

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of December 5, 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, Laurie Baroffio (Finance Director), Pierre Gomez (Chief, Northfield Police Department), Shannon Palone (Pool Director), Mary Nadon Scott, and Elroy C. Hill.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m.

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

III. DISCUSSION

a. Proposed FY 2025/2026 Town Budget

- 1. Police Department.** Manager Schulz said Northfield Police Department (NPD) Chief Pierre Gomez is present tonight to discuss his department's proposed budget and answer any questions. This discussion will start with the NPD operations and maintenance (O&M) budget, which will have a 0.5% overall decrease in the next fiscal year. Chief Gomez noted that staffing concerns is the main reason this budget has been reduced. As indicated at the first budget meeting (12/03/24), Manager Schulz said the municipality is now looking to budget for five (5) full-time officers rather than six (6), which had been the practice in recent years. This action is due to the recent inability to recruit qualified law enforcement officers to fill that position. Chief Gomez said money is the main reason that position has remained unfilled as other law enforcement agencies in the area have been providing significant signing bonuses and inflated salaries to fill their ranks. He felt Northfield was not in the position to provide similar financial inducements at this time. Manager Schulz noted neighboring states also are having similar problems with officer recruitment. Chief Gomez said if Northfield ever did offer signing bonuses, it probably would be a one-time occurrence in order to fill all remaining vacancies. Board member Morse asked what was to prevent new officers from leaving for other jobs after they received their signup bonus. Chief Gomez said a contract would need to be negotiated along with the bonus amount so that the new officer would not be able to leave for a certain amount of time, such as three (3) to five (5) years. This practice has been widely employed in other states and should pass legal muster here in Vermont. Chair Maxwell noted that in the healthcare field, such signup bonuses are usually paid out over several years rather than in a lump payment. Board member Petty hopes that current NPD officers wouldn't be offended if a new officer received such a signup bonus. Manager Schulz believes the current officers probably would be pleased that an additional officer would be coming on board to share some of the workload. Chief Gomez added that the current officers are pleased with the compensation package included in their recently approved union contract and they also know and respect the Northfield community. They also understand the problems with officer recruitment and that some additional hiring inducements may be required. Chair Maxwell agreed that having additional officers available would create a more positive work experience for the current officers. It then was noted that excessive police overtime hours often leads to officer burnout. Board member Petty asked how often Vermont State Police (VSP) officers are asked to provide police coverage for Northfield. Chief Gomez said it usually happens ten (10) days per month mainly for the overnight shift. He added that over the past six (6) months, VSP responded to 150 callouts, which he did not feel was an excessive amount. In addition, of these callouts, Chief Gomez said only about forty (40) really required a police emergency response. Chair Maxwell asked how much the municipality could save if 24/7 local police coverage was eliminated. He did not believe it would be a large amount because the overnight shift usually involves one (1) NPD officer covering a six (6) hour period.

Chief Gomez agreed there would not be substantial savings but warned if Northfield relied too heavily on VSP overnight coverage, there might be some pushback in future. He added that VSP has been very cooperative to date on this but we wouldn't want to ask too much of them. Chief Gomez also noted that VSP is legally required to respond to emergency situations if local response is not available. Board member Stevens asked about the NPD full-time officer now on military leave. Chief Gomez said that person has one (1) additional year of military obligation. Based on his conversations with that officer, Chief Gomez said there is no guarantee the officer will return to full-time service here when that year is up. However, the officer has been working as a part-time NPD officer and been willing to help out on overnight shifts, etc. Chair Maxwell asked what was Chief Gomez's opinion about only budgeting for five (5) full-time NPD officers in the next fiscal year. Chief Gomez said he did agree with that due to the current inability to fill that sixth full-time position. Board member Morse would favor maintaining budgeting for six (6) full-time officers in case Chief Gomez's recruitment efforts prove successful. Even if the sixth position goes unfilled, the additional funds could be used for signup bonuses to fill other positions. Chair Maxwell noted that restoring the budget for this position would add about 4½ cents to the property tax rate. Board member Petty asked Chief Gomez if five (5) full-time officer should be the future staffing level for the NPD. Chief Gomez said he really would prefer to have six (6) full-time officers but he does understand the need to acknowledge current recruitment difficulties. Board member Petty said she would agree with Board member Morse on maintaining funding for six (6) officers. Board member Morse said the additional funding perhaps could be used to hire a social worker associated with the NPD as Board member Shernock previously suggested. That person could respond to callouts that involve mental health issues, domestic disputes, etc. Chief Gomez has concerns about sending out a social worker to such situations without a police escort as there is always the possibility of the interaction escalating. He is willing to discuss a proposal for this but has concerns that without adequate safety precautions this could become a recipe for disaster.

