

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of January 5, 2023**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Julie H. Goodrich, Charles Morse, Lydia Petty, and John Stevens. Also present were Manager Jeff Schulz, Laurie Baroffio (Finance Director), Lawton Rutter (Ambulance Chief), Meggan McCusker (Ambulance Service), Shannon Palone (Pool Director), Tom Scott, Kaelee Bouleris, Gerard LaVarnway, and Elroy Hill.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

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

III. DISCUSSION

a. Proposed FY 2023/2024 Town Budget

- 1. Northfield Ambulance Department (NAS).** Manager Schulz provided to the Select Board members a "Budget Information" report from NAS Chief Lawton Rutter providing some additional background information regarding some issues that arose when the proposed NAS budget was first discussed (12/20/22). As Chief Rutter will be taking another position with the State of Vermont in a couple weeks, this includes a recommendation for a salary increase for his replacement. There also is his recommendation for the establishment of a second full-time NAS position as well as per diem increases for NAS EMTs. Chief Rutter noted currently the only full-time NAS position is the one he now holds.

Manager Schulz said there also was some discussion at the previous meeting of Chief Rutter's suggestion that the used ambulance unit purchased last year to temporarily fill the gap while one of the main units was being remounted out-of-state be retained permanently so that the NAS would have three (3) units on hand. There was some debate at that meeting whether having three (3) units would be cost-effective given increased vehicle maintenance costs and the expense of equipping it properly. Manager Schulz said the budget presented to the Select Board members did not include the second full-time NAS position as he felt the department has been running well with the current staffing level. He also believes the NAS has been able to recruit sufficient numbers of part-time EMTs to provide 24/7 community coverage. Manager Schulz said in addition to the salary for the new full-time position, there also would be health insurance and other employee benefits linked to the position. He also felt there should be a reevaluation whether the revenue brought in from non-emergency patient transfers justified increased personnel costs, wear/tear on the equipment, etc. Manager Schulz said he had similar concerns about committing to a third ambulance unit that would incur additional vehicle maintenance expenses as well as require the purchase of costly medical equipment, etc.

Chief Rutter said in his report he did attempt to provide documentation for his recommendations regarding NAS staffing. This included breakdowns of NAS calls for service as well as billable events. He noted that in FY 2021/2022, there were 944 total run sheets, which included 631 billable callouts. During the 2022 calendar year, which includes the first six (6) months of the current fiscal year, there were 1020 run reports. Falls (110) were the leading reason for emergency responses followed by nausea/vomiting/sickness (98), breathing problems (96), and traffic incidents (85). Chief Rutter said the fact patient falls are the leading callout reason shows the impact of the aging local population on the call volume. He has been working with the Vermont Department of Health to categorize NAS responses by patient age but that study has not been completed. In addition to falls, lift assists (52) is another frequent callout reason that is often related to patient age and/or weight. Chief Rutter noted that NAS does charge for lift assists if there are repeated requests at the same location. He added that most NAS callouts are to private residences (481) rather than to nursing homes (129), roadsides (110), or the Norwich University (NU) campus (109).

When he started as NAS Chief in 2014, Chief Rutter said the breakdown was about thirty percent (30%) each for the NU campus, nursing homes, and private residences. The remaining ten percent (10%) were miscellaneous locations. The trend has shifted away from callouts to the NU campus because students with minor issues usually are directed to the nearby Green Mountain Family Practice or provided onsite treatment by fellow NU students or staff with some medical training. Board member Goodrich noted twenty-one (21) responses to sports and athletic areas; does this include the NU athletic fields? Chief Rutter said it did but it also includes callouts for local school events, Little League games, etc. He noted that the "Forest Wilderness Area" category does include NU property in the Paine Mountain area.

Chief Rutter also provided a draft job description for the proposed second full-time position, called the "Ambulance Full-Time Daytime Provider." He first put this together three (3) years ago when he made his initial request to have this position created. The job description probably would need to be "fleshed out" a bit more before being finalized. Chief Rutter believes due to the ever-increasing NAS call volume and other factors, the current NAS staffing model is not sustainable for much longer. There had been a brief reduction in NAS call volume due to COVID-19 but we now are seeing numbers rising above the pre-pandemic figures. Chief Rutter said weekday daytime emergency coverage often depends on the frequency of non-emergency transports. Nighttime and weekend coverage is not always consistent. This is why he has requested increases in per diem EMT compensation as well as the establishment of the second full-time position. He is asking for increasing the pay up to \$17 to \$19 per hour (based on certification level), which would bring the compensation more in line to what is now provided by the White River Valley Ambulance (\$17 to \$21), East Montpelier Fire and Ambulance (\$17 to \$21), and Waterbury Ambulance (\$16 to \$19.50). Chief Rutter said it has become more common for regional EMTs to move about from one service to another based on hourly pay, work hours available, etc. He believes that it remains more cost-effective and safer for the community for Northfield to have its own local ambulance service than to contract with an outside agency.

