

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of January 21, 2026

- I. ROLL CALL.** Chair Charles Morse, Board members K. David Maxwell, Lydia Petty, Merry Shernock and John Stevens. Also present were Interim Manager Steve Mackenzie, Bill Fraser (Vermont League of Cities & Towns), Mary Smith, Susan Stillinger, Bill Clements, Brian Massey Jr., Gary Circosta, Kristin Pollard, and Elroy C. Hill.

Chair Morse called the meeting to order at 3:01 p.m.

- II. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):** None.

III. DISCUSSION

- a. Town Manager Search Process.** Former Montpelier City Manager Bill Fraser is now a consultant with the Vermont League of Cities & Towns (VLCT) and has been hired by Northfield to assist with its search for a permanent town manager. He noted that through his recent efforts Northfield now has an interim manager (Steve Mackenzie) and an interim police chief (Kevin Moulton). Now that those two boxes have been checked, attention now will turn to the permanent manager position. Mr. Fraser said this is the kickoff meeting for the manager search and some decisions have to be made to jumpstart the process. He thanked those who returned his survey regarding what qualities and qualifications they would like to see in the successful manager applicant. He has divided these attributes into three categories: Personal Traits, Technical Skills, and Experience.

Mr. Fraser asked the Select Board members what they were specifically looking for as regards to Personal Traits. Board member Petty would like someone who combines decisiveness with openness and transparency. Board member Maxwell would like an effective communicator and proven organizational leader. Chair Morse would like someone who demonstrates honesty, integrity, and accountability. Board member Shernock would like someone who will confront problems rather than allow for substandard performance. She felt this has happened recently with certain work contractors who did not provide fully competent service. Mr. Fraser said that sometimes when hiring for a position, there can be an overfocus on the deficiencies of the previous employee.

As for Technical Skills, Mr. Fraser noted that a town manager must be able to handle all sorts of situations and some managers are stronger in certain job skills than in others. He then asked the Select Board members what they felt was most important. Chair Morse believes the ability to work well with financial matters is the key to success. He added that the municipality should have a new finance director soon so it would be good to have a new manager who is able to assist with the transition period. Board member Maxwell felt the new manager should be a proven negotiator as that is an important skill for this position. Board member Petty would like someone who could start implementing some of the planning that has already been done for various proposed projects, i.e. sewer line extensions, Common revitalization, etc. Some of these projects haven't been advanced due to cost considerations but there are others that could be implemented with grant funds. Chair Morse said the manager should be able provide for the general health of the community while also working well with people. It will be a long-term process to rebuild the Northfield Police Department (NPD) but there are some departments that function very well, i.e. utilities, and the new manager should be aware of this.

Mr. Fraser asked how the Select Board members felt about the importance of relevant job experience. Board member Shernock said we don't necessarily need someone with town manager experience as there are comparable skills that could be transferable from other fields. Board member Petty would prefer someone with some municipal experience.

Board member Petty also would prefer someone who would choose to live in Northfield if hired. Mr. Fraser said requiring residency would severely limit the applicant pool so this could be encouraged but not required.

As for academic background, Mr. Fraser asked if at least a bachelor's degree should be required. Board member Petty felt comparable work experience should be acceptable. Mr. Fraser noted that there are some people who have advanced far without a college degree but this is the exception rather than the rule. Chair Morse said those without formal job qualifications should be explain their suitability during the interview process. Board member Shernock said Northfield is a college town so she would like the next manager to have an academic degree.

As for the proposed salary range for this position, Board member Petty suggested that the low end should be about \$110,000 to \$115,000. The high end should be about \$135,000. Mr. Fraser is working on another manager search in a Vermont town similar to Northfield and they now are looking at the \$130,000 to \$140,000 range for salary. He felt for the job advertisement, the Northfield position should be listed as between \$120,000 and \$140,000 based on experience, qualifications, etc. A less experienced candidate could start at the low end and be eligible for timely increases based on performance. Board member Maxwell felt that we do need to provide a competitive salary and he felt Mr. Fraser's suggestion was appropriate. There was no objection.

