

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD REGULAR MEETING
Minutes of April 8, 2025

- I. ROLL CALL.** Chair Charles Morse, Board members K. David Maxwell, Lydia Petty, Merry Shernock, and John Stevens. Also present were Manager Jeff Schulz, Acting Clerk Kenneth McCann, Denise Sanders, Lynn Doney, Danielle Farnum, Brian Massey Jr., Lorna Doney, Ben Sanders, Matthew Louis Stanley, Tim Swartz, Susan Stillinger, Carolyn Stevens, and Elroy Hill.

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

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

III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):

- a. Denise Sanders: Reinventing Town Meeting.** Ms. Sanders noted that at this year's Town Meeting open session (03/03/25), there were two (2) articles on the warning that would provide for the municipal budget as well as all public questions to be voted upon by Australian Ballot starting in 2026. Both of these articles were approved by the voters. Ms. Sanders said she attended all the annual Town Meetings when she lived in Moretown and she felt such meetings provided the opportunity for public discourse, which includes listening to others' opinions, keeping an open mind, and having the willingness to change one's opinion. Ms. Sanders originally had intended to vote against both of these articles but decided otherwise when informed that there is a good number of Northfield residents who are unable to attend such public meetings due to infirmity, etc. but still would like a say on whether the town budget is approved. It was argued that such persons have been disenfranchised in the past but changing budget approval to Australian Ballot will allow them to participate in the process in future years. Ms. Sanders afterwards did some research regarding how other Vermont communities conduct their Town Meetings. She found that 58% of the 247 Vermont communities surveyed voted their budget by Australian Ballot. Voter participation in these elections ranged from 3.6% to 69.8%. Of the 144 towns voting on their budget by Australian Ballot, 83% of them also held an open session where local matters were voted upon or merely discussed. Ms. Sanders would like to know if the Select Board members would like to keep holding the Town Meeting open session here where binding and/or non-binding business can be conducted. She provided copies of the East Montpelier 2025 Town Meeting minutes to show how this could be done with a significant number of residents taking part. Ms. Sanders also would like to know whether the funding articles for local non-profit organizations could be voted upon at this open session by Select Board action or whether this would require an article on the next Town Meeting warning. She also would like to know if the Select Board would support the creation of a committee to investigate these matters and provide recommendations. Manager Schulz said changing how Town Meeting articles are voted in future meetings would require an article or articles on the 2026 Town Meeting warning, which then would be voted upon by Australian Ballot. He added that any such articles could be put on the warning through the petition process or the Select Board members could decide to add them directly to the warning without a petition. Board member Petty said another possibility would be to hold a public information meeting in mid-January before the Town Meeting warning is approved. That way, residents could have a greater say on what issues are important to them and which should be included as warning articles. As for creating a committee, Board member Petty said Ms. Sanders could either request Select Board authorization to form a committee that would include one or two Select Board members that would operate like a Select Board subcommittee or instead form a citizen committee without direct Select Board involvement that would not be subject to the Vermont Open Meeting Law regarding posting agendas, meeting minutes, etc. This citizen committee could provide updates and recommendations to the Select Board members.

Ms. Sanders said she probably was thinking of the creation of a citizen committee that would operate much as the Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force now does. Ms. Sanders said this new committee might require the municipality's assistance in obtaining certain information when conducting its research. Manager Schulz said he was more than willing to provide any such assistance. Board member Maxwell said he would support the creation of a citizen committee to look into the possibility of reinventing Town Meeting. He added that there have been at least three (3) attempts to revitalize Town Meeting in recent years, which each had some success at first with increased public participation but, for various reasons, attendance decreased in following years. Board member Maxwell also felt it is more difficult to get reliable public participation in larger communities where there is more anonymity and residents don't feel obligated to attend these meetings. In smaller towns, it is much more noticeable if prominent individuals don't attend such community forums. Ms. Sanders said that if the committee does decide to pursue future voting changes through Town Meeting articles, they probably would need some assistance for the proper article wording, etc. Manager Schulz said that would not be a problem. Chair Morse and the other Select Board members then thanked Ms. Sanders for bringing this concern to their attention and wished her well with her future research, etc.