Board member Morse feels Chief Rutter has made a good case for his recommendations. The rising call volume indicates the municipality needs to invest more into NAS. Board member Morse had been reluctant to endorse establishing a second full-time NAS position but now thinks there may be no alternative. Making the situation worse is the current municipal policy of limiting the work hours of part-time EMTs so that they don't qualify for work benefits. Board member Morse would like more information regarding non-emergency transfers and whether the generated revenue justified higher personnel and other costs. In any case, he doesn't feel the budget proposed by management reflects the real need for additional NAS funding in the next fiscal year.

Board member Morse also believes this discussion regarding the future of NAS staffing, etc. should have taken place much earlier due to the complex issues involved. He felt this has become a statewide (if not national) problem with the increasing expenses of operating local emergency services. Board member Petty does support Chief Rutter's recommendations in general. She doesn't want to add to the tax burden of Northfield residents but Board member Petty also believes not enough has been budgeted for NAS operations. The increasing call volume trend needs to be addressed to make sure there is adequate emergency coverage. Board member Petty would prioritize increasing the EMT per diem compensation. She noted that salaries in other municipal departments have been raised incrementally to stay competitive with those in other communities and that should be the case here. As for retaining and equipping a third ambulance unit, Board member Petty felt it if truly is needed for better emergency coverage, perhaps American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds could be used for its maintenance and equipping. Perhaps the third unit could be used for revenue-generating standby events or non-emergency transports with the main two units are kept available for emergency callouts.

Board member Stevens agrees with the need to increase the per diem pay for Northfield EMTs. It also may be necessary to increase the NAS Chief's salary to \$75,000 in order to be able to hire a qualified replacement for Chief Rutter. Board member Stevens does have concerns about creating another full-time position but ultimately supports it. He feels the NAS Chief should have some assistance with all the paperwork and number-crunching necessitated by the position. As for retaining a third ambulance unit, Board member Stevens said that would depend on how much this vehicle actually would be used on a regular basis. Board member Goodrich thinks a number of these issues require more thought. She is especially interested in how hiring the second full-time position would affect the budget for part-time EMTs even if per diem compensation increases are approved. Board member Goodrich does agree that the salary for the new NAS Chief should be increased from the current \$70,000. Chief Rutter noted that Barre Town EMS is hiring a new chief with a \$80,000 base salary. He thinks Waterbury EMS, which recently lost its chief, will advertise for a new one at that same base salary. Board member Goodrich also felt the third ambulance unit, which is a 2006 model, has the possibility of becoming a real "money pit" of repair bills, etc. Chief Rutter agreed this is an older unit but he felt it was in good condition. It does have the advantage of already have been purchased and being in service. He also has learned there now is a nearly three (3) year waiting period between when a new ambulance unit is ordered and when it can be delivered. Chief Rutter feels buying new equipment for this unit would be cost-effective in the long run. Manager Schulz believes that there is a standing offer to purchase this unit for about \$15,000 if it is felt it is no longer needed. Chief Rutter said Osage Ambulances has offered to purchase it for that much. They probably would remove the box, recondition it, put it on a new chassis, and then resell for about \$200,000. Board member Goodrich still would like more data regarding the cost-effectiveness of retaining this third unit.

Manager Schulz said there will be a new NAS cost analysis distributed to the Select Board members tomorrow in anticipation of a further discussion at next Tuesday night's budget meeting (01/10/23). There also will be the five (5) year budget projection for the Northfield Police Department (NPD) that was requested. Chair Maxwell then thanked Chief Rutter for tonight's presentation. What he would like to know more about is the funding gap between the revenue generated by NAS and the operating expenses that taxpayers partly fund. Manager Schulz said NAS normally has been able to cover its basic operating expenses through its generated revenue. However, it is the capital expenses, i.e. building maintenance, equipment & vehicle purchases, etc. that have to be covered by taxpayer funds. Chair Maxwell feels the increase in the per diem for Northfield EMTs is a "no-brainer" since we would like our compensation levels to be competitive. This would help considerably with recruitment and retention of local emergency responders. We cannot rely too heavily on the NU student EMTs who usually are only in this community seven (7) months out of the year. Chair Maxwell is concerned about the long-term expense of retaining the third ambulance unit and would like additional information on that as well.

Finance Director Laurie Baroffio asked if hiring the second full-time position would result in being able to reduce the amount budgeted for part-time EMT pay. Chief Rutter said there would be a cut in overall work hours but that would mainly affect those now putting in irregular hours rather than those who provide the bulk of coverage on nights and weekends. Chair Maxwell looks forward to receiving the additional information regarding long-term projections of NAS revenue and operating expenses. He then noted that this probably will be the last time Chief Rutter will be addressing the Select Board members in his current position. Chair Maxwell then thanked Chief Rutter for all he has done for community over his many years of service and wished him well with his new position. This sentiment was shared by the other Select Board members.

