

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT**  
**SELECT BOARD REGULAR MEETING**  
**Minutes of December 12, 2023**

- 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, Acting Clerk Kenneth McCann, Andrew Bachand (Kittell Branagan & Sargent), Derek Hungerford (Kittell Branagan & Sargent), Kaitlyn Keating (Northfield Community Development Network), Mary Nadon Scott (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Delane McIlvene (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Dan Anderson (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Bill Clements (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Tim Schwartz (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Carolyn Stevens (Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force), Nancy Peck, Gerard LaVarnway, Erin Hicks-Tibbles, Don Doyon, and Elroy Hill.

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

- II. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE.** Those present were asked to join the Select Board members in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

- III. SET/ADJUST AGENDA.** Manager Schulz said members of the Northfield Community Development Network (NCDN) had asked to be put on tonight's agenda to present an American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds request. However, they have asked that this matter be delayed to another meeting in light of new developments.

**IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):**

- a. Andrew Bachand CPA and Derek Hungerford CPA, Kittell Branagan & Sargent: FY 2022/2023 Financial Audit Reports.** Mr. Bachand is a KBS Managing Partner and Mr. Hungerford serves as manager. Mr. Hungerford said the audit produced an unmodified opinion, also known as a "clean" opinion, which in auditing terms means "the auditor concludes that the financial statements of a given entity are presented fairly, in all material respects, in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles." Mr. Hungerford said a single audit had to be conducted for this fiscal year as more than \$750,000 in federal funds had been expended for the South Main Street Stormwater Mitigation and CSO Elimination project. The single audit also had an unmodified opinion. When conducting the audit, Mr. Hungerford looked to make sure that any state and/or grant funds received during this fiscal year were expended appropriately. He found no problems whatsoever with the grant dispersal process. In addition, all invoice payments followed established internal controls. Mr. Hungerford stated that in his experience, Northfield's Financial Director, Laurie Baroffio, is amongst the most efficient and effective that they deal with when reviewing municipal financial statements. Her Accounting Department staff members are also knowledgeable and helpful throughout the auditing process. Mr. Hungerford then briefly touched on highlighted financial reports, which included the use of ARPA funds during the past fiscal year. He noted that such funds must be committed by the end of 2024 and fully disbursed within two (2) years afterwards. Chair Maxwell said the Select Board members are well aware of these deadlines and working diligently to meet them. Board member Morse said the Select Board members are also aware of Ms. Baroffio's outstanding attention to detail and other achievements. Board member Shernock concurred that the Select Board members do depend on Ms. Baroffio to explain the most obtuse and confusing budgetary matters in simple terms. Mr. Barchand said one of Ms. Baroffio's strengths is that she stays in contact with the auditors throughout the year so no problems can develop between audits. The financial statements produced are good all year round. Board member Stevens thanked Mr. Hungerford and Mr. Barchand for the positive report and he also thanked Ms. Baroffio for all her efforts. Chair Maxwell also thanked all those involved in producing this clean audit and looks forward to another positive report next year. Ms. Baroffio will pass on the compliments to her staff.

