

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of December 14, 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, Laurie Baroffio (Finance Director), Peter J. DeMasi (Fire Chief), Troy Seckington (Northfield Fire Department), Danielle Farnum (Ambulance Service), Don Doyon, and Elroy Hill.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

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

III. DISCUSSION

a. Proposed FY 2024/2025 Town Budget

- 1. Northfield Fire Department (NFD).** Chief DeMasi said at the last meeting when the proposed NFD budget was discussed (11/30/23), there was a question about the air compressor (i.e., "cascade system") located at the Fire Station that is used to refill the air pacs. The concern was that this piece of equipment and its eventual replacement was not included in the NFD Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget. Chief DeMasi subsequently looked into getting quotes for the replacement cost of the air compressor and the amount he received was \$53,105.73. Chair Maxwell asked what the expected life span of a new compressor would be. Chief DeMasi said the current one was purchased in 2000 and now has 205 hours of usage. He discussed this piece of equipment with Finance Director Baroffio earlier today and their assumption is that the current compressor should provide another fifteen (15) years of service. Ms. Baroffio said in order to finance its replacement, the municipality should budget \$3,600 each year in the NFD CEP for the next fifteen (15) years. Chief DeMasi added that in addition to this compressor, which is used at the Fire Station, there is a smaller air compressor unit installed on one of the fire trucks that can be used to refill air pacs in the field. Board member Morse felt this is an important piece of equipment for the NFD and its eventual replacement should be included in the NFD CEP budget.

Chief DeMasi said there also were some questions regarding the actual cost of replacing the 1999 brush truck, which was purchased as a used vehicle in 2001. Its replacement is scheduled for FY 2027/2028 and the estimated cost for replacing the whole vehicle is \$70,000. Chief DeMasi noted after the vehicle is purchased, it probably would cost an additional \$20,000 to install new lighting, lettering, etc. Ms. Baroffio noted that if we are now projecting the total cost of replacement at about \$90,000, there would be the need to increase the annual allocation from \$2,500 to \$15,250. If these new funds were added to the current account balance of \$40,000, there should be enough funds on hand to cover half of the purchase price. It was noted that the normal practice in recent years has been to budget for half of the capital equipment replacement cost and borrow the remaining funds. Chief DeMasi noted that the brush truck's bed is in bad condition at this time and he would like to have a new truck bed installed in the next fiscal year. At this time, the condition of the truck results in spillage from the vehicle's water tank while on route to fires. He added that this vehicle is mainly used to combat brush fires but is also used to provide assistance to the larger fire trucks at structure fires or to assist neighboring fire departments when a Mutual Aid request is made. Board member Petty asked how many brush fires the truck responds to each year. Chief DeMasi said about ten (10). Manager Schulz said he was reluctant to have a new truck bed installed if the entire vehicle is scheduled for replacement in about five (5) years. Chair Maxwell asked if there was a temporary fix for the truck bed problem. Chief DeMasi said he has been looking into installing a sheet of polymat but he is unsure if that will fix the problem. He added that any new vehicle bed would be aluminum (not steel) so the problem of the truck bed rotting over time would not occur again. Ms. Baroffio said if the decision is made to replace the whole vehicle in the next fiscal year, an additional \$9,000 would have to be added to the NFD CEP account in order to have half the replacement cost on hand. The remaining funds would be borrowed. Board member Petty asked what the cost of a new truck bed would be. Chief DeMasi said about \$12,000. Chair Maxwell said the decision whether to purchase a new brush truck next year or to have a new truck bed installed first (and later replace the whole vehicle) will require some "cogitation."

Chief DeMasi said that another issue discussed was the radio replacement account in the NFD Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget. There are six (6) radios installed in NFD vehicles (\$8,000 each replacement cost) and about twenty-three (23) portable radios, which cost about \$850 to replace. Ms. Baroffio said her suggestion at the time was to budget \$12,000 in the next fiscal year budget for replacement of the vehicle-installed radios. The \$5,616 current balance in the CIP account will be allocated for portable radio replacement with an additional \$2,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. In future, the NFD Radio Replacement CIP account will be split into separate accounts for vehicle radios and portable radios. Board member Petty noted that there also had been some discussion of raising the NFD operations and maintenance (O&M) budget in order to increase the protective equipment line item from \$8,000 to \$10,000. Chief DeMasi had noted that it costs about \$5,000 to fully gear an NFD firefighter with a fire-resistant jacket, pants, helmet, boots, etc. Ms. Baroffio had assumed there had been no Select Board objection to this request, which would allow two (2) new protective equipment sets to be purchased in the next fiscal year. There still was no objection to this plan.

