

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD REGULAR MEETING
Minutes of January 23, 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, Acting Clerk Kenneth McCann, Kahwa Douoguih (Northfield Community Development Network [NCDN]), Kaitlyn Keating (NCDN/Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Carolyn Stevens (NCDN/Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Bill Clements (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Mary Nadon Scott (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Delane McIlvene (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Ginny Kunkel (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Dan Anderson (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Tim Schwartz (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Sara Nevin, Susan Stillinger, and Elroy Hill.

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

- II. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE.** Those present were asked to join the Select Board members in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

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

IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):

- a. Kahwa Douoguih, Northfield Community Development Network (NCDN): ARPA Funds Request.** Ms. Douoguih said NCDN was requesting \$50,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds in order to pay for a scoping study for a proposed all-accessible path that would parallel the Dog River from the Wall Street bridge to the downtown area near Main Street Bridge. She would like to discuss tonight the many benefits this project would provide the community along with the economic opportunities it might provide. Ms. Douoguih said NCDN originally began working with then Northfield Economic Development Director Jon Ignatowski on the possibility of creating a walking path linking the Norwich University (NU) campus with the Northfield downtown by way of Freight Yard Way. A grant for this work was obtained and work on the path was started with the assistance of NU engineering students and their professors. NCDN members also contributed their time and efforts by obtaining necessary state permits and other logistical requirements. As was announced at a recent Select Board meeting, this particular trail has been put on hold as NCDN has been unable to reach an all-access agreement with a Freight Yard Way property owner. With the assistance of the Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force, NCDN is now exploring the possibility of developing the riverside path indicated above. Ms. Douoguih said the new walking trail would be of particular benefit to residents living near the proposed route, which includes senior citizens living in the Green Mountain Apartments adjacent to the Senior Center. Ms. Douoguih said NCDN members and Task Force members recently reviewed the Stowe VT recreation path that starts in the downtown area behind Stowe Community Church and then travels northwest about five (5) miles parallel to the Stowe Mountain Road in the general direction of Mount Mansfield. When there, the group saw a healthy mix of locals and visitors using the trail for walking, biking, etc. Ms. Douoguih said it was also possible for ARPA funds to be used as the local match amount should grant funds be pursued to pay for the new trail construction. She then asked if the Select Board members had any questions or comments.

Board member Morse thanked Ms. Douoguih for an excellent presentation and noted this was the first time a local organization has come forward with a project that would utilize and help develop the Dog River waterfront. He felt such an enterprise was long overdue. Since there would be a large number of adjoining property owners that would be impacted by this project, Board member Morse felt a scoping study was definitely needed in this case. He was also impressed with the number of references to existing local planning documents included in the proposal. That indicated this project would be in keeping with long-term community goals. Board member Morse said he would support this project should any and all logistical concerns be resolved.

Board member Shernock was also very supportive of this proposed use of ARPA funds. She hasn't researched the matter but she is fairly sure Northfield has the longest riverfront of any Central Vermont community and we should benefit from this natural resource. Board member Shernock would prefer that the proposed path length be slightly extended to the area just beyond the Dollar General where children often swim in the Dog River. Board member Morse suggested that the scoping study could be used to promote swimming safety, etc. in the areas along the pathway. Board member Shernock felt reducing the amount of littering also should be considered in the study. People have been using the Dog River as a dumping ground for generations and this should stop. Board member Shernock also felt the adjoining property owners might be more willing to provide their support if there was some sort of community buy-in based on the benefits this project would provide. Ms. Douoguih said the best approach to obtaining local support should be part of the scoping study. Board member Shernock said that with such neighborhood projects, it is sometimes difficult to get universal support. The public outreach phase of this project would be very important.