- b. Mary Nadon Scott: Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force update.** Ms. Scott wanted to provide the Select Board members with an update on the task force's activities in recent weeks. She said one project they had been pursuing was to collect additional information about walking routes to and from the public schools. For this, they have spoken to students, teachers, school administrators (including School Superintendent Matthew Fedders), etc. in order to get a complete picture of the situation. Also contacted was Mike Gonneville, who organized the group walk that originates on the Norwich University (NU) campus and travels along Main Street and Vine Street before reaching Northfield Elementary School on Cross Street. Ms. Scott said the task force members are also working with Economic Development Director Tom Davis on creating a survey regarding walkable school routes that will be distributed early in the new year. This survey is now in draft form but should be finalized in the next few weeks. There also has been interaction with parents who drop their kids off by car in the morning and then collect them in the afternoon. There also are plans to include NU students in the process as many of them live in the downtown area and walk to campus on a regular basis. Ms. Scott then thanked Manager Schulz for providing copies of the recently completed sidewalk survey that evaluates and ranks the condition of all the sidewalks in the community. She noted that of the ten (10) worst sidewalks listed, five (5) are located on popular school walking routes. Ms. Scott and other task force members plan to provide the Select Board members with additional updates in the new year, which will include new information about their ongoing outreach efforts. Board member Morse said the survey would be very helpful as the Select Board members try to develop a priority list for the sidewalk work to be done next year. The current plan is to use \$100,000 in ARPA funds to address the worst sidewalk problems as soon as possible. Ms. Scott said the intention is to get widespread participation in the survey. Board member Shernock was pleased to see the draft version of the survey as it covers a number of very important concerns for Northfield pedestrians of all ages. Board member Stevens then thanked Ms. Scott and the task force members for devoting their time and labor to this very important matter. Board member Petty hoped that seasonal variations would be reflected in the survey results. For example, there are some children who are driven to school during the winter months but will choose to walk to school in the spring and autumn months when the sidewalks are not covered with snow, ice, etc. Task force member Bill Clements said surveys from other communities, including those in warmer climates, will be reviewed so climatic factors can be taken into consideration. Board member Petty was also very grateful for all the work Ms. Scott and the other task force members have done to make Northfield a more accessible, more walkable, and safer community for pedestrians. Task force member Dan Anderson said the survey results should be available for review by mid-February 2024. Chair Maxwell thought that timing would be very advantageous in case the Select Board members would like to have a full discussion of sidewalk concerns at the open session (03/04/23) of the next Town Meeting. Manager Schulz then reported that he did get confirmation from Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) officials that they would not require a scoping study beforehand should the municipality decide to upgrade the sidewalk along North Main Street leading to the Tops shopping center. The Select Board members could decide to budget highway funds for this project or the municipality could apply for federal and/or state grant funds for this purpose. He will contact potential project contractors in order to get rough cost estimates. Chair Maxwell thought it might be useful to use ARPA funds as leverage (i.e., local match amount) for any grant applications. Board member Morse thought it would be good to get cost estimates because it is fairly clear this work will be done as soon as possible. Board member Petty believes having cost estimates should help with the process of creating a priority list based on the new sidewalk inventory and other factors. Chair Maxwell then thanked Ms. Scott and the task force members.

## **V. APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

- a. November 28, 2023 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. November 28, 2023 (Regular Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. Board member Petty found some typos that will be corrected. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- c. November 30, 2023 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

- d. **December 5, 2023 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

## **VI. APPROVAL OF BILLS**

- a. **Approval of Warrant #11-24.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve Warrant #11-24 in the amount of \$1,997,990.63. It was noted that of the total warrant amount, \$1,150,500 represented property taxes collected by the municipality and then forwarded to the Paine Mountain School District. An additional \$204,597 was spent on purchasing electric power for the Northfield Electric Department (NED) to be resold later to its customers. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **Approval of Biweekly Payroll through November 26, 2023.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the biweekly payroll in the amount of \$119,818.26. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

