

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT  
PUBLIC SAFETY OVERSIGHT & PLANNING  
SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING  
Minutes of August 3, 2023**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board members Lydia Petty and Merry Shernock. Others present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Ambulance Director Meggan McCusker, Scott Bagg (Northfield Ambulance), Logan Potskowski (Northfield Police Department), Matthew Romei (Northfield Ambulance), Tom Scott (Northfield Fire Department), and Kaelee Bouleris (Northfield Ambulance).

The meeting started at 4:00 PM.

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

- III. APPROVAL OF MINUTES.** Motion by Board member Petty, seconded by Board member Shernock, to approve the meeting minutes of June 5, 2023. **The minutes were approved unanimously.**

**IV. DISCUSSION**

- a. Northfield Police Department (NPD) update.** Manager Schulz said the NPD now is operating with three (3) full-time officers. However, we are hoping that an officer now on family medical leave will be returning soon. In the interim, the Vermont State Police have been helping on request to cover some open shifts. As for the Police Chief vacancy, Manager Schulz said we are close to finalizing the employment agreement with a well-qualified candidate. He believes any remaining issues will be resolved soon and he will be sure to inform the NPD officers before the hiring becomes public knowledge.
- b. Northfield Fire Department (NFD) update.** Manager Schulz said NFD Chief Peter J. DeMasi has informed him that the department is running well at this time with no major issues to report. The firefighters seem to be very pleased with the new department equipment that has been purchased over the past couple of years.
- c. Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS) update.** Manager Schulz said that overall, the NAS seems to be working well. Long-distance non-emergency transfers, which provide significant NAS revenue, are being authorized only after there is confirmation that local coverage is in place. Manager Schulz said NAS Chief Meggan McCusker contacts him for authorization beforehand and this system appears to be working well. Chief McCusker had good news in that the ambulance unit that had been sent out-of-state to be remounted (i.e., have its "box" installed on a new cab and chassis) has been returned and went back into service today. Unfortunately, the 2017 unit was taken out of service today due to a fuel leak. This has been an ongoing issue for a while and it was felt with the other unit now back on the road, this was a good time to get it fixed and no longer have it leaking oil everywhere. It might be up to three (3) weeks before it can go in for repair but Chief McCusker is looking for quicker options.

Manager Schulz said an important topic for discussion today is the NAS request to have the third ambulance unit, which was purchased used last year for \$20,000 as a fill in for the one being remounted, be as fully equipped as the other two units. At the Select Board budget meetings held last year when the current fiscal year budget was drafted, the consensus of the Select Board members seemed to be to retain the third unit as a backup unit but not to fully equip it. In light of the NAS request to reevaluate this decision, Manager Schulz has done some research that compared the NAS situation to that of other public and private ambulance services in comparable Vermont communities. This research found that comparable communities relied on just two ambulance units for coverage. He did note that Waterbury is slowly working towards having a third unit. It is Manager Schulz's opinion that the current numbers do not support having three fully equipped ambulance units in Northfield. Longtime NAS volunteer Scott Bagg didn't feel a direct comparison with Waterbury was relevant. Even though the communities may have similar populations, NAS has a much higher call volume than Waterbury Ambulance. Mr. Bagg felt the higher call volume and the real possibility of increased NAS revenue with additional non-emergency transports were strong arguments for having a third fully equipped unit here.

