

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of November 30, 2023**

- 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), Peter J. DeMasi (Fire Chief), Pierre Gomez (Police Chief), Gerard LaVarnway, Carolyn Stevens, 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 2024/2025 Town Budget

- 1. Fire Department.** Manager Schulz said the Northfield Fire Department (NFD) budget for the next fiscal year will not see a lot of changes from the current one. Chief Peter J. DeMasi will be asking for a slight increase in the personnel services budget in order to increase the stipends paid to NFD officers (i.e., Chief, Assistant Chief, and Captains). There also will be line item increases for dispatching services and personnel protective equipment. Chief DeMasi said there also will be a significant increase in the NFD Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget for radio replacements. This includes both handheld radios and those installed in NFD trucks. As for the increase in officer stipends, Chief DeMasi cannot remember the last time these were raised. He would like to see a \$1,000 increase for the Fire Chief, \$1,000 for the Assistant Fire Chief, and \$500 each for the Fire Captains. Finance Director Laurie Baroffio noted that firefighters are also compensated each time they respond to an emergency call. Manager Schulz noted the budget for dispatching services will increase from \$20,590 to \$21,000. Chief DeMasi said he and other regional fire chiefs had been told that state grant funds would finance the upgrade costs for the regional dispatch center. However, he was recently informed that this would not be happening. Instead, the dispatching service has created a capital expense budget that will collect funds over the next ten (10) years to pay for this upgrade. The service will be applying for federal and/or state grant funds in the interim. Chief DeMasi said that is all he has been told about these plans at this time.

As for the Personal Protection Equipment line item, Chief DeMasi said he made an original request to increase this from \$6,500 to \$10,000 in the next fiscal year budget. This increase has been reduced to \$8,000 in the proposed budget. Chief DeMasi said the cost of this equipment has gone up significantly in recent years and it now costs \$5,000 to fully equip each firefighter with boots, helmet, jacket, pants, etc. He had hoped to purchase two (2) new sets in the next year. Board member Petty suggested putting the budget at \$10,000 so this can be done. There was no objection from the other Select Board members.

In the NFD Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget, the only item is Building Improvements, which now has a \$6,054 balance with \$2,500 to be added in the next fiscal year. Chair Maxwell asked about the Fire Station's condition. Chief DeMasi said it was in pretty good shape but bathroom improvements should be done soon. He is also looking to replace the overhead door opener as the control panels have suffered damage. Other than that, overall, the building is in good condition. The discussion then turned to the NFD Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget. Manager Schulz had spoken to Chief DeMasi earlier today and was informed that the replacement costs of fire trucks have gone up considerably since they last discussed the subject. Chief DeMasi confirmed that he recently received pricing for the replacement of the 2007 and 2017 pumper trucks. These costs are listed at \$525,000 each in the CEP budget by Chief DeMasi has learned that the current cost would be about \$673,000 if purchased today. Projecting this to FY 2028/2029 when the 2007 pumper truck is scheduled for replacement, the cost then would be about \$850,000.

Manager Schulz said the past practice when such heavy equipment purchases are made is to budget half of the purchase price and borrow the remaining funds. Based on the revised vehicle replacement costs, the NFD CEP budget should be changed to increase the amount budgeted in future fiscal years for the scheduled vehicle replacements. Ms. Baroffio said one point of borrowing is that the residents that will directly benefit from the new equipment (i.e., improved fire protection) will be helping to pay off the loan themselves. The current taxpayers who fund the annual set asides in the years before the purchase may no longer be around to reap the benefits. Ms. Baroffio said we may wish to consider borrowing a higher percentage of the purchase prices in future. Chair Maxwell asked how long these pumper trucks usually are in service. Chief DeMasi said about twenty (20) years. Chair Maxwell then asked about the estimated replacement cost for the aerial ladder truck. Chief DeMasi said if we replaced the current one with an identical model, the cost of purchasing new would be \$1,600,000. He noted that the current aerial ladder truck was purchased used. The estimated cost of buying a used truck is now set at \$500,000 and the CEP account for this has a \$223,213 balance. Chair Maxwell asked if this estimated cost was realistic. Chief DeMasi said the current truck was in very good condition when it was purchased in 2012. It came from a South Carolina fire department so it didn't have any winter maintenance issues, etc. It was necessary to purchase some new equipment before it was put into service. Chief DeMasi said we were very fortunate to locate that used vehicle and it has provided very good service since it has been here. Chair Maxwell noted the aerial ladder truck is scheduled for replacement in FY 2027/2028. Chief DeMasi said the truck has been operating well but the proposed replacement date is probably accurate.