IV. LIQUOR CONTROL COMMISSION

- a. **Liquor License Renewal: Cumberland Farms.** Motion by Board member Maxwell, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the liquor license renewal. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **Outside Consumption Permit: Depot Square Pizzeria.** Motion by Board member Maxwell, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the outside consumption permit. Chair Morse asked if this request is directly related to the discussion of the draft ordinance below regarding the possible creation of "parklets." Manager Schulz said there was not a direct correlation at this time. After some discussion, the motion was tabled until more information can be provided by the applicant regarding this request.

V. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- a. **March 25, 2025 (Regular Meeting).** Motion by Board member Shernock, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. Board member Petty found one mistake that will be corrected. **Motion to approve the amended minutes passed 5-0-0.**

VI. APPROVAL OF BILLS

- a. **Approval of Warrant #19-25 & #19-25A-C.** Motion by Board member Shernock, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve Warrant #19-25 & #19-25A-C in the amount of \$709,387.41. Board member Petty noted a payment to Hallstrom Excavating for snow plowing, shoveling, salting, etc. Manager Schulz said this was a temporary measure to outsource some winter road maintenance when the Highway Department crew was severely understaffed. This practice has now been discontinued. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **Receipt of Biweekly Payroll through March 30, 2025.** Motion by Board member Shernock, seconded by Board member Stevens, to receive the biweekly payroll in the amount of \$116,777.82. Board member Shernock noted the payroll report included a year-to-date update on Northfield Police Department (NPD) overtime expenses. She asked if that could be eliminated in future. Manager Schulz said that would be a Select Board decision. There was no objection. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VII. SELECT BOARD

- a. **State Revolving Fund Loan Agreement (Water Transmission Line and Reservoir Projects).** Motion by Board member Shernock, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the State Revolving Fund Loan Agreement in the amount of \$7,230,000 at 0.0% annual interest; to approve the General Obligation Bond; and to approve the General Obligation Resolution and Certificate. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **Bond Anticipation Note (Water Transmission Line and Reservoir Projects).** Motion by Board member Shernock, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the Bond Anticipation Note in the amount of \$3,200,000 at 4.740% annual interest; to approve the Bond Anticipation Borrowing Resolution; and to approve the No-Arbitrage and Use of Proceeds Certificate. Board member Maxwell asked what was the purpose of this note. Manager Schulz said this was a line of credit so large invoices related to these water projects could be paid by the municipality in advance of State of Vermont reimbursement. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- c. **DRAFT Ordinance for Authorizing Public Parking Spaces to be Converted for Outside Seating (i.e. "Parklets").** Manager Schulz had provided a draft document for the Select Board members to review and consider for approval. He added that Chair Morse recently asked him whether alcohol could be consumed on the Common if purchased by nearby establishment. Manager Schulz reviewed this and determined that since there is no local ordinance related to this, state law does prohibit alcohol use on public property. This restriction does not apply to restaurants, bars, etc. if they have obtained an outside consumption permit. Board member Maxwell added that the establishment must also fence off the alcohol consumption area from the general public. Motion by Board member Maxwell, seconded by Board member Shernock, to approve the ordinance as presented. Board member Shernock had a number of suggestions for revising the draft document, such as adding space heaters to the list of possible parklet amenities. She also felt the requirement that the parklet "owner" was responsible for "removal of any snow immediately surrounding their parklet and in adjacent parking spaces" was impracticable. In addition, the requirement that the "Parklet owners shall provide normal maintenance and repair damage within a reasonable time" was too vague and that a definite timeframe should be specified. Similarly, Board member Shernock felt the phrase "at all times" should be added to the requirement that "Parklet owners are responsible for keeping the parklet clean." She also felt that making the Town Manager personally responsible for investigating all parklet complaints is an additional duty for this position that is probably not needed. Board member Stevens felt that the list of required parklet safety features, i.e. barriers, traffic signs, railings, etc. is probably not all-inclusive. Board member Petty felt there should be some provision in the ordinance for additional outside dining/drinking locations that would not meet the "parklet" definition. She also believes a fee should be charged to parklet applicants if public parking spaces are eliminated due to the request. She felt this fee could be in the \$50.00 to \$200.00 range and the amount can be determined after Select Board discussion. Board member Petty also would like to see a calculation of the number of public parking spaces now available in the downtown area as well as the number that could be feasibly converted into parklets. There then followed a brief discussion of the time required to approve such an ordinance and whether one could be put in place before this summer. In the absence of an approved ordinance, Board member Maxwell suggested that Manager Schulz could make the decisions this year on a case-by-case basis. Manager Schulz would like to have a formal process created that would provide some oversight of future parklets. Board member Maxwell noted the Select Board members in the past have approved allowing downtown restaurants to make use of public parking spaces for outside consumption provided they met certain criteria. However, most businesses with outside consumption permits have made use of adjacent sidewalks or their own property rather than public parking spaces.