## **VII. SELECT BOARD**

- a. **Main Street Waterline and Cheney Farm Tank Replacement Project.** Manager Schulz said at the last regular meeting (11/28/23), the Select Board members were informed by project engineer Naomi Johnson from the Dufresne Group regarding the great need for this project and the funding mechanisms now available. That includes a state revolving loan program application that the Select Board members are now being asked to approve and sign. The project total amount is estimated at \$7,230,000 and the loan application would provide these funds in the form of a forty (40) year loan with a zero percent (0%) interest rate. Ms. Johnson also explained that there are other subsidy programs, include one devoted to lead pipe replacement, that eventually could cover about half of the project costs. There is a requirement that the municipality hold a bond vote prior to May 1, 2023 in order to receive this funding. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Petty, to approve and sign the state revolving loan program application. Board member Shernock asked what was the timeline for this project. Manager Schulz said Ms. Johnson recommends having the work done next year if possible as this project is now on the state's priority list. There is no obligation to commit to the project until the work contract is signed. It was noted that the waterlines and storage tanks are over one hundred (100) years old and desperately need to be replaced as soon as possible. Chair Maxwell said it appears that the municipality must take a number of initial steps before the state commits to provide its share of funding. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Fund Requests.** Manager Schulz said the Select Board members have been provided with an updated summary of local ARPA funds. The original amount Northfield has received from the federal government (\$1,950,055.26) has been supplemented by \$62,030.43 in interest earnings, making a grand total of \$2,012,085.69. Of this amount, there has been \$329,451.50 in total expenditures to date leaving an undesignated balance of \$1,459,534.19. In addition, there were two (2) new ARPA fund requests received since the last meeting. The NCDN is requesting \$66,450 in order to create a new walking trail from the NU campus to the downtown area by way of Freight Yard Way. The other request is from the Brown Public Library (BPL) Board of Trustees and requests \$15,050 in ARPA funds in order to update the kitchen adjacent to the Community Room. Board member Morse said there also was a communication from Sara Nevin asking that the Select Board members consider designating an unspecified amount of ARPA funds in order to install "a single streetlight each mile of the unpaved roads in Northfield." Manager Schulz said that request is in rough draft form and more information, including cost estimates, needs to be included before it can be considered a formal ARPA funds request. Chair Maxwell said at the last meeting, the Select Board members decided on a priority list of six (6) items: sidewalks improvements, emergency generators, Freight Yard Way waterline upgrade, a community garden, Senior Center expansion, and North Main Street pedestrian improvements. Board member Petty would like to fold the North Main Street pedestrian improvements into the general category of sidewalk improvements and replace it with Town Common rehabilitation. There was no objection.

Regarding the new request for BBL kitchen improvements, Board member Morse thought this was a very thorough application with detailed cost estimates. Board member Shernock thought there might be some cost savings if more than one appliance was purchased from one supplier (i.e., “bundling”). Board member Petty believes since the requested amount is so small and the application seems so worthy, perhaps the Select Board members could approve it at this time. This is an important community asset and an upgrade certainly is needed. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Petty, to approve the request from the BPL Board of Trustees for \$15,050 in ARPA funds for the purpose of upgrading the kitchen adjacent to the Community Room. Board member Shernock thought grant funds could be sought in order to renovate the Community Room itself. Chair Maxwell agreed that this was a well-written report for a limited amount of money. **Motion passed 5-0-0.** Manager Schulz will inform by letter the BPL Board of Trustees of this decision.

Manager Schulz said he has submitted a grant application to Vermont Homeland Security for funds to purchase emergency generators for the Fire Station, Police Station, and Municipal Building. Based on cost estimated he has received, the cost of all three (3) generators would be between \$75,000 and \$80,000. There should be an announcement in February 2024 regarding whether the grant application was successful.

At the previous meeting, the Select Board members decided by consensus to reject the request from Vershire Development for \$200,000 in ARPA funds in order to fund renovations at the Rustic Restaurant and Gould Mansion. Chair Maxwell now feels there should have been a formal motion to that effect. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to deny the application from Vershire Development for \$200,000 in ARPA funds. It was noted that the main reasons for rejecting this application was that this project would only indirectly benefit the Northfield community and would mainly benefit a for-profit business. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

Chair Maxwell believes the Select Board members should in future follow this precedent of holding a formal vote whenever an ARPA funds request is either approved or denied. Board member Shernock felt that before deciding whether or not to approve the \$15,000 ARPA funds request for a community garden, there should be a decision regarding who would manage the garden and make operational decisions. Manager Schulz agreed that if the ARPA funds were allocated for this purpose, such policies would need to be established before the garden was put into operation. Board member Morse has connections with the Northfield Farmers Market and he will make inquiries about the proper method of creating guidelines, etc. Chair Maxwell noted that there are community gardens in many Vermont communities so there probably is no need to reinvent the wheel on this. It is likely these community garden guidelines can be researched online and revised for the situation here in Northfield.

