on November 14, in person in the Senior Center Computer Room.

Ms. Ennis moved to adjourn the meeting at 12:01pm, and Ms. Moore seconded.

- Vote of the Board: 8-0-0

Documents used in the meeting:

- Agenda
- Draft September minutes
- Director's monthly report
- Monthly budget report

- PowerPoint on senior demographics in Bedford
 - * PowerPoint on Chapter 41C1/2