On the matter of air pac replacement, Ms. Baroffio said there had been a suggestion to increase the NFD CEP account for this from \$9,000 to \$13,000 in the next fiscal year. This would allow for budgeting the scheduled replacement of the sixteen (16) air pacs after eleven (11) years of service. There had been another request to use \$20,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to hasten the replacement process. Board member Stevens said the question was whether to use ARPA funds to replace all the air pacs at one time or to use the CEP budget to replace them in stages. Board member Petty then asked about the NFD aerial ladder truck, which is scheduled for replacement in FY 2027/2028. The estimated cost of purchasing a good used unit is estimated at \$500,000 and the current balance in this CEP account is \$223,213 with \$11,500 to be added in intervening fiscal years. Ms. Baroffio said we have no way of knowing how much the replacement vehicle will cost but we are now budgeting based on the assumption that a \$500,000 figure is fairly accurate. That should provide about half of the estimated replacement cost by FY 2027/2028 and the remaining funds would be borrowed, which is the standard practice with major capital equipment purchases. Therefore, Ms. Baroffio saw no need to alter this CEP account at this time but this could be revisited next year should we get a better picture of actual replacement costs.

In regard to the scheduled replacements of the two (2) NFD pumper trucks in FY 2028/2029 and FY 2038/2039, Manager Schulz said Chief DeMasi reported that their estimated replacement costs seem to have gone up considerably in recent years. There was some discussion about perhaps increasing the annual allocations to these accounts. The 2007 pumper truck, which would be replaced first, would see its annual allocation increase from \$14,000 to \$33,000. The 2017 pumper truck account would see an annual increase from \$13,000 to \$24,000. Ms. Baroffio said the amount of time until the scheduled replacements is the reason for the discrepancy in these increases. She added that when the time for the purchase arose, the Select Board members might then decide to borrow more than half of the purchase price due to the great increases in capital equipment costs. Chair Maxwell noted that Northfield's municipal debt load currently is considered very good based on the metrics usually used for this determination. Manager Schulz concurred that our debt load is very reasonable compared to that of other Vermont municipalities. Board member Shernock said the recent outside auditor report did confirm this. Board member Stevens would like to keep it that way if possible. Ms. Baroffio asked if there was a Select Board consensus to increase the annual allocation for the 2007 pumper truck replacement fund as indicated above. Chair Maxwell said there didn't appear to be this consensus at this time. Board member Morse felt the need to keep any local tax increase under ten percent (10%). Manager Schulz said there will be an analysis about how the proposed budget revisions to date would affect the local tax rates. Chair Maxwell agreed that these matters need to be discussed again before the formal approval of the proposed FY 2024/2025 municipal budget. He then thanked Chief DeMasi for the additional NFD budget information provided tonight.

- 2. Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS).** Manager Schulz said at the previous meeting when the proposed NAS budget for the next fiscal year was discussed (12/07/23), the Select Board members had requested additional information on a number of budget issues. This included the level of compensation for NAS part-time EMTs compared to that provided by other regional ambulance services, whether the proposed per capita rate to be charged Roxbury and West Berlin for NAS coverage was sufficient, and whether the projected revenue to be realized by having paid staff available on weekend afternoons for non-emergency transports justified the extra personnel expenses. Manager Schulz said that due to the hourly wage increases that have been included in recent NAS O&M budgets, he believes that the compensation provided our EMTs is neither the highest nor the lowest regionally. Because of this, NAS Chief Megan McCusker did not request an increase in the basic hourly wage for the next fiscal year. Board member Petty asked if Manager Schulz had data to support this view. Manager Schulz said that he did and he will forward this to the Select Board members. Chair Maxwell would like to see this documentation. He had gained the impression from Chief McCusker that NAS hourly pay was closer to the bottom than the top in terms of the average compensation provided by regional ambulance services.

