

# Town Seeks State Consent for Town Wide Vote on Health District

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First Selectman David Bindelglass pushed hard to achieve permission from the state to hold a referendum on Easton’s annual budget. He believed he had secured permission to hold a modified budget referendum and vote on joining the Westport Weston Health District (WWHD).

But Governor Ned Lamont’s May 1 Executive Order No. 7HH, “Clarification of Executive Order No. 7I, Section 13 - Mandatory Suspension of In-Person Voting Requirements by Members of the Public on Municipal Budgets,” put the kibosh on those plans.

That hasn’t stopped Bindelglass and Town Attorney Ira Bloom from communicating with Lamont’s office to determine if Easton can hold town wide voting about joining the Westport Weston Health District.

Bindelglass and Bloom are attempting to clear up ambiguous language in a subsequent executive order, which appears to indicate municipal referendums might be permissible after consultation with local or state health officials.

Section 7B of subsequent Executive Order No. 7JJ states: “Nothing in this order shall be construed to prohibit a municipality from conducting any in-person meeting, approval process, or referendum, provided such municipality first consults with local or state

public health officials and conducts such meeting, approval process, or referendum in a way that significantly reduces the risk of transmission of COVID-19.”

“Dave has been very active, making his own inquiries and doing his own review,” Bloom said. “He asked me to pursue it which I did. There was some controversy with people in the state government saying maybe a municipal referendum could be allowed.”

In addition to that, Secretary of the State Denise W. Merrill issued Connecticut’s Election Plan in the Face of COVID-19, which includes absentee ballots and in-person voting, conducted according to strict health and safety standards.

Lamont on March 10 issued a declaration of public health and civil preparedness emergencies, proclaiming a state of emergency throughout the State of Connecticut as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States and Connecticut.

He has issued numerous subsequent executive orders to suspend or modify statutes and to take other actions necessary to protect public health and safety and mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Easton is considering joining the WWHD, “which would provide the town more services at about the same cost as we currently incur,” Selectman Robert Lessler wrote in his May 7 Board of Selectmen notes. “The town appears to have two permanent options. First, we could hire new staff to replace the existing staff. Second, we could form a relationship with a neighboring health district.

“The two town officials who constitute the professional staff of the department are seeking to retire. If the town simply replaces the existing staff, the expectation is that the costs would significantly increase as we would need to enhance the programs, services and hours of the department.”

If town wide polling isn’t an option, Lessler said the board is considering contracting

with the WWHD to provide health services for a period of one year. “This will insure the town has the necessary services after the incumbents retire and will allow us to test the relationship with the WWHD without formally joining the district.”

A slide presentation is available on the town website regarding the WWHD proposal and video of the March 2, 2020 public presentation is available from Channel 79 on the town website.

According to the presentation, Easton’s current public health funding is \$96,296. The proposed local public health assessment upon joining the WWHD is \$100,000. The following estimated costs were also given to staff a full time municipal health department to meet all regulatory requirements:

- Full Time Registered Sanitarian \$54,000 to \$123,760 + benefits
- Full Time Director of Health range \$95,500 to \$173,000 + benefits

Those skeptical of any town proposal to join the WWHD argue that an additional cost analysis should be part of a “Plan B” scenario in which Easton didn’t join the WWHD and brought its Health Department into compliance with state regulations. Residents made their opinions known in letters and at a series of Brown Bag Lunches that Bindelglass held prior to the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders. Read more [here](#).

## Board of Finance Acts

The town of Vernon, which held drive-by voting, was the only Connecticut municipality to hold a budget referendum before Executive Order No. 7HH was enacted.

In the case of Vernon, “People didn’t get out of their cars but identified themselves as voters,” Bloom said. “No paper was exchanged. They gave a thumbs up to support the budget. No other town can do that now.”

The Board of Finance has met, called back various departments and taken into consideration public input. At its May 21 meeting, the Board of Selectmen is expected to authorize the Board of Finance to approve the 2020-21 budget and set the mill rate. A mill represents the taxes paid for every \$1,000 of assessed property value.

The important point according to Bindelglass is that the decision should reflect what the majority of voters in Easton want. The Board of Selectman's goal is to authorize a referendum vote if the town is able to get the green light from the governor. If this isn't permitted, then the town could maintain the status quo or consider joining the WWHD on a trial basis for one year.