Board member Morse has heard that some Burlington police officers are very displeased with the way local politics has affected the way they can perform their duties. They might be willing to relocate to smaller communities like Northfield. Chief Gomez noted that the officers might be disgruntled but they are still being well compensated and might not want to give that up. In addition, those living in the Burlington area might not want to make the commute to Central Vermont. Board member Petty asked what was the additional expense of adding that sixth full-time officer to the budget. Finance Director Laurie Baroffio estimated about \$150,000. Board member Morse suggested that other than personnel costs, the NPD budget should be reviewed for areas where its O&M budget could be reduced. Manager Schulz noted the NPD overtime budget has been problematic in recent years but the amount budgeted for the next fiscal year has been reduced by \$5,000 in light of the availability of the VSP for overnight coverage, etc. Chief Gomez added that one of the part-time officers has indicated an ability to work additional hours soon and that should have a positive impact on overtime expenses. Ms. Baroffio noted that even if the NPD were fully staffed, there still would be overtime expenses due to officers taking vacation time, going on sick leave, taking training time, etc.

Board member Shernock had a couple of questions regarding some line items in the NPD O&M budget. For example, she asked what was the purpose of the "Professional Services" budget. Chief Gomez said the NPD did not have an internal IT specialist so it does need to hire someone to come in and update the computers, etc. He noted that the person now doing this for the NPD does charge reasonable hourly rates. Board member Shernock then asked about the "Police Services" line item. Chief Gomez said when the under-staffed NPD has to bring in outside law enforcement agencies such as the Washington County Sheriff's Office to help provide extra coverage for special events like the Labor Day Weekend Festivities, that expense comes out of this account.

Manager Schulz noted that the VSP has been threatening in recent years to discontinue its free dispatching service for local law enforcement agencies. As a result, the municipality did budget funds in case this came to fruition with little or no notice. However, due to strong opposition from municipalities, the VSP has decided not to go through with this. As a result, the \$15,000 that was budgeted for this possibility in the current fiscal year will be zeroed out in the next. Manager Schulz then turned to the Materials/Supply O&M budget, which will decrease 12.3% in the next fiscal year due to reduced budgets for heating fuel and gasoline expenses. In addition, due to local solar energy projects, the municipality's electricity costs have somewhat stabilized in recent years.

Manager Schulz then turned to the NPD Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget. The only account is for Building Improvements and it has a current balance of \$11,961 with \$2,500 to be added in the next fiscal year. Manager Schulz noted the building is relatively new and probably won't require any major renovations for some time. Chief Gomez said some work had to be done in the attached garage but all is in good condition now. It was noted that the new emergency generator, which was purchased with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, should be installed in coming weeks. Board member Shernock would like this work done sooner rather than later.

In the NPD Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget, Chief Gomez noted that the cost of taser replacement has gone up significantly in recent years. Fortunately, the NPD has a sufficient number in stock that so there is no need to budget for replacement units at this time. As for the in-vehicle computers, Chief Gomez noted that they were able to purchase refurbished rather than new replacement computers and all are working well at this time.

