

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
PUBLIC SAFETY OVERSIGHT & PLANNING
SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING
Minutes of December 5, 2023**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board members Lydia Petty and Merry Shernock. Others present included Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Ambulance Director Meggan McCusker, Scott Bagg (Northfield Ambulance), Kaelee Bouleris (Northfield Ambulance), and Mary Nadon Scott.

The meeting started at 1:00 p.m.

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

- III. APPROVAL OF MINUTES.** Motion by Board member Shernock, seconded by Board member Petty, to approve the meeting minutes of October 4, 2023. **The minutes were approved unanimously.**

IV. DISCUSSION

- a. Northfield Police Department (NPD) update.** Manager Schulz reported that the NPD remains one full-time officer down and with another full-time officer on military leave. He added that it has become very difficult to recruit qualified law enforcement officers in Vermont, noting that the Town of Stowe has been offering a \$15,000 signing bonus for new officers. Manager Schulz said NPD Chief Pierre Gomez is doing his best to recruit new officers. Board member Petty suggested this subcommittee could develop some creative idea in order to bring needed police officers to Northfield. Manager Schulz said one possibility is to use American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds as sign-up bonuses. He added that except for the personnel shortfall, all seems to be going well with the NPD. Board member Shernock would like list of items that are needed to make the Police Station more habitable during prolonged usage when used as an emergency operations center. The Northfield Rotary Club is willing to provide those items free of charge. Manager Schulz will contact Chief Gomez about this.
- b. Northfield Fire Department (NFD) update.** Manager Schulz said all is going well with the NFD. NFD Chief Peter J. DeMasi was present last week (11/30/23) when the Select Board members discussed the proposed NFD budget for FY 2024/2025. There were some unresolved issues after that meeting so Chief DeMasi will be providing additional information about updated equipment replacement cost estimates, etc. Board member Petty said it also was unresolved whether ARPA funds should be used for air pac replacements. Board member Petty also hopes that the missing letter at the Fire Station, which now reads "Northfield Fire Department." Chief McCusker believes that Chief DeMasi is working on fixing this problem with a new vinyl letter.

- c. Northfield Ambulance Services (NAS) update.** Manager Schulz said Chief McCusker is here to present the proposed NAS budget for the next fiscal year. Chief McCusker said at the previous subcommittee meeting (10/04/23), there was a suggestion that the NAS pursuing a third fully equipped ambulance unit while at the same time seeking NAS personnel compensation revisions might not be received well by the other Select Board members. In light of this, Chief McCusker and her officers decided that this probably wasn't the right time to request three fully equipped ambulance units. She added that NAS EMT Lynn Doney suggested remounting the 2006 unit, which was purchased used last year to provide coverage while another unit was out-of-state being remounted. This would allow for the 2017 unit, which has been causing some problems lately, to be sold when the remounted 2006 unit returns to Northfield.

Chief McCusker considered this scenario and it now seems the best option. This would solve the problem of what to do with the now spare 2006 unit while also addressing the issues with the 2017 unit. The 2006 unit has never been remounted so it is a good candidate for this. The 2017 unit already has been remounted once and this cannot be done a second time. Board member Petty asked for Manager Schulz's opinion on this proposal. Manager Schulz has done some research on this and he believes the proposal is sound. Board member Petty asked about the cost. Chief McCusker said purchasing a whole new ambulance unit would cost about \$425,000. The remount, which involves installing the existing ambulance unit box on a new chassis, would cost about half of that amount. Board member Petty asked about the timing of the remount. Chief McCusker has spoken to the ambulance dealership that would perform the remount and they would be able to schedule the remount by the end of 2025. The work itself would take about three (3) months so the unit would be returned to Northfield by the spring of 2026. Manager Schulz noted that it is possible that an earlier slot could open up before then. Chief McCusker agreed and noted that would be a good reason to send the unit to the out-of-state dealership a few months ahead of time just in case. Board member Petty noted that this is the timeframe for the scheduled replacement of the 2017 unit. However, instead of a new unit it would be replaced with a remounted unit instead. Chief McCusker confirmed that when the 2006 unit returns from its remount, the 2017 unit would be sold for whatever it could bring in at that point. She added that the 2017 unit, despite its current problems, should be able to remain in service until then. There might be higher maintenance costs in order to keep it on the road. Chief McCusker noted that the company that remounted the 2017 unit, which is now out of business, did not do as good a job as they should have. This has resulted in intermittent electrical system problems, etc.

NAS EMT Scott Bagg said he is one hundred percent (100%) in favor of Chief McCusker's plan. He, however, is not as optimistic as her regarding whether the 2017 unit will remain functional until after the remounted 2006 unit has been put back into service. That being said, Mr. Bagg feels this is the best option at this time. He added that due to ever increasing call volume, it might be necessary in the future to revisit the issue of whether the NAS would operate better with three (3) fully equipped units rather than two (2). Board member Petty believes the other Select Board members understand this possibility should the call volume keep increasing each year. Mr. Bagg noted that before the discussion regarding possible expansion of the NAS fleet takes place, there needs to be some consideration of finding additional storage space to properly shelter any additional vehicles. Board member Petty said the Select Board members will need to start strategically planning the future of NAS, which would include staffing, vehicle storage, etc.