Board member Shernock would like more information regarding the ARPA funds request from Bob Keeley for an internet-based program that would create municipal infrastructure inventories while allowing residents to directly communication with local officials. Chair Maxwell also would like more information on this to determine whether or not this would be beneficial to Northfield. It was noted that there were no cost estimates included with this application. Chair Maxwell suggested that perhaps Manager Schulz could outreach to Mr. Keeley for more information.

Board member Petty noted that during the recent budget meetings there have been a number of suggestions to supplement certain budgets with ARPA funds. She thinks that should be reflected in the most recent list of proposed ARPA-funded projects. Chair Maxwell said he would prefer that ongoing concerns, such as funding special events at the municipal pool, should be part of the regular budget process rather than rely on a one-time influx of ARPA funds. Chair Maxwell said he does feel the Select Board does appear to be moving in the right direction regarding the dispersal of ARPA funds for worthy community projects.

Kaitlyn Keating, who serves as NCDN Chair, explained that their ARPA request was being withdrawn for the time being because one of the property owners along the proposed trail site had added some new conditions for public access. The NCDN membership would like to review this matter further, which might include additional negotiations with the property owner. When any remaining issues have been resolved, the request for ARPA funds might be revisited at a later date.

- c. **Authorize Select Board Chair to Review and Approve Future Payroll and Operating Expenses through December 26, 2023.** Manager Schulz noted that since the Select Board members have decided to cancel their regular meeting scheduled for December 26, 2023, they now need to authorize Chair Maxwell to review and approve future payroll and operating expenses through that date in accordance with 24 V.S.A. §961(b). Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Shernock, to provide Chair Maxwell with this authorization. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

#### **VIII. TOWN MANAGER'S REPORT**

- a. **Planning Commission Revision of Local Zoning Bylaws.** Manager Schulz noted that the Planning Commission (PC) held their Public Hearing on proposed revisions to the local zoning bylaws on Wednesday, December 6, 2023. The PC members will be holding a special meeting tomorrow night (12/13/23) to discuss the public comment provided at the public hearing and whether to make any substantial changes to the draft document. Should the PC members decide to accept the current draft document without any substantive changes, it will be forwarded to the Select Board members so that they can hold their own public hearing(s) on the draft document. Should the Select Board members decide to make their own substantive changes to the document, it would be returned to the PC members so they can hold an additional public hearing. Manager Schulz noted that significant changes have been made since the PC members started this process almost two (2) years ago and he will prepare a summary of those changes for the Select Board members in preparation for the upcoming public hearing(s). He added that most of these changes are intended to keep the local zoning bylaws compliant with changes in state law since the zoning bylaw document now in effect was approved over five (5) years ago. Manager Schulz stated that the consultant the PC members hired for the revision process (JuliBeth Hinds) also did a significant reorganization of the local zoning bylaws document in order to eliminate redundant language, etc. Board member Morse is disappointed that the changes made in the document were not tracked in the normal manner. He would have much preferred to see this over a mere summary of changes. Board member Morse understands that the current zoning bylaws document underwent significant reorganization at the beginning of the process but there is no reason why subsequent changes couldn't be tracked. Manager Schulz said he has had this conversation with the Zoning Administrator (Mitch Osiecki) and the PC Chair (Stephen Fitzhugh). Chair Maxwell said there also have been concerns expressed by residents who would like to know all the proposed changes that have been made in the document. Manager Schulz said he will reach out to Ms. Hinds to get this done. Board member Morse has some real concerns about some of the changes being proposed, such as reducing the minimum lot size requirements in the lower density parts of the community. Chair Maxwell would like to have a tracked document in hand before the Select Board members hold their public hearing(s). Board member Morse said even if this requires additional payments to the consultant, he will consider that money well spent.
- b. **Smart Meters.** Manager Schulz said that in preparation for the planned installation of smart meters next year, a private contractor (Alclara) will be in town for several hours this Thursday (12/14/23) to perform a radio communications survey for the Northfield Water and Electric Departments. Erin Hicks-Tibbles noted that smart meters do allow utility customers to better track their energy usage on an hourly basis.