Chief Gomez said the normal practice in the past was to purchase Ford Explorers for replacement NPD cruisers but he would like to change this in future as their low ground clearance creates problems on the backroads. He would prefer to transition to Chevy Tahoes in the future given their four (4) extra inches of ground clearance. The probable added cost will need to be a consideration when the actual purchase times approach. Chair Maxwell noted the VSP also purchases Chevy Tahoes and probably for the same reasons. He then asked if any early replacements were needed for the NPD fleet. Chief Gomez did not think so since all the NPD vehicles are now in pretty good shape. The discussion of the NPD budget thus concluded, Chair Maxwell thanked Chief Gomez for his attendance tonight and for all the good work he and his officers have provided over this past year.

2. **Municipal Pool.** Manager Schulz noted Pool Director Shannon Palone is present tonight to discuss and answer any questions about the proposed Pool budget. Manager Schulz said the Pool O&M budget will see a slight increase (5.7%) mainly due to modest wage increases for the Pool Director and lifeguards. In the Materials/Supplies budget, there is an increase in the water and sewer line items in order to better match actual expenses from recent years. Ms. Palone then confirmed she was able to hire a full complement of lifeguards last summer and she hopes a number of them will be returning next year. She noted that retaining junior and senior lifeguards is an important factor in maintaining proper staffing levels and added she has trained most of these lifeguards herself. Chair Maxwell asked for how long Ms. Palone is willing to continue serving as Pool Director. Ms. Palone said she will be here for at least one (1) more year but is unsure about how long after that. Chair Maxwell said the Select Board members are very appreciative of the great service Ms. Palone has provided to the community over the years. Board member Shernock noted that a number of public swimming pools had to reduce their hours or close altogether last summer due to insufficient lifeguard staffing. The fact this did not happen in Northfield is a credit to Ms. Palone and her staff. Chair Maxwell has been very pleased with Ms. Palone's long service to the community but the Select Board members will need to start planning for her future retirement.

Board member Petty would like the Municipal Pool to be more aggressively marketed in the future so that more residents know when it is open, what services are available, etc. Ms. Palone said she would like to expand the water aerobics program, offer additional swim lesson sessions, and hold more special events/theme nights in future. Ms. Palone said she has always been able to fill swim lesson slots in the past but would like to attract more people to the pool at other times. Board member Petty noted the Pool O&M budget does include \$1,200 for special events/theme nights. Ms. Palone said such events do require additional lifeguard expenses, which need to come from the Personnel budget. She added that some local merchants do provide food and drink donations for special pool events. Manager Schulz said he has spoken to Economic Development Director (EDD) Tom Davis about possible new strategies for better marketing of the Municipal Pool. It then was suggested that notices could be placed in the *Northfield News*, Front Porch Forum, etc. several weeks before the mid-June pool opening so residents are more aware of its summer schedule. Ms. Palone noted that weekly concerts are held in the adjacent Memorial Park each summer and they do bring more people out to the area.

A discussion of swimming lessons then followed including the possibility of providing free lessons to Northfield residents. Manager Schulz noted that the revenue generated by swimming lessons is not that significant, i.e. about \$3,000. Board member Morse suggested that if Northfield residents are provided free swimming lessons when young, they very likely will become regular pool pass purchasers in their adult years. The Select Board members were supportive of the concept of free pool lessons for Northfield residents with some details to be worked out at a later time. For the time being, the anticipated swim lesson revenue was reduced to \$500 and \$1,000 was added to the Pool personnel budget in a "Special Detail" line item to cover the extra cost of providing lifeguards for special events and theme nights.

In the Pool CIP budget, it was noted the repainting of the pool was completed last year and this should reduce water loss next summer. All the pool skimmers have been replaced and no replacements should be required for a few years. Manager Schulz said the Building/Facility Improvements CIP account now has a \$12,563 balance with \$10,000 to be added in the next fiscal year using Town General surplus funds. Ms. Baroffio noted the \$10,000 paving bill for fixing the parking area and putting in additional handicapped parking spaces has not yet been paid. That would lower the current balance to about \$2,000. Manager Schulz said the next proposed project is to hire an engineer to assess the facility and provide recommendations for further improvements. This could include a redesign of the current pool house for which \$36,400 in ARPA funds have been allocated to hire a project architect.