As for the NAS facility, Chief McCusker said engineering plans were developed in the past for either updating the building at its current location or expanding the current Fire Station to house both the NFD and NAS. Board member Shernock said discussions regarding the NAS facility certainly need to be held and perhaps this subcommittee would be the best place to start. Board member Petty thought applying for a planning grant might be a good way to fund any needed update of the old engineering plans. Manager Schulz thought that might be a good idea. It might be useful to review the old plans first to see if they are still useful. Chief McCusker believes there was a \$2,100,000 cost estimate to expand the Fire Station to also house the NAS. A good part of this expense would be to make the building fully accessible to the public, which would include installing an elevator to the upper floor, etc. Manager Schulz will provide copies of the old engineering studies to the subcommittee members.

The discussion then turned to the NAS operations and maintenance (O&M) budget. Most of the NAS requests for this budget involve increased EMT compensation for specific assigned duties, such as weekend and overnight standby coverage, etc. Chief McCusker has requested eight (8) hours of dedicated administrative time every other Monday so that she can focus on processing payroll sheets and other paperwork without having to respond to emergency calls, etc. In the NAS budget that was provided to the Select Board members, Manager Schulz has reduced this to four (4) hours. Chief McCusker believes this should be sufficient. Another of her requests was to have paid staff to provide weekend standby coverage from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. Chief McCusker said it has been increasingly difficult to get EMTs willing to work over the weekends and this additional compensation should make it easier to find volunteers. This \$48,000 request was included in the NAS budget provided to the Select Board members.

Chief McCusker also requested that \$40,000 be added to the NAS budget in order to pay EMTs for weekday afternoon standby duty in order to perform non-emergency transfers. Chief McCusker said most of these transfers would be from local hospitals to nursing facilities or to the patient's home. She believes that with the additional NAS revenue these transfers would provide, this request would be at worst revenue neutral. Manager Schulz did remove this request from the proposed NAS budget due to the cost and concerns about the amount of potential downtime for the standby crew. Chief McCusker said having this transfer crew on hand at these specified times would allow her to contact local hospitals, nursing homes, etc. to let them know that an NAS crew is available for non-emergency transports. This would be a contract to the current system in which the hospital contacts Chief McCusker about the possibility of NAS performing a transfer and she then has to contact EMTs to check on their availability. She added that if there are no transfers scheduled for that weekday afternoon, there is no reason the EMTs couldn't respond to emergency calls. Mr. Bagg said by having the EMT crew on standby, this new policy would improve the ability of NAS to respond to emergency callouts. He feels that there should be some work available for the standby crew to perform on these afternoon shifts. Mr. Bagg agreed with Chief McCusker that this proposal would be at worst revenue neutral but he also sees the possibility of this becoming a considerable source of NAS revenue once more hospitals, etc. become aware of increased NAS availability for non-emergency transfers. Board member Petty asked if there was any middle ground for this proposal. Chief McCusker said it was possible to start with a trial period starting with only two or three weekday afternoons. The program could be expanded later if the additional revenue does come in as anticipated. Board member Petty said this possibility could be discussed by the full Select Board at the next budget meeting (12/07/23).

Board member Shernock asked if NAS members have supported the budget requests Chief McCusker has made. Chief McCusker said she discussed her proposals with any NAS EMT who was interested and there seemed to be support for them. Board member Shernock does not want a repeat of what happened at the last Town Meeting open session when a few NAS members made their own request to increase the NAS budget in order to raise EMT compensation. Mr. Bagg said the NAS officers have tried in recent months to address and repair the divisions within NAS that led to this public dispute. He doesn't see anything like this happening again next year as there seems to be wide support for the proposals Chief McCusker made for the coming fiscal year. Mr. Bagg would much rather have any public discussion of such proposals to be held with the subcommittee members and the Select Board members in a formal meeting atmosphere rather than on Town Meeting Day.

Board member Petty feels that the Select Board members as well as the general public need to consider the needs of our EMTs as the NAS appears to be making a slow transition from a volunteer ambulance service to a professional staffed one. There is a risk that many more experienced NAS EMTs may decide to work for higher paying ambulance services as this long process continues. Mr. Bagg thought a strategic plan was needed to keep Select Board members aware of the long-term changes needed to keep local ambulance services viable so that there are no surprises when future fiscal year budgets are developed. Board member Petty thought it might be worth applying for state planning grant funds in order to have a long-term plan for NAS written and distributed. Chief McCusker agreed, stating that we will need to plan for ahead for the time when an expansion of the NAS vehicle fleet will become necessary so that appropriate funding will be allocated in the NAS Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget in coming fiscal years. Hand in hand with the potential fleet expansion would be the future of the current Ambulance Bay. Chief McCusker noted that if there decision is made to move the NAS facility to another location, this would also benefit the Highway Department that now shares part of the Town Garage with NAS. Moving NAS elsewhere would free up additional inside storage space for the Town Highway fleet. Board member Petty said constructing a new NAS facility might eventually become essential should NAS call volume continue to expand in future years. However, the anticipated cost, which might be several million dollars, and the impact on local taxpayers would be great deterrents on any such plans.

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 was adjourned at 1:49 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

These minutes are subject to approval at the next subcommittee meeting.