

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD REGULAR MEETING
Minutes of October 10, 2023**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell (absent), Vice-Chair Lydia Petty, Board members Charles Morse, Merry Shernock, and John Stevens (absent). Also present were Manager Jeff Schulz, Acting Clerk Kenneth McCann, Pierre Gomez (Police Chief), Matthew Goslant (Vershire Development Company), Erin Hicks-Tibbles (Northfield Housing Subcommittee), Aaron Rhodes, Gerard LaVarnway, Susan Stillinger, Carolyn Stevens, and Elroy Hill.

Acting Chair Petty called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

- II. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE.** Those persons present were asked to rise and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The remote contingent also participated as much as possible.

- III. SET/ADJUST AGENDA.** There were no changes to the posted agenda.

IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):

- a. Matthew Goslant, Vershire Development Company: American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) Funds Request.** About two months ago, Mr. Goslant submitted a request for ARPA funds in the amount of \$200,000 to "renovate and restore the properties of the Gould Mansion and Rustic Restaurant." The request form also indicated the intention to create new housing units on the properties. Mr. Goslant said he has been working with Economic Development Director Tom Davis in order to obtain state pandemic relief funds but was deemed ineligible as he did not purchase the properties until 2022. This is despite the fact the restaurant itself was closed throughout the pandemic period. Mr. Goslant has developed working plans for the site renovation and about half the work has been already completed, including remodeling the front of the buildings, upgrading the parking area, etc. He has spent a great deal of his own money on this project to date and the requested ARPA funds will not cover the full cost of the remaining work. The properties used to have thirteen (13) housing units but through space conversions, he has been able to add an additional three (3). Board member Morse wished Mr. Goslant good luck with the remainder of this project. He added that he and the other Select Board members would like to see a breakdown of how the \$200,000 would be spent, i.e., a financial profile. Board member Morse understands this project would mainly benefit a private business but the prospect of adding additional housing units is an attractive possibility. Mr. Goslant said installing new heating and air circulation systems would be the remaining high-cost items. There is a plan to make the structures more energy efficient with conversions to heat pumps, electric heating, etc. Mr. Goslant did provide a working budget to the Select Board members but can provide more detailed information if required.

Board member Shernock is unsure how this proposal is consistent with the Northfield Town Plan as well as other local and regional planning documents. This need for compatibility is highlighted on the request form. Mr. Goslant said the Rustic Restaurant was a staple dining establishment in Northfield Falls for over sixty-five (65) years and its absence has been keenly felt. Other than the Falls General Store, there aren't any other destination locations in Northfield Falls that can attract visitors from afar while also serving local residents. In addition to providing employment for restaurant staff, etc., the facility also will provide needed gathering space for local groups or for special events. He added that none of the current apartment tenants have been dislocated during the building renovations and the rent charged is below current market prices. Mr. Goslant believes the ARPA funds request amount is reasonable provided the benefits this project would provide to Northfield Falls as well as the whole Northfield community. Board member Shernock asked if the housing units are at full occupancy. Mr. Goslant confirmed that was the case. There are six (6) smaller efficiency units occupied by travelling nurses employed by Mayo Healthcare and other local medical facilities. The larger units are occupied by long-term residents and this includes some Central Vermont residents who were displaced by the regional flooding earlier this year.

Board member Shernock said the Select Board is interested in the creation of additional affordable housing opportunities for the local workforce. She asked if Mr. Goslant had considered other sources of funding for this project. Mr. Goslant said he has been working with Mr. Davis on possible federal and state grant programs but there hasn't been a good fit to date. Board member Shernock noted Northfield Falls has a Designated Village Center designation and asked if Mr. Goslant has been able to take advantage of this. Mr. Goslant said he has been working with Mr. Davis on several applications, which mainly focus on receiving state tax credits. However, most have been unsuccessful.

Board member Shernock said she would be willing to have ARPA funds used as match amounts for grant applications for this project. As a Northfield Falls resident herself, Board member Shernock understands the importance of the Rustic Restaurant to the local community. However, she is reluctant to provide ARPA funds directly to a for-profit business. Mr. Goslant said this project will be completed with or without the ARPA funding. However, the additional funds certainly would hasten the process. He will continue to work with Mr. Davis on other possible funding sources. Mr. Goslant said if the municipality has plans to extend public sewer lines to Northfield Falls in the near future, that would simplify his efforts considerably and he would have no need for the ARPA funds. Acting Chair Petty said she would like to see a written narrative to explain why these public funds should be directed to a private business. Perhaps Mr. Davis could be present to discuss other possible options when Mr. Goslant's request is next brought up for Select Board discussion. She then thanked Mr. Goslant for making his request in person tonight and wished him well with his project.

