

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of December 17, 2024**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Charles Morse, Lydia Petty, Merry Shernock, and John Stevens. Also present were Manager Jeff Schulz, Laurie Baroffio (Finance Director), Bruce Wright (Northfield Cemetery Contractor), Mitch Osiecki (Zoning Administrator), and Susan Stillinger.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 6:02 p.m.

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

III. DISCUSSION

a. Proposed FY 2025/2026 Town Budget

- 1. Cemetery.** Manager Schulz said Bruce Wright, with whom the municipality contracts annually to maintain the public cemeteries, is present tonight to answer any questions regarding their operations as well as his views regarding the proposed FY 2025-2026 Cemetery budget. He then noted the Cemetery operations and maintenance (O&M) budget will increase by 3.3% in the next fiscal year. Almost all of this increase is due to the annual adjustment in the municipality's cemetery maintenance contact with Mr. Wright. Mr. Wright said Mount Hope Cemetery is the largest public cemetery in Northfield and has the most visitors over the year. A major concern that he has is regarding the large maple trees that line the stone walls that mark the cemetery's borders. He feels these trees are now overgrown and some have internal rot that can result in limbs coming down due to strong winds. He added that he spends at least an hour after each storm picking up tree debris that has landed on gravesites, etc. Mr. Wright said the other main issue with the Mount Hope Cemetery is poor stormwater drainage along its central access road. Due to the current inefficiency of the existing drains, the stormwater runs down the top of this road and into the adjacent Vermont Route 12/12A intersection. Mr. Wright said the drainage pipes need a major clearing out so that the stormwater can be diverted away from the street. Manager Schulz said the Water & Sewer Department does have a powerful vacuum machine that they use to clean out water and sewer lines that certainly could be used on these stormwater lines. He will try to set this up as soon as weather permits. Manager Schulz then noted that the Cemetery's budget does include a \$1,500 line item for tree removal so he will try to contact a tree removal contractor to get this work done. After some discussion, it was suggested that this line item be increased to \$4,000 so that the problems trees in Mount Hope Cemetery and the other public cemeteries can be addressed next year. Although there might be state grant funds available to purchase replacement trees, Mr. Wright would prefer that new trees not be planted as their root systems will eventually negatively impact grave lots, headstones, etc. There now are six (6) Mount Hope Cemetery trees that should be removed as soon as possible. Once this is done, other problem trees could be removed when needed, which probably would be at most one or two annually.

In the Cemetery Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget, it was noted there is a \$5,897 balance in the Falls Cemetery Fence account. Mr. Wright would like to see this fence restored in the next year and those funds should be sufficient. He also would like to have new signage installed that display the cemetery rules. This includes a ban on plastic flowers as they can cause damage to the lawn mowers should they get entangled in the undercarriage machinery. Mr. Wright would like these rules better enforced in future and such signage would help considerably.

Mr. Wright also would like to see the local cemetery rates adjusted in the next year as they have not been changed in about seven (7) years. As a result, Northfield now significantly undercharges for certain services compared to other public cemeteries in the region. For example, the Green Mountain Cemetery in Montpelier charges \$1,500 for a weekday burial and \$2,010 for a weekend funeral. By contrast, Northfield now charges \$500 for weekday funerals and \$700 for weekend/holiday funerals. Board member Morse agreed that our cemetery rates should be revised to reflect current pricing in other communities. He would like a recommendation from Mr. Wright and Manager Schulz on this. Mr. Wright said it would be his recommendation to increase the lot sale price from \$600 to \$800; the cost of weekday funerals from \$500 to \$700; the cost of weekend/holiday funerals from \$700 to \$900; weekend cremations from \$300 to \$450; and weekend cremations from \$350 to \$650. He also would like a \$100 additional charge for Sunday burials and cremations. Chair Maxwell believes a cemetery rate adjustment is long overdue and the recommendations Mr. Wright has provided seem reasonable. Manager Schulz said he will work with Mr. Wright to draft a rate adjustment proposal for Select Board approval. Chair Maxwell then thanked Mr. Wright for attending tonight's meeting and providing valuable information regarding the operation of our public cemeteries. Mr. Wright said this has been a one of the more enjoyable jobs he has had in his life. Chair Maxwell suggested that this is because his customers never talk back to him. Mr. Wright agreed that he gets no complaints from them. Should this start happening, it probably would be a good time for him to retire.