#### **IX. BOARD MEMBERS' COMMENTS, CONCERNS, QUESTIONS**

- a. **Economic Development Reserve Account.** In the Select Board packets was an updated balance sheet for the Economic Development Reserve Account established in 2014 when Northfield voters authorized the appropriation of \$100,000 for this purpose. Board member Shernock noted that \$17,000 from this account had been expended to the Northfield Community Revolving Loan Fund in FY 2020/2021. She asked if this program was still in operation. Manager Schulz said this fund was set up in order to help local businesses with loans that would help them expand their operations, renovate their business locations, etc. Unfortunately, there were no qualified applicants for the loan program so those funds can be reallocated elsewhere. There had been some concerns about the interest rate the municipality would be charging and the pandemic also put a halt to many previously planned business expansions.

- b. Regional Forum on Youth Opportunity.** Board member Petty said this Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) forum would be held in the cafeteria of the Northfield Middle & High School on Tuesday, January 9, 2024 starting at 5:30 p.m. Free pizza, desserts, and drinks will be provided. Such forums will be taking place across the state in order to gather feedback “on a number of topics including education, job training, community connection, youth voice, mentoring, and more.” Board member Petty hopes that anyone looking to improve opportunities for local youth will be able to attend this meeting.
- c. Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC) Grant Implementation Committee update.** Board member Petty, who is a member of this committee, said that a second release of VOREC state grant funds will be awarded soon. As the cost of materials for the projects the VOREC committee were pursuing (i.e., signage, kiosks, etc.) was higher than anticipated, the committee members decided to apply for an additional \$69,000 in VOREC grant funds. The application deadline is later this week (12/15/23) and since no local match funds are required, no Select Board action is needed. Chair Maxwell did receive a request to sign a letter of support for this grant application and will provide this before the application deadline. There were no objections from the other Select Board members. Manager Schulz noted that the grant application form asked that this letter of support come from an elected official and that is why he didn’t sign it himself.
- d. Northfield Municipal Budget FY 2024/2025.** Chair Maxwell said the next budget meeting will be held this coming Thursday night (12/14/23). The budgets of the Northfield Fire Department (NFD) and Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS) will be on the meeting agenda as the Select Board members requested additional information when these budgets were initially discussed. Manager Schulz said that there had been unresolved questions about NFD capital equipment costs and NAS personnel costs and revenue that required additional research.

**X. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED)**

- a. Erin Hicks-Tibbles: Possible ARPA Fund Projects.** Ms. Hicks-Tibbles doesn’t have a formal application at this time but thought that some ARPA funds should be allocated to creating a new municipal position of housing liaison who could work with individuals having sheltering problems while also exploring grant opportunities. Another possible use of ARPA funds would be to create a community aid fund that could help residents in need pay their utility bills, rent, etc. Ms. Hicks-Tibbles said CERV does provide this type of assistance but only to a limited extent. Chair Maxwell believes Economic Development Director Tom Davis already has local housing issues and potential grant applications as part of his normal work activities. Chair Maxwell also would not like to create a local assistance program that might overlap with the services CERV already provides. Carolyn Stevens serves on the CERV Board and she confirmed that CERV does provide Northfield residents with funds for utility bills and other emergency expenses. There usually are more such requests than CERV funds available and there is a \$500 limit on these emergency funds provided to an individual during a calendar year. CERV cannot assist with rent payments as that would deplete its resources too quickly. Ms. Stevens noted that at the current time, the CERV volunteers are focusing most of their attention on its clothing and food shelves. Ms. Hicks-Tibbles felt the new housing liaison position would complement the efforts Mr. Davis has been undertaking in regard to local affordable housing concerns. In addition, given the gaps in services CERV can provide given its limited resources, perhaps the establishment of another civic organization with similar goals but better resources would benefit the community. Chair Maxwell believes CERV has a strong organization and he would rather work with them rather than create a new organization from scratch. Ms. Stevens suggested that AmeriCorps might provide the funding and/or personnel for a local housing liaison.

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

The Board adjourned at 9:35 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 January 9, 2024.