

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD REGULAR MEETING
Minutes of July 12, 2022**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Julie H. Goodrich, Charles Morse, Lydia Petty, and John Stevens. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Acting Clerk Kenneth McCann, John H. Helfant (Police Chief), Tom Davis (Economic Development Director), Mark Fournier, Ray Pelletier, Steve Davis, Gerard LaVarnway, George Goodrich, Nate Poe, Colin Bright, and Carolyn Stevens.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 7:01 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. Mark Fournier: Highway Maintenance Concerns.** Mr. Fournier said there have been ongoing issues in the Highway Department for several years. He feels snow plowing has improved recently but other problems persist. For example, the municipality spent a lot of money (\pm \$1,700,000) reconstructing Union Brook Road but maintenance of the road has been spotty at best since this project was completed. Mr. Fournier had provided photographs that indicated tree and other debris on the side of the road. He said some of this debris seems to be pushed into the new drainage ditches rather than being removed from the site. Mr. Fournier said mowing was done along Union Brook Road recently but this only was after he asked to be put on tonight's agenda to express his concerns. He also has seen a number of potholes around town that don't seem to be addressed in a timely manner. Mr. Fournier is not complaining about the Highway Foreman or the members of the Highway crew specifically. He felt that there hasn't been proper oversight of the local roads since the position of Highway Superintendent was eliminated several years ago. Mr. Fournier feels it would be a good idea to reinstate the position of Highway Superintendent (also known in some towns as the "Road Commissioner") so that certain road maintenance matters, such as clearing roadside foliage to provide proper sight visions around corners, aren't allowed to slide over time. He then thanked the Select Board members for allowing him to speak tonight.

- b. Ray Pelletier, CVFiber Delegate: CVFiber Update.** Mr. Pelletier is Northfield's appointed delegate to the communications union district originally known as Central Vermont Internet but now entitled CVFiber. He had provided a recent letter to the Select Board members in which he suggested that they might want to consider devoting five percent (\$90,000) of the American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) funds Northfield will be receiving to CVFiber in order to help bring high-speed internet to the five hundred and fifty (550) Northfield households now underserved. The Select Board members had questions regarding this request and asked Manager Schulz to contact Mr. Pelletier about attending this meeting. Mr. Pelletier provided a CVFiber project map that shows underserved areas in the Central Vermont region. He noted the map resembled a series of doughnuts in that the downtown areas of Montpelier, Barre, and Northfield have existing broadband access but the surrounding rural regions were underserved. Mr. Pelletier said it would cost about \$800,000 to connect the currently underserved Northfield households. The \$90,000 in local ARPA funds he is requesting would be matched by the State of Vermont in a program that expires September 15, 2022. The balance would be made up by other grant programs, borrowing, etc.

Board member Morse felt extending high-speed internet access in Northfield and around the state is a fascinating subject. He noted TDS Telecom is in the midst of expanding its fiber-optic network in Northfield and other parts of its service areas. Mr. Pelletier said CVFiber only operates in areas without high-speed internet access and has no intention of competing with TDS Telecom or other for-profit internet providers. However, past experience has shown that for-profit internet providers usually bypass rural areas where the cost of broadband installation and maintenance make it nearly impossible for the company to make any money.

Board member Morse noted the TDS Telecom is supposed to start their project in Northfield this year. If they do provide high-speed internet to all the currently underserved residents, this would eliminate the need for CVFiber here and there would be no need to provide them with \$90,000 in ARPA funds. The deadline for committing ARPA funds to eligible local projects is December 31, 2024. The deadline for expending all the funds is two years later. It is possible TDS Telecom would have its optic fiber network in place by then. Mr. Pelletier said that as a private company, TDS Telecom is not required to publicly provide its timelines on current and future projects. There is no way of knowing when TDS Telecom would complete its Northfield project and whether the new high-speed service would cover all the currently underserved households.

Board member Morse lives in one of the underserved areas and will be speaking with TDS Telecom tomorrow about their plans for Northfield. He will provide this information to the other Select Board members afterwards. Board member Goodrich noted TDS Telecom already has put additional high-speed internet infrastructure in place for its Northfield expansion. Therefore, the municipality should be careful of committing ARPA funds to CVFiber as their services may not be needed. Board member Petty doubts TDS Telecom plans to connect every one of the currently underserved households in Northfield. If that is the case, she felt CVFiber's services should be kept as another option. As the \$90,000 in local ARPA funds would finance hooking up some but not all of these underserved households, Board member Petty believes the money eventually would be spent here to benefit Northfield residents. Manager Schulz said a lot depends on when TDS Telecom plans to complete its work in Northfield. If it is several years away, then CVFiber would serve a useful purpose. Chair Maxwell asked what would happen to CVFiber's plans for Northfield if it does not receive the requested ARPA funds. Mr. Pelletier said CV Fiber is committed to extending high-speed internet access to all Northfield residents over the next three years. Funds would be found elsewhere if needed. If this results in additional borrowing, the result might be higher subscriber rates. Board member Morse would like to discuss this matter again, perhaps in executive session, after he receives the information from TDS Telecom. Chair Maxwell thought this could be done at the next regular meeting (07/26/22). Mr. Fournier feels such a discussion such include the affected Northfield residents and not be held behind closed doors. Manager Schulz said the Open Meeting Law allows for the Select Board members to discuss certain matters in executive session, such as possible contact negotiations. Chair Maxwell said in this case, it might also include proprietary business information that cannot be discussed publicly. Mr. Pelletier is very willing to discuss this matter again with the Select Board at a future meeting.