In the NFD CEP account for Radio Replacements, Chief DeMasi said he had requested \$8,000 be added to this account in the next fiscal year but this was lowered to \$6,000 in the proposed budget. The budget now has a balance of \$5,616 but Chief DeMasi just ordered a replacement vehicle radio for Engine One at a cost of \$7,894. The old radio simply stopped working. The new vehicle radio is backordered but should arrive sometime this winter. Chief DeMasi said it was because of this necessary purchase that he made the \$8,000 initial request and noted this was the second vehicle radio he has had to purchase in the past couple of years. Ms. Baroffio noted that this CEP account also covers the purchase of portable two-way radios. Chief DeMasi said the NFD has fifteen (15) of these and they cost about \$2,000 apiece. Chair Maxwell asked if there was a replacement schedule for radio replacement. Chief DeMasi said there wasn't as the radios are kept in service until they stop working. The vehicle radio that is being replaced lasted about twenty (20) years and was purchased with grant funds. The portable radios last about the same.

Chair Maxwell asked if there were any current grant opportunities that would cover emergency service radio purchases. Neither Chief DeMasi nor Manager Schulz had seen any recently but will keep monitoring the situation. Ms. Baroffio believes that when the initial budget request was reduced from \$8,000 to \$6,000, neither she nor Manager Schulz knew about the recent vehicle radio purchase. Chair Maxwell believes there should be separate NFD CEP accounts for vehicle radios and portable radios. This would allow for better budgeting of replacement units in the future. Manager Schulz said under the conditions, it probably would be best to set the FY 2024/2025 budget at \$8,000. After some discussion, Ms. Baroffio said she would create a new budget line item for portable radios and put the current \$5,616 balance into that account. No additional funds will be allocated for this account in the next fiscal year. There will be another line item for vehicle radios and \$12,000 will be allocated for this account in the next fiscal year. The allocations for future years will also be readjusted accordingly. This will be included in the next draft of the proposed FY 2024-2025 municipal budget.

The NFD CEP account for Air Pacs now has a \$27,470 balance with \$9,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. Chief DeMasi said the NFD usually replaces two (2) of these each year at a cost of \$9,000 each. This avoids having to replace a larger number at one time should they all stop working at once. Chair Maxwell said there still is a \$125,000 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds request to purchase fourteen (14) air pac for NFD. Chief DeMasi said he inspected the current air pacs in stock and noted the oldest ones have been in service for about ten (10) years. These air pacs usually last about twenty (20) years but there has been talk that there might be new fire safety regulations that would require replacement after eleven (11) years. It was in light of this possibility that the ARPA funds request was made. Chair Maxwell believes this is a worthy request for ARPA funds. One question is whether all fourteen (14) new air pacs would be purchased at one time or if this would be a staggered purchase. Board member Shernock asked if the new standard becomes eleven (11) years would the older air pacs have to be disposed of. Chief DeMasi said that would be required. The new change, if it comes to pass, is being explained as necessary for improved firefighter safety by reducing carcinogen risks. Board member Morse asked how the air paces are recharged. Chief DeMasi said he has a compressor at the Fire Station that was purchased in the 1990s. The replacement of this compressor has never been budgeted but a replacement probably would cost about \$30,000. Board member Morse feels a new NFD CEP account should be created for this purpose. He also felt there should be a full inventory of NFD capital equipment so that future purchases can be budgeted. This means the NFD budget will probably need to be reviewed again at another budget meeting. Manager Schulz asked about the status of the thermal cameras. Chief DeMasi said they were in good shape with the most recent ones purchased in 2017. NFD now has four (4) of them. The cost of replacing them used to be \$10,000 but that price has dropped to about \$3,500 in recent years. Chief DeMasi noted that the less expensive thermal cameras have fewer feature but will do all that is needed. Chair Maxwell asked when the new thermal camera replacement is scheduled. Chief DeMasi said they are used until they stop working. He added that they aren't used with every call for service.