2. **Municipal Pool.** Manager Schulz said there will be a 7.4% increase in the pool's operations and maintenance (O&M) budget. Most of this is due to wage increases for the Pool Director and the part-time lifeguards. There also are slight increases in the "Materials/Supply" budget due to higher water, sewer, and chemical expenses. Pool Director Shannon Palone believes the \$31,000 budgeted for the lifeguards is enough. She added that like the NAS, it often is difficult to recruit new employees due to higher per hour compensation at some neighboring municipal pools. However, most of the lifeguards live in Northfield and want to work here. Ms. Palone usually prefers to start the pool season with twelve (12) hired lifeguards. Last year we started a little short but Ms. Palone was able to pick up an additional two (2) lifeguards by running a training class. She prefers to have more available because some don't want to work too many hours, they have other summer jobs, and some take vacation time with their families. As for revenue, Ms. Palone said it might be possible to increase the cost of swimming lessons as other municipal pools charge much more than we do. One problem with this is making sure that there are a sufficient number of qualified instructors available. Ms. Palone does teach certification courses in February and April to make sure there are sufficient numbers of qualified lifeguards available. She noted other communities have not been as fortunate as Northfield and have had to reduce their operating hours due to lack of lifeguards. Based on conversations she has had with current lifeguards, Ms. Palone believes we will have sufficient staffing this coming summer.

Board member Stevens asked why the amount budgeted for workers compensation is so much higher here than it is for other departments. Ms. Baroffio said the amount is based on the increased risk associated with pool operations. Past actuals show the budgeted amount is rarely required. Board member Petty feels we should do better marketing for our municipal pool with better outreach to the community. Perhaps grant funds could be sought to cover some operating expenses and thereby eliminate the need to raise user fees and the cost of swimming lessons. Ms. Palone noted when she was young the lessons were free. She added that she would like to see additional usage of the pool such as the return of water aerobic classes. There also could be "open houses" and perhaps rental to regional swim teams. Much could be done in the morning hours before the pool opens to the general public at 1:00 p.m. Board member Petty noted there was a Brown Public Library (BPL) program last year that rewarded young readers with free pool passes. She would like to see such programs expanded as the pool has become a safe place for local youth during the summer. Chair Maxwell also would like to see more activities at the municipal pool, which he felt was underutilized. Board member Petty added that when there were soccer camps held next door at Memorial Park last summer, a good number of out-of-town parents and other family members visited the pool during the training sessions. Manager Schulz said he will discuss with Economic Development Director Tom Davis the possibility of seeking grant funds for the pool as well as better promotion of its operations. Ms. Palone said she did some social media notices herself but more marketing certainly would help.

Turning to the Pool's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget, Manager Schulz said the major accounts included "Paint/Repair Pool," which has a \$62,061 balance with \$7,940 to be added in the next fiscal year. The project is estimated at \$70,000 and is scheduled to occur in the next fiscal year. Manager Schulz said the facility has seen some recent work and should be in good condition until this project is done. In the "Skimmers" account, there now is a \$31,139 balance. Manager Schulz said the municipality has done a good job of budgeting for skimmer replacement each year. One problem is that skimmer technology has changed and new ones purchased are larger than previously so there needs to be some poolside renovations. Manager Schulz added that the pool house is in good shape. There is \$1,563 in this budget with \$1,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. That amount should be enough to cover any minor renovations.

Chair Maxwell noted that the pool has thirty (30) skimmers installed and asked how many are replaced each year. Manager Schulz said the skimmers are inspected each spring and the ones in bad condition are replaced. He has been looking for a contractor to do the work, which requires some pool cutouts, as municipal employees cannot do it. Ms. Palone said about fifteen (15) skimmers at the back of the pool are in the worst shape and should be replaced. She would like this done all at the same time so the contractor can do the poolside renovations at one time. There also are some drainage issues that need to be addressed but that work probably could be done by municipal employees. Ms. Palone would like this work done this April so that the pool is ready for its mid-June reopening.

Turning to the Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget, Manager Schulz noted the major account is for pool filter replacement, which is estimated to cost between \$80,000 and \$100,000 and is scheduled for FY 2024-2025. This CEP account now has a \$68,653 balance with \$7,500 to be added each fiscal year in the near future. Chair Maxwell asked if there would be a shortfall if the work costs closer to \$100,000 than \$80,000. Board member Petty suggested getting an updated estimate. Ms. Palone said the pool filter is in good condition and may not need to be entirely replaced. She added that the pool vacuum also is in good shape and not scheduled for replacement until FY 2030-2031. Ms. Palone noted a new diving board was purchased last year so there is no need for replacement for a while. She did request two (2) new lifeguard chairs. Her preference is to find a local supplier who would be able to match the current customized ones. Ms. Palone will check into this further. She also would like to do some fundraising to purchase some new deck chairs. Ms. Baroffio noted that there are some existing funds in the pool donation account. Ms. Palone added that some new buoys and pool lane dividers are needed along with a new backboard. These purchases also will make use of donation funds. Chair Maxwell was pleased to hear this and thanked Ms. Palone for the valuable information provided tonight.

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

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

The Board adjourned at 7:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

These minutes were approved at the Select Board regular meeting of January 24, 2023.