In addition, over the past few years the instances of numerous simultaneous calls for service have become much more common. Mr. Bagg believes having this third unit fully equipped would be a revenue positive action that would benefit the community. Board member Shernock noted the community of Shelburne is comparable to Northfield and their ambulance service has only two units. They also perform a similar number of non-emergency transports. Mr. Bagg said the ambulance service in Shelburne doesn't provide inter-facility transfers from one hospital to another. Manager Schulz asked what would happen if NAS no longer performed inter-facility transfers to the UVM Medical Center, to Center Vermont Medical Center (CVMC), etc. Mr. Bagg said it would reduce the need for a third unit but also result in a significant decrease in NAS revenue. He added in recent years transferring patients from one medical facility to another has become as vital a part of the Vermont EMS system as emergency responses. Board member Petty has considered this matter much in recent months and her main concern is to see that NAS has all the resources it needs to operate. However, she still would like to see solid numbers that would justify the increased spending for a fully equipped third unit. Manager Schulz noted NAS has operated with two units for quite some time so going to three units would be a major change. Chief McCusker said NAS had two units when it was responsible for about 450 calls for service each year. She noted in the past fiscal year, that number more than doubled to about 950. Mr. Bagg noted NAS had two units when he became an NAS EMT in the 1990's. Chief McCusker then differentiated between call out numbers and run sheet numbers. She felt the latter more accurately measured NAS activity because it includes standby events and also reflects that callouts often involve multiple patients. Board member Petty noted there has been discussion of using \$60,000 in local American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to fully equip the third unit. She first would like to see more solid numbers regarding the recent increase in NAS activity to make sure that it justifies this expense. Board member Petty also noted that the 2016 and 2017 ambulance units will need to be replaced in the near future. This will be a major expense in a relatively short amount of time. Mr. Bagg said maintenance concerns regarding these older units is another good reason why having the third unit available for callouts, transports, etc. In addition to the number of non-emergency transports the NAS has performed, Mr. Bagg also has tracked the number that had to be declined due to vehicle maintenance issues with one or more of the units. He has estimated the loss of revenue at about \$100,000. Mr. Bagg then noted that compared to the problems NAS sometimes has in collecting on billing associated with emergency callouts, the inter-facility transports are a much more reliable income stream. Manager Schulz asked if there was sufficient NAS staffing for a third unit. Mr. Bagg said staffing has always been available for non-emergency transports. It was equipment problems that has led to refusals. Chief McCusker added that staffing problems, when they do arise, are much more common in summer months when Norwich University (NU) student volunteers are not available. There also has to be a real effort to keep NAS EMTs below the maximum work hour amount. Those exceeding that amount would become eligible for worker benefits and this is to be avoided as an unbudgeted expense. Manager Schulz does have the concern that staffing the third unit would result in those work hour limits being exceeded and thus result in additional full-time NAS employees. Currently, Chief McCusker is the only NAS full-time employee. Mr. Bagg said this hasn't become a problem to date and that the additional revenue generated by non-emergency transports does cover the extra personnel costs. In addition, the concern of EMTs exceeding their work hour limits should not be a real issue especially when NU students are available. Board member Shernock felt it might be necessary to reevaluate the NAS mission statement if its efforts continue to expand beyond the Northfield community. Mr. Bagg said this would be a useful exercise as regional responsibilities for ambulance services have expanded in recent years. Manager Schulz felt the Select Board members could address this matter. Board member Shernock then suggested that when the next ambulance unit is replaced, perhaps a less expensive "vanbulance" could be purchased rather than an ambulance unit. This vehicle could be used mostly for the non-emergency transports as it would then operate exclusively on paved roads, etc. Chief McCusker prefers to spread out the mileage and other usage relatively evenly among the available units. She added that if the third unit was needed to respond to an emergency callout on the backroads, the vanbulance would be unable to navigate the hilly gravel roads in Northfield.

Kaelee Bouleris is an NAS officer and NU employee who works with the NU student volunteers. He said many of them are very interested in helping with non-emergency transfers when they have downtime between classes. This also includes nighttime transfers and they are very enthusiastic to help with this. Chief McCusker said if a non-emergency transport patient is from Northfield or being transported to Northfield, the hospital will call NAS first when the transport is assigned. The transport usually is between Northfield and CVMC in Berlin. Mr. Bagg said 98% of the transports are for hospitals in the service area between Burlington (UVM Medical Center) and Lebanon NH (Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center). There sometime are requests for transport to Albany or Boston but these are very rare. Any long hauls are authorized by Manager Schulz first. Mr. Bagg said before any experiment with a vanulance is attempted, he thought it best to have a trial period for the third fully equipped ambulance to see if the extra revenue will justify the use of ARPA funds. Board member Petty would like to know the full cost of a new standard ambulance unit as compared to a replacement vanulance. Mr. Bagg said Waterbury Ambulance has made recent purchases of both; he can get some numbers from them. Board member Petty said borrowing to purchase two new ambulance units over a relatively short period might cause some sticker shock for local taxpayers. She noted that there would be additional staffing costs associated with the third unit. Manager Schulz noted that NAS revenue in recent years has been able to cover its operating and maintenance expenses but not such capital expenses as the purchase of vehicles and medical equipment. Board member Petty also would like to know how often NAS vehicles have maintenance problems that have put one or more of them out of service at the same time. Mr. Bagg can provide that information. He noted that with one unit now out for oil leakage repair, if we didn't have the third unit, we would in fact be down to only one unit. Board member Petty had hoped the subcommittee would be able to provide the other Select Board members with a recommendation after this meeting but it now seems another meeting is needed to review the information now being requested. Mr. Bagg is willing to provide any information needed for a decision to be made. If there is a test period with a third fully equipped unit, Board member Petty would like test criteria developed beforehand so it will be possible to tell without despite whether the experiment has been a success or failure. She then asked how much of the ARPA funds spent on equipping the third unit could be recouped if the experiment is a failure. Mr. Bagg said the most expensive single purchase would be a ZOLL defibrillator and that could be used to replace an older one if it was no longer needed on the third unit. Manager Schulz felt a six-month test period would be best. It was noted that the factors involved in whether the experiment is a success include the amount of additional NAS revenue; whether the additional work hours can be distributed equitably with no one exceeding the maximum number of hours; how often the third unit is actually required for transports and/or emergency callouts, etc. Manager Schulz said he and Chief McCusker could work out the success/failure criteria between them. This should be available along with the other information requested for the next subcommittee meeting. Board member Petty also would like the NAS run sheet totals dating back to pre-COVID numbers. Chief McCusker will prepare this for the next subcommittee meeting. There also will be data regarding the numbers of requests for Mutual Aid, etc.

- d. Next Subcommittee Meeting.** The next subcommittee meeting was tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, August 16, 2023, at 4:00 p.m.

**V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED).** There was none.

**VI. ADJOURNMENT.** Motion by Board member Petty, seconded by Board member Shernock, to adjourn. **There was no objection.**

The meeting adjourned at 5:19 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Kenneth L. McCann*

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

These minutes were approved at the subcommittee meeting of August 16, 2023.