V. DEPARTMENT HEAD REPORT

- a. John Helfant, Police Chief.** Chief Helfant said the Northfield Police Department (NPD) is operating fairly well and continues to provide 24/7 coverage of the Northfield community. It appears the major local concern based on the number of phone calls they receive is speeding on certain roads. Chief Helfant said this is addressed by having his officers stay on site and monitor the traffic on one of these streets for a while before moving on to another problem area. However, the department's current staffing problems make it difficult for him to have officers linger at one site for prolonged periods. He noted NPD currently is down three full-time officers with one leaving for the Berlin Police Department, one on full-time military leave, and another on long-term family sick leave. He hopes the officer on family sick leave will return soon. Chief Helfant added that because of these staffing issues, sometimes there is only one officer on duty on certain overnight shifts.

Chief Helfant then noted the replacement vehicle for the 2014 NPD cruiser is on order and should be delivered by this October. Every effort is being made to avoid incurring additional repair bills for the 2014 cruiser until then. Board member Morse asked if there had been a backorder for this vehicle. Chief Helfant said he had anticipated delivery delays so he ordered the vehicle soon after the municipal budget was approved by voters on Town Meeting Day (03/01/22). He noted that in pre-pandemic days, it was possible to order a new police vehicle in June and have it delivered the next month.

Board member Stevens noted a spate of catalytic converter thefts around the state and asked if this has become a problem in Northfield. Chief Helfant said two had been stolen recently but one was later recovered. He felt the 24/7 local police coverage was an important factor in helping curtail the activities of overnight sneak thieves. Board member Goodrich is pleased NPD overtime expenses now appear to be staying within budget. Chief Helfant said he has made every effort to do so but this may become more difficult when the remaining full-time officers take vacation time, etc. Chair Maxwell asked if Chief Helfant is advertising for new officers. Chief Helfant said he is advertising to fill the vacant full-time position and is always on the lookout for qualified part-time officers. The main problem is that there aren't a lot of people willing to serve as police officers these days due to negative attitudes towards police officers, officer burnout due to job-related stress, etc. Chief Helfant noted there used to be about one thousand police officers in Vermont but currently there only are about six hundred and fifty.

Chief Helfant then noted a new problem at the NPD station in that people used to be able to request afterhours officer assistance by accessing an outside callbox. This used to contact them directly with a state police dispatcher but there now is a new phone message tree that requires caller input to bypass the entire message. Unfortunately, the call box doesn't have input buttons so the person requesting service has to wait until the prolonged recorded message completes, by which time the person might well have given up. Chief Helfant said this usually happens when the officers are on patrol and not available in the building itself. He said this problem with state dispatch is among a number of recent concerns with its afterhours service. Although this service is free of charge, Chief Helfant would like the Select Board members to consider budgeting for a different dispatch service. He noted the Northfield Fire Department (NFD) and Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS) are dispatched by the Montpelier Police Department (AKA Capital West Dispatch), which does an excellent job for a fairly reasonable charge. Chair Maxwell asked if there is a sign near the callbox that alerts people on how to use it. Chief Helfant said he is considering removing the callbox altogether since few people actually wait for the call message to play out. He noted telephone callers receive the same message when they dial the NPD non-emergency number (802-485-9181) when the NPD dispatcher is not on duty. If the NPD contracted with the Montpelier PD for dispatching, the caller would speak to a dispatcher immediately. Chair Maxwell thanked Chief Helfant for this information and said this recommendation will be considered when the Select Board members start their budget sessions this fall for the next fiscal year.