V. DEPARTMENT HEAD REPORT

- a. Northfield Police Department (NPD) Chief Pierre Gomez.** Chief Gomez reported he has been on the job now for about three (3) weeks and in that time his focus has been on getting out and meeting members of the Northfield community. He has met with just about every business leader and patronized local businesses and restaurants in order to introduce himself. Chief Gomez also has met individually with every NPD officer to discuss his vision for the department and where they would fit in. He prefers face-to-face encounters over email messages, which are impersonal and could go unread for days. Chief Gomez said one of his initial goals is to increase NPD officer visibility in the community and has asked officers for logs of their patrol mileage to make sure they don't spend the bulk of their shifts in the Police Station on the computer. It is also his intention to increase the level of professionalism in the department. Chief Gomez is now writing job descriptions for the two (2) vacant full-time NPD officer positions, including the NPD Sergeant position. As to the previous discussion with Mr. Goslant, Chief Gomez agrees the availability of local affordable housing is a major issue that does affect police officer recruitment. He concluded by stating that although he has found Northfield to be quite different from his past experience in Philadelphia, he really is enjoying it here. Manager Schulz noted that he regularly meets with Chief Gomez to discuss any NPD issues that might arise. Board member Morse agrees that a visible police presence is a good thing and he has enjoyed having officers in uniform circulating on the Common during the weekly Farmers Markets. Chief Gomez noted that he plans to visit the Northfield schools tomorrow to meet with local youth. Board member Shernock asked whether Chief Gomez is working on obtaining his state certification to serve as a law enforcement officer. Chief Gomez will be attending training courses in Barre VT with NPD Officer Monica Welch next week. Board member Shernock asked if Chief Gomez will be working with the Montpelier Community Justice Center (MCJC) as regards to local restorative justice and mediation. Chief Gomez met with MCJC Director Carol Plante earlier today and looks forward to working with her and the local reparative justice committee. Acting Chair Petty said she is very happy to have Chief Gomez on the job and asked him to let the Select Board members know if there is anything they can do to help him in the performance of his duties. She also liked the fact Chief Gomez has focused on getting out and interacting with the Northfield community.

VI. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- a. September 26, 2023 (Regular Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Shernock, to approve the minutes. Board member Shernock found a typo that will be corrected. **Motion passed 3-0-0.**

VII. APPROVAL OF BILLS

- a. Approval of Warrant #07-24.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Shernock, to approve Warrant #07-24 in the amount of \$1,027,150.60. Board member Morse noted that of the total warrant amount, \$255,859 was spent purchasing power for the Northfield Electric Department (NED). Manager Schulz added that a number of bond payments are in this warrant. These are related to such past projects as the Union Brook Road reconstruction, water system improvements, and Wastewater Treatment Facility renovations. **Motion passed 3-0-0.**
- b. Approval of Biweekly Payroll through October 1, 2023.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Shernock, to approve the biweekly payroll in the amount of \$119,602.67. **Motion passed 3-0-0.**

VIII. SELECT BOARD

- a. **Approval of Local Hazard Mitigation Plan Update.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Shernock, to approve the Local Hazard Mitigation Plan Update. This plan is updated every five (5) years and local approval is required to keep Northfield eligible for federal disaster relief funds and for federal and state planning grants. Board member Morse noted this document contains a lot of valuable local information but also is ninety-five (95) pages long. Acting Chair Petty agreed it is a bit long and perhaps the next update could be a bit more streamlined. Board member Shernock felt it was important to have this approved document in place so the municipality doesn't miss out on any federal and/or state emergency relief or grant funds. **Motion passed 3-0-0.**