2. **Planning/Zoning.** Manager Schulz said the Planning/Zoning O&M budget will see a 3.4% increase in the next fiscal year with the bulk of this due to the higher cost of contact services with the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC). Zoning Administrator Mitch Osiecki then noted the budget line items for postage and advertising have been raised in the next fiscal year budget due to increasingly higher costs for both. Many of the notices Mr. Osiecki mails out have to be sent by certified mail, which now costs \$9.64 per letter. Mr. Osiecki confirmed this expense is required for Development Review Board (DRB) hearings when abutting property owners have to be individually notified. This can become very costly when Norwich University (NU) submits a zoning application requiring a hearing due to its large number of abutting property owners. Although this is not included in the next fiscal year budget, Mr. Osiecki plans to make a future budget request for sufficient funding for cloud storage of all zoning documentation. This would require an installation charge and a monthly storage fee and would allow for new permit applications to be submitted online and for previous zoning applications to be reviewed online. Manager Schulz said he did not feel this would be too complicated to accomplish and would provide a much needed service. It then was noted the municipality is currently reviewing options for allowing customers to make credit card payments. This would allow for zoning permit fees payments to be made electronically, which is now fairly common practice in other Vermont communities. The customer would be charged a service fee per transaction and Ms. Baroffio said the process for accomplishing this is being worked out. Chair Maxwell then thanked Mr. Osiecki for attending tonight's meeting and providing useful information regarding his department's proposed budget.

- 3. Miscellaneous.** Manager Schulz said due to the upcoming holiday session, the next budget meeting will be postponed until Tuesday, January 7, 2025. He asked that during this break, the Select Board members should consider some of the issues that were left unresolved during the initial review of the various department budgets. This includes management's recommendation that the municipality budget for five (5) full-time Northfield Police Department (NPD) officers in the next fiscal year rather than six (6), which had been past practice. Manager Schulz noted this is due to the ongoing difficulty in filling the sixth position as law enforcement officer recruitment remains problematic throughout the state. There also is the question of whether the municipality should budget in future to cover the maintenance and replacement costs of three (3) or four (4) NPD patrol vehicles.

In addition, the proposed Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS) budget for the next fiscal year now includes modest hourly wage increases for the various levels of NAS EMTs. However, the NAS Chief has requested that these pay rises be increased further in order to better match regional EMT compensation amounts. In the NAS revenue budget, Manager Schulz said there now is a plan to increase the per capita amount charged the towns of Roxbury and West Berlin for NAS coverage from \$35.00 to \$38.00 in the next fiscal year. The Select Board members would need to decide whether this fee increase is sufficient or should be even higher. There also are a number of minor budget issues that need to be resolved. Chair Maxwell felt that there will be a number of hard budget decisions that need to be made when the meetings resume next month.

Chair Maxwell then asked if the Select Board members could be provided with a separate listing that shows how prior year surplus funds will be allocated in the next fiscal year budget. That information is now indicated in the breakdown of the various departmental budgets but he would like to see it in single document. Ms. Baroffio will provide that information in writing but is able to provide it verbally tonight. In the Town General budget, there was a \$330,653 surplus at the end of the most recently completed fiscal year (FY 2023-2024) and the current proposal is to use \$237,200 of these surplus funds in the next fiscal year budget. This will leave a \$43,453 balance. In the Town Highway budget, there was a \$60,306 surplus balance and none of these funds will be used in the next fiscal year budget. Ms. Baroffio then noted that the Town General CIP budget now has a \$42,948 surplus balance and \$42,510 of those funds will be used in the next fiscal year budget. As indicated above, she will provide all this information to the Select Board members in writing. Ms. Baroffio said the municipality is authorized by Northfield voters to carry \$190,000 in surplus funds from year to year. The current plan is to retain about \$90,000 in such surplus funds. Ms. Baroffio confirmed that the amount of surplus funds retained each year does fluctuate over time based on current circumstances.

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

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

The Board adjourned at 8:02 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

A video recording of this meeting is available at <https://youtu.be/a2vddQ4Csh0>

These minutes were approved at the Select Board regular meeting of January 14, 2025.