Board member Stevens strongly favors this proposal and would support approving the \$50,000 request tonight. Board member Petty would like some basic questions answered before the scoping study is authorized. This would include the number of adjoining property owners affected by this proposal, whether potential opposition to this proposal could be detected early in the process, etc. Board member Petty would not like to commit the ARPA funds to a scoping study if it is apparent a few property owners could derail the project for their own reasons. She felt these conversations should take place before committing ARPA funds to a scoping study that might quickly become irrelevant. NCDN member Carolyn Stevens suggested the Select Board members could provide tentative approval subject to the NCDN obtaining property owner acquiescence. She noted that such an outreach process could take some time.

Board member Petty noted there might be similar proposals for public pathways that could be located on municipal property or utilize existing rights-of-way. Before the ARPA funds are awarded for this project, she would like a little legwork done first to see if obtaining property owner permission is feasible. This would include getting permission from New England Central Railroad (NECR) as its tracks bisect the planned route. Board member Petty added that due to the amount to be spent on the scoping study consultant, the municipal purchasing policy would require soliciting sealed bids, which is the case for any municipal expenditure in excess of \$15,000. She asked if the municipality or NCDN would be responsible for this. Ms. Douoguih said the NCDN members probably would prefer that the municipality take the lead on this but they would be willing to provide any assistance as the project progresses. Ms. Stevens never thought the funds would go directly to NCDN but rather be used to conduct the scoping study. Board member Petty noted that the actual amount of the ARPA funds awarded would have to be based on the actual cost of hiring the project consultant.

Chair Maxwell asked about the timeline for the scoping study. Ms. Stevens said once the consultant had been hired, it could be completed within three (3) months. Board member Morse suggested awarding a lesser amount of ARPA funds at this time so that a consultant could conduct a preliminary investigation of whether this project would have the support of adjoining property owners. This could include a conceptual design that could address potential concerns about loss of privacy, excessive noise, littering, etc. along the proposed trail route. Board member Morse said it might be possible to determine early in the process whether the proposal is at all feasible, especially since the concurrence of NECR would appear to be necessary hurdle to surmount before proceeding. Chair Maxwell said he was very supportive of the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) public forums held last year that identified community goals to be pursued in the near future. One of these was to create such public walkways in Northfield and the Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force, many of whose members are present tonight, was formed to achieve this. Chair Maxwell noted the Select Board members will discuss this matter again later in the meeting when it considers action items. He then thanked Ms. Douoguih and the other NCDN members present tonight for providing their proposal for Select Board consideration.

V. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- a. **January 4, 2024 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. Board member Petty found some typos that will be fixed. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **January 9, 2024 (Regular Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- c. **January 16, 2024 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. It was noted that two (2) separate executive sessions were held that night. The minutes will be revised to reflect this. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- d. **January 18, 2024 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VI. APPROVAL OF BILLS

- a. **Approval of Warrant #14-24.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve Warrant #14-24 in the amount of \$108,093.52. Board member Petty noted a \$557 payment for fixing garage door panels at the Police Station. Manager Schulz confirmed the work could not be done internally so Vermont Door Company was hired to make repairs. Board member Petty also noticed \$163 in travel reimbursement funds spent so Northfield Police Department (NPD) Chief Pierre Gomez could attend a "reliant hiring event." Manager Schulz said Chief Gomez attended in order to learn new strategies, etc. for recruiting new NPD officers. He will attend a similar event in the near future to be held on the NU campus. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **Approval of Biweekly Payroll through January 7, 2024.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the biweekly payroll in the amount of \$124,892.38. Board member Morse noted this pay period included \$7,408 in Highway Department overtime as a result of the Highway Department crew working nights and weekends to fix the roads. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VII. SELECT BOARD