As for the search process itself, Mr. Fraser asked if the Select Board would like to have an independent search committee comprised of local residents. Chair Morse would like members of the community to be part of the process but felt too large of a committee would unduly delay the hiring process. Board member Petty would like any residents named to the committee to be truly representative of the greater community. Mr. Fraser recommends that any such citizen committee should become involved only after the final candidates have been identified. The committee members could interview the candidates and afterwards provide their recommendations to the Select Board members. Board member Maxwell noted that during the last manager search process, the search committee helped reduce the applicant pool down to four (4) candidates. Mr. Fraser noted that the large number of people involved with the search process, the greater the danger that confidential matters will be revealed. A larger committee also would make it difficult to arrange meeting times that all could attend. Chair Morse said some residents have already expressed an interest in serving on a manager search committee. Board member Petty said when soliciting community members to serve, it probably should be stated in the advertisement that applicants with certain skills, experience, etc. would be preferred. Mr. Fraser said it might be expedient to reserve some positions on the search committee for persons with certain backgrounds. There could be a few at-large positions (three?) for which anyone could apply to serve. Board member Petty said it would need to be decided at what point this committee would get involved in the process. She would prefer that all the Select Board members would be involved from the beginning and not just those who would serve on the search committee. Mr. Fraser said the Select Board members should be at least aware of all the applications that come in and have some input regarding which would advance further, i.e. "screen the list." Board member Maxwell said this is appropriate since the Select Board members would be making the final decision on this hiring.

Board member Petty would prefer that the search committee only be involved with the short-listed candidates. Having the search committee go through all the applications would slow down the process too much. Mr. Fraser said the total number of applications would largely determine how quickly the applicant pool could be reduced to a manageable short list of about four (4) candidates. That could be the point that the search committee could interact first with the applicants. The final candidates probably would be brought to Northfield to meet with the search committee, with municipal staff, with Select Board members, and also receive a community tour.

Mr. Fraser said the initial interviews with applicants probably would be done with Zoom meetings and it would be best to keep down the number of interviewers. When the final candidates come to Northfield, they should be able to meet with several groups if this would be considered beneficial. Mr. Fraser will draft an advertisement that would solicit members for the search committee. He thought it would be good if the deadline for letters of interest would be the same as the deadline for manager applicants.

Mr. Fraser then asked where he should advertise for managerial candidates. After some discussion, the following print and online sites were recommended: The Times Argus, Seven Days, International City Managers Association, New Hampshire Municipal Association, Maine Municipal Association, New York Managers Association, ICMA, Linked-In, Indeed, and VLCT. Mr. Fraser estimated the cost of advertising in these venues would cost under \$2,000. Board member Maxwell suggested also contacting Norwich University officials to see if they knew of anyone who might be interested in applying.

The Select Board members would like a full background check on the final candidate. This would cost about \$1,500 and would include the last ten (10) years of social media postings, etc. Chair Morse said once the final candidates have been named, residents probably will Google the names themselves. Once a job offer has been made to the final candidate, Mr. Fraser would be willing to negotiate the employment contract with the input of the Select Board members. The Town Attorney also would need to become involved with the contract language. Drafting a severance clause is very important as it has become quite difficult in recent years to dismiss a municipal manager for cause. Board member Maxwell asked is there is a normal probation period length. Mr. Fraser said six (6) months is usual but a different length could be negotiated.

As for the schedule of the hiring process, Mr. Fraser said he would prepare the employment advertisement in the next week along with a brochure that would inform applicants of the local situation with photographs, descriptions, etc. He will send the completed brochure to Chair Morse and Board member Petty for their input and approval. The job ad will be posted on February 6, 2026 with an application deadline of March 7, 2026. As this date falls after Town Meeting Day, there will be at least one (1) new Select Board member when the applications are received. In the week after the application deadline, Mr. Fraser will review and rank the applications and then meet with the Select Board members to decide how to proceed. The first Zoom meetings with applicants will be held the following weeks and a short list of candidate generated. The citizen committee members would be appointed at the Select Board regular meeting of March 10, 2026. Mr. Fraser said the number of qualified applicants will affect the scheduling of the initial Zoom interviews, the in-person interviews with the final candidates, etc. However, if all goes well, the preferred candidate could be identified by April 8, 2026. This would allow for the background checks, contract negotiations, etc. to commence.

IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED). There was none.

V. ADJOURNMENT. Motion by Board member Shernock, seconded by Board member Maxwell, to adjourn. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board adjourned at 4:34 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

A video recording of this meeting is available at: <https://youtu.be/KdTFw8Rr7Q4>

These minutes are subject to approval at the next Select Board regular meeting.