Manager Schulz noted that replacement of the brush truck is scheduled for FY 2027/2028 and there is a \$40,000 balance in this account. Chief DeMasi said the estimated \$70,000 replacement cost would just pay for a new cab and chassis as the truck body would be remounted. There would be additional costs for new lights and lettering. The current truck does have issues but all repairs are still under warranty. As for the 1993 tanker truck, Chief DeMasi said that vehicle is kept as a backup for the 2021 tanker truck. The older tanker truck will be retained until it stops working. It also can be dispatched to neighboring town through mutual aid assistance. Chair Maxwell asked if keeping the old tanker costs the municipality any money. Chief DeMasi said it did need a valve replacement recently but that cost only \$1,600 in this cost came out of the NFD operations and maintenance (O&M) budget. He would not put significant money into keeping this truck operating.

Chair Maxwell asked how the NFD crew is doing at this time in terms of numbers, training, etc. Chief DeMasi said the roster is now at twenty (20) fully trained volunteers. He would like to have thirty (30) but it is difficult to get recruits given the long certification hours required (i.e., 260 hours) and the fact that being on call means turning out nights, weekends, holidays, etc., which can prove difficult for the firefighters and their families. Chair Maxwell asked about the future. Chief DeMasi said he will be starting a new recruitment program to address possible staffing shortfalls. Chair Maxwell then thanked Chief DeMasi for attending tonight. He may be asked to attend a future budget meeting to answer any remaining questions about the proposed NFD budget for FY 2024/2025.

2. **Police Department.** Chair Maxwell said Manager Schulz indicated at the Budget & Financial Review subcommittee meeting that the full-time officer line item (i.e., "Technical") has been reduced from \$475,020 in the current fiscal year budget to \$428,310 in the next fiscal year budget. This reduction reflects the fact that one of the full-time officers is on military leave. Although this position must be reserved in case the officer decides to return, there are no expenses for it at this time. Northfield Police Department (NPD) Chief Pierre Gomez confirmed this but noted that the officer has been filling some shifts when he is able. He added that NPD shifts now are being filled largely from full-time officers working overtime.

Chair Maxwell asked whether the overtime budget should be increased to account for this. Manager Schulz said there are times when officers are working split shifts and this reduces the need for overtime pay, which occurs when a twelve (12) hour has been exceeded. He added that the NPD has been down at least two (2) full-time officers over the past couple of years and there have been no significant problems filling work shifts. The overtime budget has been overspent but this has been offset by other savings in the NPD budget. Chair Maxwell asked if NPD is still providing 24/7 coverage for the community. Chief Gomez confirmed that was the case. Manager Schulz stated that we did have to rely on the State Police for overnight coverage earlier this year when an additional full-time officer was out on medical leave but this was an unusual circumstance. Chief Gomez said the NPD has been down one full-time officer for some time so it may be necessary to start thinking outside the box regarding recruitment. One possibility is to assist new officers with finding temporary housing, however spartan, while they try to find more permanent accommodations. This would help with recruiting qualified officers from out-of-state, etc. Chief Gomez believes the difficulty in finding affordable housing has hindered our ability to hire and retain police officers.

Manager Schulz said the part-time officer budget has been reduced from \$6,000 to \$3,000 in the proposed budget as it has been difficult to hire part-time officers who may be employed by another law enforcement agency in the area. He said these officers would prefer to work additional overtime hours for their home departments rather than work for lower part-time pay elsewhere. Chair Maxwell noted the current NPD union contract will expire next June so negotiations on a new contract will be starting soon. The new contract might include salary increases, etc. and other incentives for attracting additional officers. Manager Schulz noted that NPD salaries will be increasing between 5% and 6% in the next fiscal year based on provisions in the current union contract. He added that the NPD employee health insurance budget will nearly double in the next fiscal year (\$88,090 to \$163,640) as some former officers had taken the health insurance buyout (as they had coverage from another source) or had individual rather than a family plan. Ms. Baroffio said she also increased this budget in case the new full-time officer to be hired decides to go on the family plan.