- a. **Approval of Water Project Necessity Resolution.** Manager Schulz said the attorney who drafted the wording for the bond article on the Town Meeting warning advised that the Select Board members also should approve and sign a resolution stating that the bond is needed because the expense of this project (\$7,230,000) is "too great to be paid out of the ordinary annual income and revenue of the Town..." Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Petty, to approve and sign the resolution. Board member Morse noted that the resolution refers to the Cheney Farm reservoir as a "water tank." He would prefer it be called a "reservoir" instead. There was no objection. Chair Maxwell asked about the timeline for this project. Manager Schulz said in order for this project to remain on the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) priority list and to receive state funding and interest-free loans, the bond vote must be held by May 1, 2024. Holding the bond vote on Town Meeting Day (03/05/24) would keep the project on the priority list whether or not the vote passes at that time. **Motion to approve the revised resolution passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **Northfield Common Rehabilitation Project: Select Board Member Representatives.** Manager Schulz said the Select Board members previously authorized (11/14/23) hiring the engineering firm DuBois & King to conduct a redesign study of the Northfield Common for an amount not to exceed \$40,000. A major component of this study would be public outreach in order to explore all possibilities and obtain local support for whatever course of action the Select Board members decide to pursue. Manager Schulz said DuBois & King would like two (2) Select Board members to work with them as steering committee members in order to facilitate this process. After some discussion (and some persuasion from Chair Maxwell), Board members Stevens and Shernock agreed to serve on this steering committee.

- c. Approval of 2024 Northfield Town Meeting Warning.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve and sign the 2024 Northfield Town Meeting Warning. Board member Morse noted that the water bond article also includes the term "water tank." Without objection, that will be changed to "reservoir." Manager Schulz noted that a public hearing will be held on Tuesday, February 27, 2024, so that voters can ask questions about the articles to be voted upon by Australian Ballot. That includes the water bond article. Manager Schulz will be working with the Utility Commission members in order to better inform Northfield voters regarding the reasons behind this water project, who would repay the bond note, etc. Board member Petty suggested that it might be necessary to hold an additional public information meeting regarding the bond vote. Manager Schulz said that could be scheduled. **Motion to approve the amended 2024 Northfield Town Meeting Warning passed 5-0-0.**
- d. American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Fund Requests.** Chair Maxwell noted that as there is a December 31, 2024 deadline to designate the local ARPA funds, the Select Board has set aside time at the second regular meeting of each month for the discussion of ARPA fund requests, both old and new. He noted that an updated list of ARPA fund requests and a current balance sheet of designated and undesignated ARPA funds was provided to the Select Board members. The current balance is \$781,671.50 in total expenditures and commitments and \$1,236,851.59 in undesignated ARPA funds. Manager Schulz said he did revise the list of ARPA fund requests to delete the previous NCDN request and add the new one presented earlier tonight. There is another new request form from Andrew Padilla, who is the NU Assistant Director of Recreation. Mr. Padilla is asking for \$7,800 in ARPA funds in order to design a disc golf course to be located near the Shaw Outdoor Center.
- Chair Maxwell would like to begin with a further discussion of the NCDN request for \$50,000 in ARPA funds to cover the expense of a scoping study for a riverside walking trail. As noted in the documentation included with the ARPA funds request, NCDN has held some preliminary discussions with Timber and Stone LLC, a trail building company in East Montpelier, regarding the logistics of such a project. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to authorize up to \$5,000 in ARPA funds for NCDN to contract with Timber and Stone LLC to create a conceptual study for a proposed riverside walking trail. Board member Morse said awarding these funds would allow for the initial public outreach phase of this project to begin as soon as possible. He feels that getting a right-of-way from the railroad (NECR) is a potential stumbling block that should be addressed first. Ms. Stevens feels NCDN has a good relationship with Timber and Stone LLC, with whom they worked on the proposed Freight Yard Way trail, and they should be able to obtain some very useful information from the initial \$5,000 expenditure. Board member Petty felt it might be possible to divide this project into components that bypass the NECR property if there are delays or outright refusal in obtaining a right-of-way. She also felt NCDN should interact with Katrina Dailey from the Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC), which is spearheading the Cross Brothers Dam removal project, about the possibility of dovetailing these projects.
- Ms. Stevens said the open support of the Select Board members for the riverside walking trail proposal would help NCDN considerably in its future interactions with NECR and abutting landowners. Chair Maxwell believes the Select Board members do support this project in concept subject to logistical concerns being addressed in a timely manner. Board member Shernock would like the initial outreach to NECR to take place before the \$5,000 is committed to the conceptual design. It was suggested that current Economic Development Director Tom Davis, who has been in contact with NECR regarding the possibility of adding an Amtrak whistlestop in Northfield, could handle the initial outreach. Manager Schulz will also speak to Montpelier officials about the approach they took in order to successfully obtain walking trail rights-of-way from NECR. He added that some outreach to the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) might provide some useful information about dealing with railroad property access. Board member Petty thought that some direct contact with NECR might be useful in finding out whether they might consider allowing the project to develop or if there would be a "hard no."