VI. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- a. **June 28, 2022 (Regular Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. Board member Petty said it was Chair Maxwell (not her) who asked whether Central Street parking would change after the current road projects are completed. This will be corrected in the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VII. APPROVAL OF BILLS

- a. **Approval of Warrant #01-23.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve Warrant #01-23 in the amount of \$337,654.37. Board member Stevens noted the NFD purchased of sixteen pairs of gloves for \$1,700 and thought that seemed excessive. Manager Schulz said these were special fire protection gloves that do cost a lot. Board member Goodrich saw a \$1,961 payment to turn on the water in the pool bathhouse. Manager Schulz said there had been some problems with the plumbing in the building so they did need to bring in a professional to do the job. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **Approval of Biweekly Payroll through June 26, 2022.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the biweekly payroll in the amount of \$117,763.44. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VIII. SELECT BOARD

- a. **Approval of 2022-2023 Tax Rates (Homestead & Non-Homestead).** Manager Schulz said it was that time of year again for the Select Board members to approve the local property tax rates (homestead and non-homestead) so the property tax bills can be sent out. There is good news this year in that the local education tax rate determined by the state has decreased by seven cents (7¢) from last year for homestead properties and by 5.75¢ for non-homestead parcels. This, coupled with an expansion of the local Grant List amount from \$3,232,727.50 to \$3,265,126.50 over the past year will result in the local homestead tax rate decreasing by just over eight cents and the non-homestead rate by almost seven cents. Manager Schulz said that for a home valued at \$150,000, there would be a \$121.65 in property tax decrease for those paying the homestead rate and \$102.90 for those paying the non-homestead rate. Motion by Board member Petty, seconded by Board member Stevens, to set the FY 2022/2023 homestead property tax rate at 2.5764 and the non-homestead property tax rate at 2.7749. Chair Maxwell noted this is the first time both property tax rates decreased in the same fiscal year since 2015, which was when the last town-wide reappraisal was completed. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **Northfield Community Revolving Loan Fund (NCRLF) Program.** At a previous meeting (06/14/22), Manager Schulz distributed to the Select Board members a draft version of a governing document for the NCRLF program that defined the process through which local businesses could apply for loans. This included the fees paid to apply, the interest rate charged, loan conditions, etc. Some of the Select Board members felt at that time the process was too expensive and cumbersome and this would discourage local entrepreneurs from participating in this revolving loan program. With the assistance of Jamie Stewart from the Central Vermont Economic Development Corporation (CVEDC), Manager Schulz has revised the document to address these concerns. For example, the proposed interest rate for the loans originally had been set at the prime rate plus three percent. In the revised document, this has been lowered to the prime rate plus one percent. In addition, the list of possible business uses for the loan funds has become much more general and less specific. Although some Select Board members objected to some of the fees charged to potential borrowers, Mr. Stewart felt some had to be maintained in order to properly operate the loan program. Manager Schulz said the result of the revision should make this loan program much more attractive to local businesses as compared to using a bank or other traditional lenders. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the revised NCRLF program document. Board member Morse would have liked to have seen a tracked document indicating all the changes made from the original version. However, he does endorse the changes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

IX. TOWN MANAGER'S REPORT

- a. **Main Street Bridge Replacement Project.** Manager Schulz said the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) is still working on the public/private utilities relocation plan. Their initial plan only proposed to relocate some of the utility lines underground but Manager Schulz and Utility Commissions Chair Stephen Fitzhugh provided VTrans with an alternate plan that increased the amount of buried utility lines. They will meet with VTrans representatives next week (07/20/22) to discuss the revised plans. When the plan is completed, it will be forwarded to the Select Board members for their discussion and (possible) approval. VTrans also is working on the preliminary construction plans that should also be provided for Select Board review in the next two to three months. That presentation will be well publicized in advance in order to obtain public input.
- b. **Slaughterhouse Road Covered Bridge.** Manager Schulz recently spoke with the contractor (Daniels Construction) on the upcoming project to reinforce the bridge's structure in order to increase its maximum weight limit back to 16,000 pounds. There had been concerns that the lumber for the project might not arrive for a month or two but the contractor spoke again to his supplier and it should be here in the next couple weeks. If all goes well, the project should be completed by the end of August 2022.