In the Pool CEP budget, the next big project is to replace the pool filter. This is expected to cost between \$80,000 and \$100,000 and \$83,653 has already been budgeted for this purpose with an additional \$7,500 to be added in the next fiscal year. This project was scheduled for FY 2025/2026 but the filter was inspected and found to be in good shape so this work might be delayed for a couple of years. The pool vacuum is not scheduled for replacement until FY 2030/2031 and also is in pretty good shape. Ms. Palone noted a diving board was replaced last year and another should be replaced next year. In addition, the diving board bases need to be replaced at the same time. The line item for diving board replacement was increased from \$1,000 to \$2,000 in the next fiscal year to cover these costs. With the discussion of the Municipal Pool budget concluded, Chair Maxwell thanked Ms. Palone for attending tonight's meeting and providing valuable feedback regarding pool operations. Ms. Palone said she soon would provide the Select Board members with a list of possible pool special events and theme nights for the next pool season.

- 3. Brown Public Library (BPL) .** Board member Stevens also serves as the Treasurer for the BPL Board of Trustees and therefore will present the proposed BPL budget for the next fiscal year and answer any questions. He noted that due to increased expenses, such as higher postage costs, etc., the BPL Board of Trustees are asking the BPL O&M budget be increased by \$3,500 to \$112,000 in the next fiscal year. This also will allow the weekly hours for the Library Director (Sherri Brickley) to be increased from thirty (30) to thirty-five (35). In addition, the weekly hours for the Youth Librarian (Rebecca Pearish) would be increased from twenty-five (25) to thirty (30). Ms. Baroffio asked if the Youth Librarian now gets health insurance coverage. Board member Stevens said she did not. Ms. Baroffio believes such coverage must be offered to employees working at least thirty (30) hours. Board member Stevens will investigate this matter further and it might need to be revisited later based on what he learns. Board member Shernock has heard from a number of young parents about how great the BPL youth programs are. She felt that many more such youth targeted programs should be done in Northfield to provide proper diversions for younger residents. Board member Stevens then noted that about \$20,000 will need to be spent to install new storm windows.

In the BPL CIP budget, Manager Schulz said there is a \$25,000 balance in the Library Roof account. At this time, no additional funding for this account will be added in the next fiscal year budget. Board member Stevens said the roof now is in relatively good shape with only a few shingles to be replaced when needed. Chair Maxwell felt the whole roof will need to be replaced at some time so he would favor budgeting an additional \$5,000 for this account in the next fiscal year. The cost of roof replacement is estimated at \$50,000 in the BPL CIP budget but Chair Maxwell feels this figure is probably far too low. Board member Morse would favor installing a standing seam metal roof when the time comes. In the Building Improvements CIP budget, there now is a \$20,000 deficit due to such recent projects as installing handicapped accessible doors, etc. \$25,000 in Town General CIP surplus funds will be added to this account in the next fiscal years to help build this account back up again. The Historical Society basement saw a lot of work done last year to address dampness, mold, and other similar problems. Manager Schulz would like to add an additional \$10,000 to this CIP account in the next fiscal year to complete any remaining work. The Community Room Update CIP account now has a \$4,000 balance with an additional \$4,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. Chair Maxwell asked what updates are we considering at this time. Manager Schulz said we are looking at installing new flooring, purchasing new furniture, repainting the walls, etc.

The Select Board members will hold their next budget meeting at 6:00 p.m. prior to the next regular meeting on Tuesday, December 10, 2024. This will be a one-hour meeting and the Northfield Fire Department budget will be the sole topic of discussion.

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

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

The Board adjourned at 7:49 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

A video recording of this meeting is available at <https://youtu.be/NPmMNph7Rxw>

These minutes were approved at the Select Board regular meeting of January 14, 2025.