IX. TOWN MANAGER'S REPORT

- a. **July 2023 Flooding Storm update.** Manager Schulz has been meeting regularly with FEMA officials to properly document the local storm damage in order to get federal reimbursement for the repair costs. He added that the storm-related emergency repairs have been mostly completed so the remaining paperwork can be sent in soon. The next step will be for him to work with Highway Foreman Trent Tucker to generate a list of any remaining storm-related damage, however minor, in order to bring everything back to its original condition. This includes the area behind the Municipal Building where the stream overflowed its banks and damaged some of Kent Street and the Northfield Savings Bank parking lot.
- b. **Highway Department update.** Manager Schulz said now that the worst storm damage has been addressed, the department will focus next on resurfacing Hallstrom Road. About three (3) miles of new road gravel will be put down, new culverts will be installed, etc. State grant funds will cover much of the cost for road materials and employee time. A similar project had been done on Little Northfield Road and, when completed, the road residents were very happy with the results.
- c. **ADA Compliance Issues.** Manager Schulz said the municipality has been trying to address all the concerns located on municipal property that were identified at a recent Select Board meeting (09/12/23). This includes Memorial Park where a boulder near the parking area was removed, a walkway was paved, and designated handicapped parking spaces were installed. A consultant will be hired to help address the access concerns at the Municipal Pool and the pool bathhouse. Manager Schulz said the municipality also will be hiring a consultant to determine how best to improve handicapped access to the Brown Public Library.
- d. **Fiscal Year 2024/2025 Municipal Budget.** Manager Schulz said the initial stages for drafting a budget for the next fiscal year have begun. He is working with Financial Director Laurie Baroffio and the various department heads in order to create the first draft, which will afterwards be sent to the Budget & Financial Review Subcommittee (Board members Maxwell and Morse) for their review and input. Board member Morse said he would like to have some idea beforehand what the expected increase in municipal expenditures would be in the next fiscal year. Such increases might be unavoidable due to COLA-related employee compensation increases, etc. Manager Schulz said the lower inflation rate this past year probably will mean a lower COLA increase than we have seen in recent years.
- e. **Norwich University (NU) New Cybersecurity Building.** Manager Schulz noted NU received \$16.4 million in federal funding for the creation of a National Cyber Fusion Research & Development Center building. NU officials are now working with a consulting firm to determine the best on-campus location. They would like to address the Select Board members at the next regular meeting (10/24/23) regarding this project, which might include the discontinuance of a public road. Board member Shernock asked if the site of the Hasset House on Park Avenue was one possible location. Manager Schulz confirmed it was. Since this is a historic structure, it most likely would be relocated rather than razed.
- f. **Electric Vehicle (EV) Charger Installation.** Manager Schulz has been in contact with the hired charger installer and has been told the installation definitely will start next Monday (10/16/23). There have been several delays in this project but it now seems certain to be completed within the next couple of weeks.
- g. **Smart Meters.** Manager Schulz said since the State of Vermont will now cover at least half the cost of purchasing and installing smart meters, this project is now moving ahead steadily. These meters can be read remotely, which will provide more information about local usage to the utility departments as well as their customers. Manager Schulz said public communications explaining the situation to the Northfield community will be coming soon.

X. BOARD MEMBERS' COMMENTS, CONCERNS, QUESTIONS

- a. **ACLU of Vermont Letter regarding Northfield Encampment Policy.** Board member Morse noted that he had received a letter from ACLU Vermont seeking information regarding the Select Board's adoption earlier this year of an Encampment Policy. Manager Schulz said he has been working with the Town Attorney on providing all the requested information so the Select Board members don't need to take any individual action on this. This includes minutes of the board meetings when this policy was discussed, approved, etc.
- b. **Northfield Falls Pedestrian Safety Improvements.** Board member Shernock asked when these improvements would be installed now that the state grant funds have been awarded. Acting Chair Petty noted the grant had been awarded but the funds would not be forthcoming until the State of Vermont provides the finalized signed grant agreement. Manager Schulz said he submitted all the required paperwork some time ago but hasn't had a response yet regarding the grant agreement. Board member Shernock said Falls residents do appreciate that the crosswalk lines have been repainted.

XI. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED)

- a. **Erin Hicks-Tibbles, Northfield Housing Subcommittee.** Ms. Hicks-Tibbles is the chair of this subcommittee that has been meeting regularly since November 2022. She stated that at the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) community forums held earlier this year, a Downtown Development & Housing Task Force was formed to also look into the local housing situation. As there is a great overlap in the membership of the subcommittee and task force and since both are addressing the same matter, Ms. Hicks-Tibbles asked Select Board's permission for the Northfield Housing Subcommittee suspend its operations so its membership can focus on task force activities. Board member Morse said the Select Board does authorize the establishment of subcommittees but afterwards rarely interferes in their activities (provided that they adhere to the Open Meeting Law, etc.). If the subcommittee members would like to take a break from holding regular meetings at this time, that is their choice. Ms. Tibbles-Hicks would also like to know if the Select Board members have any suggestions regarding local affordable housing. Board member Morse said Mr. Davis probably would be the best contact person for the municipality as he is most familiar with local housing developments as well as the availability of relevant grant programs. Board member Shernock would like to see a public reconsideration of communal living, i.e., "boarding houses," rather than just focus on creating single-family housing units or single-occupant apartments. She added that the housing groups might want to consider applying for ARPA funds that could be used as local match amounts for grant applications. Ms. Hicks-Tibbles said the task force would soon be circulating public surveys to determine what actions Northfield residents would favor in addressing concerns about the local housing situation. She hopes that the Select Board members will participate in this survey and encourage others to take part as well.

XII. ADJOURNMENT. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Shernock, to adjourn.
Motion passed 3-0-0.

The Board adjourned at 8:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

An audio recording of this meeting is available in the Town Manager's Office.

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