- c. **Northfield Falls Pedestrian Safety Study.** Manager Schulz noted \$20,000 in grant funds has been allocated to the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC) in order to perform a pedestrian safety study that will focus on the area near the crosswalk by the Falls General Store. Due to staffing issues, there had been some delays in starting the study but Manager Schulz has learned CVRPC will beginning its field work in the next couple weeks. Since the crosswalk is located on a state highway, the completed study will be forwarded to VTrans so there can be a discussion of possible safety improvements (i.e. flashing pedestrian crossing signs, etc.) and the availability of state funding to install them.
- d. **South Main Street Stormwater/CSO Elimination Project.** Manager Schulz said this project originally was scheduled to begin last month but there have been some delays in breaking ground. He contacted the project contractor and was assured the work will start next week. The plan is to have the work along South Main Street completed by late August 2022 (i.e., before Labor Day). Some work on the side streets (Slate Avenue, Elm Street, Prospect Street, Highland Avenue, etc.) would be completed later.
- e. **Possible Second Historical Marker in Northfield.** Manager Schulz said the Northfield Historical Society is working with the state on the possibility of having a roadside marker installed that would honor Tuskegee Airman Robert Arthur Cole (1920-1968), who was born and raised in Northfield. There are about three hundred of these markers located around the state but the only local one is at Norwich University ("The Nation's Oldest Private Military College..."). If the marker is sited on a town highway, Select Board permission will be required. East Street might be a possible location as Mr. Cole operated a shoe repair shop there for several years.
- f. **Wellfield Hazmat Incident.** Manager Schulz said there was a minor chemical spill near the wellfield this morning caused by human error. Chlorine liquid was put in the wrong storage tank and this resulted in the release of some toxic gas. Utility Superintendent Patrick DeMasi was briefly sickened by exposure to the gas but has since fully recovered. The spill was confined to one of the outbuildings and there never was a threat to the water supply. Local emergency vehicles responded to the accident and the municipality now is working with state hazmat officials to decontaminate the area. Notices were put on local social media right away and several phone calls were made in order to assure the public that the public water supply was completely safe to drink.
- g. **Lovers Lane Grant Award.** Manager Schulz said a \$200,000 VTrans grant will be used to install new guardrails and other safety improvements on Lovers Lane.
- h. **Historic Bridges Grant Funds.** Manager Schulz said a new VTrans grant program would provide funds for the preservation of historic bridges. He looked into the grant criteria and believes four local bridges are eligible: the three covered bridges located on Cox Brook Road and the railroad truss bridge on Rabbit Hollow Road. VTrans will contact Manager Schulz about scheduling bridge inspections.

X. BOARD MEMBERS' COMMENTS, CONCERNS, QUESTIONS

- a. **Zoning Permit Application.** Board member Morse noted that in Zoning Administrator Mitch Osiecki's list of recent permit requests the Northfield Community Development Network (NCDN) was the applicant in a Development Review Board (DRB) hearing. He asked why that happened. Manager Schulz said the former Economic Development Director (Jon Ignatowski) had been working on a project that would create a walking trail from Norwich University (NU) to the downtown area using NU property as well as some private property along Freight Yard Way. Since the municipality could not be the conditional use applicant, NCDN agreed to take the lead in this.
- b. **Dog River Park Vandalism.** Board member Petty learned this afternoon through social media of the overnight vandalism that took place at the Dog River Park. She hopes any needed repairs can be done quickly as this is a popular and well-used public facility. Chair Maxwell also feels this should be done right away and the culprits made aware that there are serious consequences for such actions.

- c. **Northfield Common Sculpture.** Board member Petty noted that as part of the downtown beautification project, a sculpture purchased with grant funds will be sited on the Common near the flagpole. She understands it will be arriving soon. Manager Schulz confirmed he has heard from the artist that the sculpture is almost completed and he pledged to her that the municipality will assist with its installation. Board member Petty hopes a ceremony can be held when the sculpture is first displayed to the public. This could be in conjunction with another event there such as a special Northfield Farmers Market, the annual “Night on the Common,” etc.
- d. **Stony Brook Road Paving.** Board member Stevens is concerned about the repaving work being done in the vicinity of the Stony Brook Bridge off Vermont Route 12A. He feels another layer of paving needs to be put on the bridge itself but the recent work in the area seems to have bypassed the bridge. Manager Schulz said he didn’t note the problem when he drove by the area today but will work with Highway Foreman Trent Tucker to make sure it is addressed. Chair Maxwell asked if a second layer on the bridge was really necessary. Board member Morse drives over the bridge frequently and he confirmed that it is needed.
- e. **Northfield Common Water Fountain.** Board member Goodrich asked if there were plans to make minor repairs to the fountain and turn the water on later this summer. Manager Schulz said there were indeed plans to do this.
- f. **Statements of Appreciation.** Chair Maxwell first wanted to thank the organizers of the Northfield Farmers Market. This is a true community asset. He also wanted to thank our first responders for the long hours they put in to keep Northfield residents safe. Chair Maxwell also congratulated the local Little League Baseball team for advancing deep into the playoffs for the first time in several years.
- g. **Central Street Road Paving.** Chair Maxwell is concerned about the timeline for the repaving of Central Street. He is hoping all the work can be completed by NU Homecoming Weekend, which will start on Thursday, September 15, 2022.

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

XII. EXECUTIVE SESSION. Motion by Board member Petty, seconded by Board member Morse, to go into executive session, in accordance with 1 VSA 313 (a)(1)], in order to discuss a personnel matter. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board went into executive session at 8:35 p.m.

Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Goodrich, to come out of executive session. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board came out of executive session at 8:45 p.m. No action was taken.

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

The Board adjourned at 8:45 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 July 26, 2022.