Board member Petty asked if \$15,000 is enough to budget for dispatching services. The State Police have been providing this service to local law enforcement agencies at no charge but there have been indications this will end soon, requiring them to have to contract with a professional dispatching service provider (i.e., Capital West). Manager Schulz said if this change did occur in the next fiscal year, we now think the cost will be much more management than previously thought. He then noted that the cost of janitorial services will be increasing in the next fiscal year due to a new provider. However, despite the additional cost, we are very pleased with the service now provided. Chief Gomez agreed that it has been exceptional.

Manager Schulz noted that in the administrative budget, the telephone line item will increase from \$9,500 to \$12,000) as more officers rely more on their smart phones. Chief Gomez said the materials/supply budget probably will see additional gasoline expenses as he has encouraged his officers to spend more time out on patrols rather than spending the bulk of their shifts in the Police Station. He noted that even when an officer parks on the side of a busy nighttime street, this can have a positive effect for the community. Board member Morse noted that gas prices have been dropping recently so this should not cause too much trouble.

Turning to the NPD CEP budget, Chief Gomez said he has applied for funds to purchase new body cameras. Board member Petty thought it might be a good idea to start budgeting replacement costs in case grant funds aren't available in the future. Board member Morse suggested allocating \$700 per year for this purpose. Chair Maxwell then asked about the state of the NPD vehicle fleet. Chief Gomez said the 2018 Ford Explorer does need to be replaced. Fortunately, this already has been scheduled for the next fiscal year (FY 2024/2025).

The current balance in this account is \$37,942 and the expected replacement cost is set at \$45,000. Chief Gomez thought we might be able to get a new vehicle a little bit cheaper than that. He added that the rest of the fleet is in good shape.

Chief Gomez noted that there is an old fingerprint machine now collecting dust in the Police Station garage. He is looking into selling it to a neighboring department as it still works well. The NPD's current fingerprinting machine was donated by the state and is operating well. Ms. Baroffio noted these machines usually cost \$18,000 new. Board member Petty thought if the old one is sold, the monies obtained could be used to start a new NPD CEP budget for the eventual replacement of the current fingerprinting machine. Chair Maxwell asked Chief Gomez to let Manager Schulz know if there is any NPD capital equipment that is not accounted for in the NPD CEP budget to let Manager Schulz know. That way, future equipment replacements can be properly budgeted over time. Board member Petty asked if the radio replacement, office equipment/copier, and computer CEP budgets were in good shape. Chief Gomez said he has been trying to get some volunteer assistance from a Norwich University (NU) IT person in order to help speed up their current computers. Other than that, all the mentioned equipment is in good shape. He would like to upgrade their two-way radios but the prices are rather high at this time. The current ones are serviceable until replacement costs become more reasonable. Manager Schulz noted that the vehicle radios are purchased whenever a new vehicle is bought.

Manager Schulz noted the only account in the NPD CIP budget is for building improvements, which now has a \$9,461 balance with \$2,500 to be added in the next fiscal year. The building itself is fairly new and considered to be in pretty good shape. He added that there is consideration of using ARPA funds to purchase emergency generators for the Police Station and the adjacent Fire Station. Board member Shernock noted that the Northfield Rotarians have offered to donate some items that would make the station more habitable during a prolonged stay when its conference room is used as a command center during a natural or man-made disaster situation. An inventory of items to be donated will be created soon. Board member Petty thought ARPA funds could be used to supplement these donations in order to provide enough "creature comforts" for a long stay. Board member Morse is unsure whether the Police Station really needs an emergency generator costing upwards of \$100,000. He felt that the energy requirement of this building would not be as great as for the Fire Station.

Chair Maxwell asked Chief Gomez if he had anything additional to add about the proposed NPD budget. Chief Gomez did not but added that his main concern is keeping personnel costs under control. He will be attending a meeting of regional police chiefs soon and there will be a discussion of state certification training costs and how to manage them properly.

Manager Schulz noted the next budget meeting will take place on Tuesday, December 5, 2023 and the Brown Public Library, Municipal Pool, Administration, and Cemetery budgets will be discussed at that meeting. The next one is scheduled for Thursday, December 7, 2023, and the Northfield Ambulance and Town Highway budgets will be discussed then.

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

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

The Board adjourned at 7:44 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 December 12, 2023.