As for the per capita rate charged Roxbury and West Berlin for NAS emergency coverage, Manager Schulz said that amount currently is planned to increase from \$32 to \$35 in the next fiscal year. However, it has been noted that even the new amount is lower than what some Vermont ambulance services charge for providing coverage for neighboring communities. For example, the Town of Berlin pays a \$66 per capita charge to Barre Town Ambulance for covering the rest of the community. In addition, the Town of Williamstown just signed a contract with Barre Town Ambulance that has a first-year per capita rate of \$75. Manager Schulz added that Montpelier Ambulance and White River Ambulance also charge significantly higher per capita charges for their coverage areas. He noted there were some significant differences between NAS and the aforementioned ambulance services, which usually have several full-time staff members. By contrast, Chief McCusker is the only full-time NAS employee. Board member Shernock feels the proposed rate increase to \$35 seems to be rather low compared to what these other ambulance services charge. Chair Maxwell said we don't want to raise the per capita rate so high as to bankrupt Roxbury but at the same time we don't want Northfield taxpayers subsidizing NAS coverage for non-residents. He then asked about how the current NAS fee schedule was developed. For example, how was it determined that non-emergency transports for Northfield residents should cost \$575. Manager Schulz said NAS fees are reviewed and adjusted periodically based upon the recommendation of the current NAS Chief. These fees reflect what other ambulance services charge for similar services and also are adjusted to account for increases in the costs of certain medical supplies, etc. Manager Schulz noted that the NAS fees now collected do cover NAS O&M expenses, which he thought was quite good for a government service. Therefore, Manager Schulz felt the current fee schedule appears to be overall appropriate at this time. Chair Maxwell said it might be prudent to increase the per capita rate over a three (3) year period in order to not overburden the Town of Roxbury with the additional expense. Board member Morse feels we should also look at the number of emergency responses to Roxbury that NAS undertakes on an annual basis. That could help determine what the appropriate per capita rate should be based on actual additional expenses. Manager Schulz noted that by providing emergency coverage to Roxbury and West Berlin, NAS also receives the fees generated by callout, which are billed to the patient or the patient's insurance. Chair Maxwell said the NAS crew, equipment, and vehicle fleet are top notch and this exceptional service should be acknowledged when the per capita rate is set. Manager Schulz noted that not having a full-time staffed ambulance service does save this community a considerable amount of money. He felt the other ambulance services with full-time staff might feel the need to charge higher per capita rates to non-residents in order to ease the burden on their own taxpayers. Manager Schulz has spoken to Roxbury officials and they realize that they are getting a good deal from contracting for NAS emergency coverage. However, they also emphasized that Roxbury is a small town with a limited budget so it cannot pay an exorbitant amount. Chair Maxwell said once the additional documentation the Select Board members have requested has been received, every effort will be made to determine an equitable rate.

Board member Petty then asked about the standby paid staff for non-emergency transfers. Ms. Baroffio said that based on the previous discussion of this proposal, she has developed the cost totals for two (2) weekday afternoons with two (2) EMTs working for five (5) years each, or a total of ten (10) paid standby hours per week. The annual cost of this would be \$23,260 starting in the next fiscal year. Chair Maxwell said the NAS proposed budget will be discussed again when the requested information related to the per capita charge and other matters has been provided.