Chair Morse felt installing parklets on Depot Square parking spaces might create safety hazards that should be addressed by a local ordinance. He also did not feel it was reasonable to expect restaurant servers to fully supervise these parklets at all times for safety concerns, etc. Board member Maxwell noted there now are two (2) requests for such parklets and he also felt that it was unrealistic to have this ordinance in place for the beginning of this year's outside drinking/dining season. He thought it might be useful in the interim to have the parklet applicants provide additional information, including schematics, to the Select Board members so these requests can be properly reviewed prior to possible approval. Board member Maxwell would like Manager Schulz to get written proposals from these businesses that the Select Board members can review at the next regular meeting (04/22/25). It is possible that there could be automatic renewals of these parklet approvals each year if required conditions are observed. Without objection, the motion to approve the draft ordinance was tabled.

- d. **Tax Stabilization Policy and Application Form.** At the last meeting (03/25/25), there was a tabled motion from Board member Shernock, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the Tax Stabilization Policy and Application Form as presented. That motion is being reintroduced at this time. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VIII. TOWN MANAGER'S REPORT

- a. **Vine Street Sidewalk.** As he reported earlier, some utility poles needed to be relocated due to this project. The new poles have been put in place and the power lines will be switched over in the next couple of weeks. The new starting date for this project is Thursday, May 15, 2025. Board member Petty would like some public notifications before the work begins. Manager Schulz will provide some social media postings and letters will be sent to the property owners most affected by the sidewalk work.
- b. **FY 2025-2026 Water and Sewer Department Budgets.** Manager Schulz said draft budgets were submitted for discussion to the Utility Commission members at last night's meeting (04/07/25). Their reaction was favorable. We are looking at a 2.6% combined Water-Sewer rate increase for average residential customers. Manager Schulz also stated that water-sewer usage is now back to pre-pandemic levels.
- c. **Main Street Waterline and Reservoir Replacement Project.** Manager Schulz put a notice on Front Porch Forum and on the municipal website today about the project and its current timeline, which is late April/early May for the work on Main Street and mid-May for the replacement of the Cheney Farm reservoirs. No road closures are anticipated but there will be times when traffic will be restricted to one lane. Flaggers will be present whenever that occurs. Manager Schulz will provide weekly updates to Northfield residents as the project proceeds.
- d. **Turkey Hill Maple Farm Lease.** Manager Schulz said the lease agreement with Turkey Hill Maple Farm to tap sugar trees located on Water Department property on Turkey Hill Road will expire on June 30, 2025. The Utility Commission members first discussed a possible lease extension at last night's meeting.
- e. **Town Buildings & Energy Subcommittee.** Manager Schulz said this subcommittee will meet tomorrow afternoon (04/09/25) at 3:30 p.m. to discuss the Pool House Redesign Project and (if time permits) the Town Common Rehabilitation Project.

IX. BOARD MEMBERS' COMMENTS, CONCERNS, QUESTIONS

- a. **Contracted Street Sweeping.** Board member Maxwell asked when the street sweepers will arrive this year. Manager Schulz said they should be here next week. In addition, the street line striping should be completed by the end of this month. He contacted these contractors early this year in order to make sure the work would be done this spring instead of the summer months as in recent years.

- b. Cheney Farm Knotweed Problem.** Board member Petty hopes the knotweed now present on Cheney Farm will be addressed during the upcoming water tank replacement project. At the very least, she doesn't want the problem to spread out to other areas. Manager Schulz said the project contractors will follow federal rules regarding the removal and proper disposal of invasive plants on the worksite. Board member Petty then asked if any of the hiking trails in the area would be affected by this project. Manager Schulz doesn't believe there will be any disruption.
- c. Project Tracker List Update.** Board member Stevens would like the Vine Street Pedestrian Bridge Project and the proposed repairs of Town Bridge 56 added to the Project Tracker list that is distributed in the Select Board packets.
- d. Municipal Bridge Inspections, etc.** Board member Stevens asked when the inspections of local bridges will take place. Manager Schulz is hoping to have them completed by May 15, 2025. Board member Stevens then asked about the culvert inventory. Manager Schulz said the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC) is hiring the people for this project but we don't have a timeline for this.
- e. Highway Department Appreciation.** Board member Stevens thanked the Highway crew for recently removing the piles of downed tree branches that were located on Brown Public Library property.
- f. Select Board Retreat.** Board member Shernock asked if a Select Board Retreat will be held this spring. Chair Morse said there are a number of considerations that need to be resolved first before the retreat can be scheduled.

X. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED)

- a. Matthew Louis Stanley: Northfield Police Department (NPD) Questions.** Mr. Stanley said his children are considering moving to the Central Vermont area and since he has concerns for their personal safety, he wanted some information about local law enforcement. Chair Morse said Northfield has its own police department that is overseen by NPD Chief Pierre Gomez who has over twenty (20) years of law enforcement experience. He added that Chief Gomez is well respected by the Select Board members and (he believes) by the community in general. The NPD is currently understaffed and does have to rely on Vermont State Police on occasion for overnight coverage. Mr. Stanley asked how many NPD officers there were at this time. Chair Morse said including Chief Gomez, there are four (4) full-time officers as well as some part-time officers. In addition, Norwich University has its own Public Safety officers who patrol the campus and handle most on-campus incidents. In response to a hypothetical question, Manager Schulz said that in case of a suspicious local death, Vermont State Police investigators will be brought in. He added that any ongoing investigations cannot be discussed at a public meeting. Chair Morse recommended that if Mr. Stanley has any additional questions about the NPD and its operations, he should directly contact Chief Gomez.
- b. Lynn Doney: Richardson Drive Problems.** Mr. Doney asked if Richardson Drive was scheduled for repaving this summer. Manager Schulz did not think so and noted that potholes on the road were filled last year. He will review the road again to see if any additional work should be done this year.
- c. Lynn Doney: Concerns about NPD Chief Gomez.** Mr. Doney asked why the municipality provides Chief Gomez with a complete uniform when it seems most days he drives a police cruiser around just wearing a hoodie with his badge hanging down on a chain. At such times, Mr. Doney believes Chief Gomez looks much less like a police chief and more like "a gangster off the street" driving around one of our cruisers. Board member Shernock did not feel Chief Gomez looked like a gangster and is sure that he follows every regulation "to the letter." She also noted that such casual attire is frequently worn by law enforcement officers when on duty. Mr. Doney then said there was a car accident on Berlin Pond Road a couple weeks ago. He was not there himself but was informed by two (2) Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS) personnel that Chief Gomez arrived on the accident scene but left rather quickly before any other NPD officers showed up. Before he left, when asked what he was doing, Chief Gomez said he was "just out joyriding."

Mr. Doney also wants to know why Chief Gomez drives an unmarked police vehicle with green license plates. Manager Schulz noted this vehicle was outfitted this way by the former police chief with municipal authorization. Chair Morse said that when conducting a police investigation, especially when drugs might be involved, it is usually best not to drive a vehicle that is instantly recognizable as a police car. Mr. Doney then asked if any current NPD officers have death scene certification. Manager Schulz believes at least one does but will check on this. Mr. Doney said not having an NPD officer with such certification present at a death scene results in considerable delays when an outside law enforcement agency has to be brought in.

- d. **Elroy Hill: Depot Square Parklets.** Mr. Hill felt that due to the scarcity of public parking spaces around the Common, perhaps this is not the best place to remove some of them to create parklets. He thought if one dining establishment gets one, they all will want them. Mr. Hill believes this is a busy traffic area and he hopes that the Select Board members will not approve any applications for parklets there.
- e. **Lorna Doney: Downtown Parklets.** Ms. Doney does support the establishment of parklets in the downtown area provided that they are set up the correct way to ensure public safety, etc. She also didn't feel you should discriminate against certain businesses by allowing parklets on East Street but not on Depot Square.

XI. EXECUTIVE SESSION. Motion by Board member Maxwell, seconded by Board member Stevens, to go into executive session, in accordance with 1 VSA 313 (a)(1)], in order to discuss contract negotiations, legal matters, and personnel issues with Manager Schulz present. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board went into executive session at 9:05 p.m.

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

The Board came out of executive session at 9:55 p.m. No action was taken.

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

The Board adjourned at 9:55 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

A video recording of this meeting is available at: https://youtu.be/Ixrb_f3EO6U

These minutes were revised and approved at the Select Board regular meeting of April 22, 2025.