Board member Morse would favor going forward with the initial \$5,000 ARPA funds award to NCDN to at least get the process going. **Motion passed 4-1-0, with Board member Petty voting in the negative.** NCDN Chair Kaitlyn Keating said NCDN will inform the Select Board members if Timber and Stone LLC decides \$5,000 is insufficient to cover the cost of a conceptual study.

Chair Maxwell then turned to Mr. Padilla's request for \$7,800 in ARPA funds to design a disc golf course. Board member Petty serves with Mr. Padilla on the VOREC Grant Implementation Committee and she believes the disc golf baskets and other needed equipment is already in Mr. Padilla's possession. The \$7,800 would be used to engage a professional disc golf course designer. Board member Petty does have questions regarding when the course would be installed after its design as well as whether it would be fully available to the general public. Board member Shernock also wanted to know who would be responsible for promoting the disc course. Chair Maxwell would like to know if there would be any charge to use the course. Manager Schulz will reach out to Mr. Padilla for answers to these questions. He also will see if Mr. Padilla would like to attend a future Select Board meeting to present his request in person.

As for the updated ARPA documentation provided by Manager Schulz, Board member Petty noted that at a previous meeting (12/12/23), the Select Board members created a priority list of six (6) ARPA fund requests deemed especially meritorious: sidewalk improvements, emergency generator purchases, Freight Yard Way waterline upgrade, a community garden, Senior Center expansion, and Town Common rehabilitation. Chair Maxwell would like these items highlighted when any future lists of existing ARPA fund requests are distributed. He also would like to have ARPA fund requests that were incorporated in the next fiscal year budget, such as air pacs for the Northfield Fire Department (NFD), removed from the current listing. It was noted ARPA funds have been used to fully cover the expenses of the full-time Economic Development Director position but the Select Board members recently decided to phase this out over the next three (3) years. Manager Schulz said he is still reviewing the ARPA funds request from Bob Keeley to purchase a "311" computer app for Northfield, which would allow for residents to report real-time infrastructure and other problems, communicate directly with municipal officials, etc. Mr. Keeley did not include a cost estimate with his request and this is one of the things Manager Schulz will be investigating. Board member Stevens also would like an update from the Northfield Senior Center regarding their request for \$350,000 in ARPA funds in order to expand and update their facility. When this request was first made in person, the Select Board members did have some questions regarding the proposal. Manager Schulz will reach out to them for additional information. Board member Petty would like the Highway Planning & Project Oversight Subcommittee (Board members Shernock and Stevens) to meet in the near future in order to develop a priority list of upcoming sidewalk projects. This would include fixing current sidewalk, installing new sidewalk where they are needed, etc. Board member Petty also would like the subcommittee members to review the proposed vehicular and pedestrian detour routes devised by VTrans for when the Main Street Bridge is closed for about three (3) months during the 2025 bridge replacement. Manager Schulz will work with the subcommittee members to determine an acceptable meeting date.