- 3. Town Budget Recap.** Manager Schulz then went through a number of budget items that had been changed or left unresolved at earlier budget meetings. In the Highway CIP budget, there was a suggestion to increase the road paving budget from \$200,000 to \$230,000 in the next fiscal year. This increase was based in part on initial paving quotes for the paving projects envisioned for next year. In addition, the use of \$100,000 in ARPA funds is proposed for the sidewalks budget. The recently completed sidewalks survey will be used to create a priority list of sidewalk projects for the next fiscal year. Chair Maxwell noted regarding the CIP account for bridge maintenance/replacement, there was a suggestion to use \$110,000 in ARPA funds to cover any shortfall in the bridge replacement project for the Jerry Bridge, which is located off Vermont Route 12 just south of Lovers Lane. The Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) has inspected the bridge and found it in need of replacement as soon as possible. Manager Schulz said the municipality brought in engineers who estimated the cost of bridge replacement at \$220,000. The original plan was to budget this amount over two (2) fiscal years with the bridge replacement occurring in FY 2025/2026. Manager Schulz is unsure whether VTrans will wait that long for the matter to be addressed. Board member Stevens thought that since this bridge is located on a one-house road and doesn't see much traffic, there may be less expensive alternatives available. He earlier suggested using a repurposed flatbed railway car to span the gap. He now suggested the purchase of a Bailey Bridge, which would be a prefabricated steel structure that comes in ten (10) foot panels. These bridges were originally developed by the US Army during World War II to serve as temporary bridges in war zones but they also can serve as permanent peacetime structures. There are several manufacturers of Bailey Bridges and this might cut the cost of this project by at least half. Board member Stevens will research the cost estimates for a sixty (60) foot structure to replace the current Jerry Bridge. Manager Schulz will check with VTrans to see if that would be in this case an acceptable alternative to standard bridge construction. Board member Morse was not entirely sure if such a bridge could withstand the rigors of a Vermont winter. However, if this proves to be the case this might be a good solution for this low traffic road provided that the maximum weight amount can accommodate emergency vehicles, home heating delivery trucks, etc. Board member Shernock noted that covered bridges were the prefabricated bridges of the nineteenth century so having a twenty-first century prefabricated steel bridge installed is an interesting possibility. Chair Maxwell agreed the concept is good. As for the use of ARPA funds, Board member Petty didn't know if paying for the replacement of a bridge on a one-house road would be appropriate. Board member Shernock agreed, noting that in the community outreach meetings she helped organize, there was a strong desire to only use ARPA funds for projects that would benefit a broad section of the community. If ARPA funds are used for bridge maintenance/replacement, Board member Shernock preferred that this only be for bridges used to a greater extent by the general public such as the footbridge, Main Street Bridge, etc. Board member Petty noted that it could be argued that by helping to reduce the local tax rate, the use of ARPA funds for this project could be said to benefit a large number of Northfield residents, i.e. those paying property taxes. Ms. Baroffio reviewed this matter earlier today and now feels that the use of prior use surplus funds probably would be more appropriate for this project than ARPA funds.

As for the use of ARPA funds for sidewalk projects, Board member Morse said new sidewalk usually has a fifty (50) year lifespan so this would have a lasting and positive impact on the Northfield community. Manager Schulz said the sidewalk inventory showed a surprising amount of poorly rated sidewalk throughout the downtown area. Board member Petty asked if there was any thought of eliminating some sidewalk when the other side of the road has very good sidewalk installed. It was noted that this happened with sections of Central Street after new sidewalk was installed on the west side of the street.

Chair Maxwell said it would be most desirable to replace every foot of bad sidewalk in this town but that might not be financially feasible. If there is one good sidewalk on one side of every major thoroughfare, that would be a good start. Board member Petty thought the sidewalk priority list should focus on where the work is most needed to promote pedestrian safety. There are some narrow streets near the public schools that really don't need sidewalks but there should be at least one safe walking path for students who want to walk to school. Board member Petty felt there should be similar safe paths to the grocery store, bank, and other essential services. Chair Maxwell said we should have a better understanding of this when the plans for sidewalk work for next year are developed. The sidewalk survey does provide needed information on actual sidewalk conditions and this will be essential for the process. Chair Maxwell still believes it might be necessary to hold a bond vote to generate sufficient funding to address a large number of problem sidewalks at the same time. This is a major capital expenditure. He noted that the municipality did hold bond votes to finance the extensive roadwork done on Union Brook Road and Cox Brook Road and the results of these projects were very good and long lasting.

