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Temper flare over pitch to stream meetings at recent Stonington select board meeting

School budget priorities discussed with McKechnie

March 19, 2026

BY JACK BEAUDOIN



STONINGTON—Select board members voted 5-0 to table a proposal to stream and record town meetings in order to gather more information about technical requirements and legal implications.

Resident Morgan Eaton brought the proposal to the board's March 16 meeting. She said that providing a live streaming option such as Zoom would boost civic involvement, engage residents who have not been part of the process in the past and ultimately help board members make better informed decisions based on greater input.

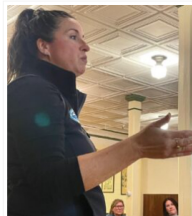
"This technology will allow people to participate more, even if they can't be in the same room," she said. "This provides a lower barrier to participation, improves information equity, increases possibilities to be involved and to engage and provide direction."

Coincidentally, new select board chair Travis Fifield was attending the meeting via Zoom after a storm cancelled his flight home earlier in the day.

Eaton's proposal included two options:

- **Watch-only**—A service from Town Hall Streams would enable residents to tune in live or view meetings on demand. It would not enable views to speak or participate remotely. As a turnkey service, Town Hall Streams would provide the necessary equipment, enable unlimited meetings, store video for at least five years, and warranties the service and equipment for the life of the contract.
- **Interactive**—Using the town's existing equipment and account, meetings would be presented on Zoom, and attendees could participate in the public comment portion of the agenda and ask questions. The Zoom meeting could be recorded and archived to the town's YouTube channel and available for on-demand viewing.

"I don't see any downsides," Eaton said. "If COVID taught us one thing, it's that we can still gather publicly from our own homes. The best thing is to be here, of course, but it's not always possible."



Resident Morgan Eaton details her proposal to stream town meetings over Zoom or similar services. Eaton offered to pay for any first-year fees so that the town can gauge its value. PHOTO BY JACK BEAUDOIN



CSO 13 Superintendent Tara McKechnie and school board co-chair Chelsea Torrey outline the district's budget schedule at the March 16 Stonington Select Board meeting. The schools are facing a \$177,000 cut in state subsidies in the upcoming year. PHOTO BY JACK BEAUDOIN

In her proposal outlines, Eaton noted that live streaming town meetings would benefit elderly residents, people with disabilities or who are just under the weather, as well as families with young children. People, she said, "shouldn't have to choose between participating in their community and putting kids to bed."

She argued that it would also relieve the burden of public service select board members shoulder because so few community members actively participate in town affairs. Wider input would lead to better decision-making and perhaps make it easier to recruit volunteers to staff town committees.

But board members were skeptical. Donna Brewer asked Eaton to outline the potential involvement and expense on the town's office staff. She and Town Manager Kathleen Billings expressed concerns about the cost of the proposals in terms of information technology (IT), archiving video and producing a second set of documentation (archived videos) beyond the standard meeting agenda and minutes.

"Other towns have IT people and we don't," Billings pointed out. "We need to look into it more and understand the implications."

"I don't see how this is going to save us money," Brewer said.

"It's not designed to save money," Eaton replied. "It's about engagement."

Nonetheless, Eaton's proposal did include price tags for both services. Town Hall Streams includes a \$1,250 one-time charge for set-up and equipment, and \$300 a month charge for meetings and video archives. The Zoom plus YouTube approach would leverage the town's existing equipment and accounts, although Eaton allowed for a \$100-\$200 expense for new equipment and \$15 monthly Zoom Pro account.

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In either case, Eaton said she would personally cover the first year expense, which she said made the plan risk-free for the town.

Tempers flare

Brewer said she also took exception to the implication that Stonington boards were making "back room deals." She read a paragraph from a letter Eaton published in the *Island Ad-Vantages* on March 12:

"In my hometown of Stonington, resistance to streaming has included reluctance to appear on camera, suspicion of voters' motives for wanting access, and the claim that streaming amounts to 'spying.' These are not acceptable reasons to limit public access to public meetings. When you accept a position on a board or committee, you are agreeing to serve in a public role."

After reading the passage, Brewer said she found the letter very insulting. "I didn't hear any of those things," she said. "Who did you hear that from?"

Eaton said that she heard it herself when she last presented the proposal in November of 2024. "But this isn't about mistrust," she added. "This is about involvement, information equity... Public meetings are for public involvement."

Billings said she also found the letter and related discussions on social media damaging to morale at Town Hall and to efforts to hire skilled staff. "It's easy to criticize on Facebook," she said. "But if you have an issue with me, you can come in my door."

Eaton said she had kept her message positive all along. "I'm here because I came to this meeting as a person and as a taxpayer," she said. "I'm pro-Stonington, pro-you. This isn't about mistrust—just the opportunity for everyone to engage."

At that point Brewer moved to pause the proposal "until we have more of our own information" and could consult with a lawyer. Field, over Zoom, called for a board vote, which unanimously tabled the proposal.

Other business

In comparison, the balance of the board's agenda proved uncontroversial. Members voted unanimously to town post roads with the arrival of warmer weather, spend \$2,800 for a new 42-inch mower and sign an agreement to hire a lawyer from the firm Drummond Woodsum (at \$325 per hour) to advise the appeals board on an upcoming appeal of a planning board decision.

In the latter case, the town can't use their regular legal staff, and Billings characterized the case as a complex one involving shoreland zoning, commercial site plan review, the Americans with Disabilities Act and other regulations. "She'll need some time to get up to speed," Billings said.

School budget priorities

While not part of the formal agenda, CSD 13 Superintendent Tara McKechnie, School Board Co-Chair Chelsea Torrey and Business Manager Rhonda Eaton presented an update on the 2026-2027 school budgeting process. After completing a first round, the schools are moving line by line through proposed expenses to create a second draft to be reviewed in April. McKechnie said she expected a final draft and warrant article approval from the school board in May, followed by the annual referendum in June.

"The biggest thing we're trying to do is maintain a safe and healthy school environment," the superintendent said. The schools plan to hire a project manager, funded by a grant, to create a 10-year renovation and maintenance plan that will serve as the basis for applications to the state's revolving fund for school renovations. McKechnie said the fund will award up to \$2 million per school for projects like energy efficiency and structural needs, and told the board that both the elementary and high schools are good candidates.

Other budget priorities will include maintaining the small school environment, bring back in-school foreign language classes and building on the apprenticeships program.

The bad news, she added, is that the state subsidy for CSD 13 will decrease by \$177,901 from last year's amount. "That's a really hard hit," McKechnie said, and will require a combination of cuts and/or other funding sources to close the gap.

McKechnie closed with a hope that town and school leaders could improve communication by attending each other's meetings. Billings agreed, saying she would have like to sit in on more of the school facility meetings but they often conflicted with town meetings held on the same night.



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