- e. **Public Hearing (Revised Zoning Regulations): Tuesday, February 13, 2024.** Chair Maxwell noted that this public hearing will begin at 6:00 p.m. in the Community Room. The proposed revised zoning regulations can be downloaded from the municipal website (<https://www.northfield-vt.gov/zoning>) and hardcopies also will be available for review in the Northfield Municipal Building. Manager Schulz will prepare a press release regarding the approval process and the potential impact of the proposed revisions.

VIII. TOWN MANAGER'S REPORT

- a. **Brown Public Library ADA-Compliant Doors.** Manager Schulz said the technician who will be installing the automatic doors will be here in a couple weeks (02/06/24) to perform the work.
- b. **NPD Staffing Issues.** Manager Schulz is pleased to report that there has been increased interest from police officers working full-time for other law enforcement agencies to come to Northfield to work part-time shifts.

- c. **Dole Hill Road Erosion Concerns.** Manager Schulz said the recent winter storms have done some damage to this road so he has met with engineers to develop a scoping study. He will share that with the Select Board members when it becomes available.
- d. **FEMA Storm-Damage Reimbursement.** Manager Schulz and other municipal employees are continuing to work with FEMA on documenting the monies the municipality spent on the July 2023 flooding storm damage in order to receive reimbursement. He has learned from FEMA officials Northfield's reimbursement request process is much further advanced than that in other Vermont communities so we should be receiving reimbursement funds before they do. Board member Morse asked if the State of Vermont is still collecting information regarding the December 2023 flooding rainstorm. Manager Schulz said it is collecting data regarding storm damage in order to determine whether a natural disaster declaration should be issued for this storm for Washington County. That has not been done to date.
- e. **Main Street Bridge Replacement Project.** Manager Schulz has been reviewing the bridge replacement local logistics with Utility Superintendent James Russo and Highway Foreman Trent Tucker. VTrans has been looking for a local site to deposit any riverbed materials removed during the project. They are now considering the municipal gravel pit located off Cemetery Street.

IX. BOARD MEMBERS' COMMENTS, CONCERNS, QUESTIONS

- a. **Winter Sidewalk Maintenance.** Board member Stevens is not pleased with the performance of the new sidewalk plow as it seems to leave big patches of snow on sidewalks. Manager Schulz said he has been asking Mr. Tucker to put additional salt on the sidewalks to hasten the snow melting process. He added that this region has had difficult weather conditions recently and Mr. Tucker has been looking to hire additional part-time assistance to help clear the sidewalks after snowstorms. Manager Schulz said there are municipal guidelines when it comes to maintaining the sidewalks in wintertime.
- b. **Winter Trail Maintenance.** Board member Petty wanted to thank the NU Shaw Center staff for grooming the Paine Mountain trails used for winter snowshoeing, cross country skiing, etc. This work is the result of a collaboration between NU and the Town Forest Stewardship Committee.
- c. **Paine Mountain School District Update.** Chair Maxwell said he and Board member Petty reached out to the Northfield members of the school board and learned that they have approved the school budget for the next fiscal year. We will be looking at a 13% increase in the local school tax. Chair Maxwell also noted Vermont Department of Taxes has confirmed in its 2023 Equalization Study that Northfield's property tax assessments are about one-third too low overall and this fact contributes to higher property tax rates.

X. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED)

- a. **Carolyn Stevens: Electric Vehicle (EV) Charging Station Maintenance.** Ms. Stevens asked if the snow is removed from the area surrounding the Depot Square EV charging stations right after winter storms. Manager Schulz said it was as he has made it known to Mr. Tucker that this snow removal should be a priority.
- b. **Elroy Hill: Footbridge Snow Removal.** Mr. Hill said he saw a recent attempt to use the snowplow to remove snow from the footbridge. He felt this work needed to be done by hand as the snowplow doesn't do a very good job on this narrow bridge. Manager Schulz will discuss this with Mr. Tucker.

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

The Board adjourned at 9:07 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 were approved at the Select Board regular meeting of February 13, 2024.