Turning to the Municipal Pool CIP budget, Manager Schulz said there had been a suggestion to increase the amount allocated for skimmer replacement in the next fiscal year. This account now has a \$31,139 balance and Pool Director Shannon Palone reported that a number of the skimmers are in bad condition and need to be replaced before the pool reopens next summer. There was no objection to adding another \$2,500 to this account in the next fiscal year. Manager Schulz said there had been another suggestion to create a new O&M line item in order to fund special events at the pool that would help promote the facility and perhaps increase patronage. This amount could be between \$1,200 and \$1,500. Board member Stevens said there had been another suggestion to use ARPA funds to provide free family passes and/or swimming lessons. Manager Schulz noted that through a grant program last year that Economic Development Director Tom Davis pursued, about twenty-five (25) income eligible families were provided pool passes. Board member Stevens suggested setting aside \$3,000 in the next Municipal Pool budget to subsidize the purchase of pool passes and swimming lessons for disadvantaged residents. Ms. Baroffio said this amount of ARPA funds could be set aside for this purpose and the projected pool revenue be decreased by the same amount. There was no objection to this suggestion.

Manager Schulz then turned to some remaining questions about municipal revenue in the next fiscal year. For example, Board member Morse had asked whether the zoning permit fee (\pm \$4,800) Norwich University would pay for its new building would be submitted before or after the next fiscal year begins on July 1, 2024. If it was after, those funds should be added to the projected zoning permit fee revenue for FY 2024/2025. Manager Schulz has learned that the fee will be paid this spring so the projected revenue amount will not need to be adjusted. In addition, there was a discussion about ending the current practice of using ARPA funds to cover the full salary, benefits, etc. of the full-time Economic Development Director (EDD) position. Chair Maxwell had suggested phasing out the use of ARPA over the next three (3) years. This would mean that one-third of the EDD position expense (\$31,000) would be added to the Economic Development O&M budget in the next fiscal year. The following fiscal year this would be increased to two-thirds and there would be no use of ARPA funds in the following fiscal year. Ms. Baroffio said this change also will be reflected in the budget page showing the transfer of ARPA funds into various municipal budgets.

In the Northfield Police Department (NPD) CEP budget, Board member Petty asked if a new account should be set up for the eventual replacement of the NPD fingerprint machine. Manager Schulz said that NPD Chief Pierre Gomez did not feel that was necessary at this time. Ms. Baroffio noted that the current machine was donated by the State of Vermont and should be operational for several years.

Board member Morse asked about how much has been added to the FY 2024/2025 municipal budget due to the revisions suggested to date. Manager Schulz said he and Ms. Baroffio reviewed the figures and estimated the increase at about \$160,000. Chair Maxwell said there still are some unanswered questions about certain budgetary matters. A summary sheet with narrative of these changes and their impact on the local property tax rate, etc., will be prepared for the next budget meeting.

Board member Morse said the Town Budget & Financial Review Subcommittee (Board members Maxwell and Morse) met with management on November 15, 2023, to review the initial draft of the budget. The subcommittee members made every effort to keep any local tax increase under ten percent (10%) but those efforts seem to be undermined by the recent budget revisions that were based in part on new information that had not been provided to the subcommittee members. Chair Maxwell thought it was inevitable that the direct interactions between the Select Board members and the departments heads during budget meetings does yield new information when specific budget items are discussed. He felt developing the municipal budget for voter approval each year was the most important function for a Select Board member. It is not surprising that the initial budget proposed by management and recommended by the subcommittee will undergo considerable revision as it proceeds through the review process. Due to the holiday season and previous Select Board member commitments, the next budget meeting will be held Thursday, January 4, 2024 at 6:00 p.m. in the Community Room.

IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED).

- a. Elroy Hill: Bridge Maintenance/Replacement Funding.** Mr. Hill strongly supports the use of ARPA funds to fund bridge projects as a means of keeping the local property tax rate as low as possible. He noted that there have been recent media reports that the State of Vermont will be increasing the education tax rate for the next fiscal year much higher than originally anticipated. Mr. Hill felt that it would be a true benefit to Northfield taxpayers to thus stabilize the local tax burden. He added that the local municipal bridges do belong to all Northfield residents so he felt this would be an appropriate use of ARPA funds. Chair Maxwell thanked Mr. Hill for his suggestion and it will be taken into consideration when the proposed Highway Department budget is finalized.

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

The Board adjourned at 7:53 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.