

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT  
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING  
Minutes of December 20, 2022**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Julie H. Goodrich, Charles Morse, Lydia Petty, and John Stevens. Also present were Manager Jeff Schulz, Laurie Baroffio (Finance Director), Peter J. DeMasi (Fire Chief), John Helfant (Police Chief), Lawton Rutter (Ambulance Chief), Lynn Doney (Ambulance Service), Meggan McCusker (Ambulance Service), Carolyn Stevens, 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 2023/2024 Town Budget**

- 1. Northfield Fire Department (NFD).** Manager Schulz said there were not a lot of changes from the current fiscal year's budget. There only will be a 1.3% increase in the NFD Operations & Maintenance (O&M) budget. Compensation for the NFD officers and volunteers is the major part of this budget and this has been level-funded into the next fiscal year. There will be an increase in the "Dispatching" line item as Capital West has increased its charges. NFD Chief Peter J. DeMasi had nothing to add about the O&M budget. In the NFD Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget, the only account is for "Building Improvements." Manager Schulz said since much work has been done at the Fire Station in recent years, such as new windows, better ventilation, an improved heating system, etc., there are no major expenses foreseen in the near future. The current account balance is \$3,554 and an additional \$2,500 will be added in the next and future fiscal year budgets. This will rebuild the account for when additional building renovations are needed. Board member Morse asked should American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) or other funding be used to purchase an emergency generator for the Fire Station, would the same generator be able to power the nearby Police Station as well. Manager Schulz said he has seen a number of grant opportunities that would fund a generator able to power both buildings. Quotes on generators of this size have already been explored. Board member Stevens asked is there was a washing machine that needed to be replaced. Chief DeMasi said they now have a working heavy-duty washing machine in the building but they would like to purchase in future a "firefighter gear extractor" that would be gentler on the materials but also do a better job of removing from gear hazardous chemicals encountered during fire calls. This would not be an immediate purchase. In the NFD Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget, Manager Schulz said the line items would be level-funded into coming years as no major purchases are planned in the next fiscal year. Board member Goodrich noted the original request from Chief DeMasi was to put \$20,000 in the account for aerial truck replacement but the proposed budget from management saw this reduced to \$11,500. Manager Schulz said he and Finance Director Laurie Baroffio reviewed this and thought the lower amount would be sufficient. Chair Maxwell then asked Chief DeMasi about the current state of NFD equipment. Chief DeMasi said it is in overall good shape at this time. There were some minor issues with ladders but this and other minor issues are being addressed. Chair Maxwell asked if the aerial ladder truck's planned replacement in FY 2027-2028 still seemed an accurate projection. Chief DeMasi said it was given how well the truck has been operating recently. There were no other questions about the NFD budget and Chair Maxwell thanked Chief DeMasi for his appearance tonight.

2. **Northfield Police Department (NPD).** Manager Schulz said the NPD O&M budget will see a 11% increase in personnel expenses and benefits. NPD wages have seen a rise due staffing changes and the provisions of the new union contract. Manager Schulz added that NPD Chief John Helfant has done a good job in recent months in keeping administrative and materials/supply costs under control. There will be some increases in these budgets to reflect the higher costs of gasoline and heating fuel. The overall O&M budget will increase 10.9%. Chief Helfant would like to thank the Select Board members and management for agreeing to the salary increases for NPD officers. He noted that the Montpelier Police Department is now looking to increase compensation for its officers. Chief Helfant hopes that the recent "wage war" will be ending soon. He added that the numbers of law enforcement officers in Vermont have dropped dramatically in recent years, which has been fueling movement between agencies. There were 1,170 Vermont law officers six (6) years ago but the number now is around 600, which is a 45% decrease. Chief Helfant doesn't see any near-term growth in this. He hopes that with the increased pay for NPD officers, we will be better able to retain our personnel in coming years. Chief Helfant noted there is a new line item for dispatching services. The Vermont State Police has been providing this as a free service to local law enforcement but that will be ending soon, which will require NPD to contract with Capital West or a similar dispatching company. He doesn't see anything that will prevent this eventuality. Chair Maxwell asked when the State Police will end this free service. Chief Helfant said originally it was to be the end of this calendar year but this has been delayed. He now expects the change by the end of 2023. Board member Petty asked how much advance warning would be provided. Chief Helfant hopes it will be a month or two but nothing is certain. The initial notice that this would be happening was a bit of a surprise. Manager Schulz said \$25,000 has been put in the NPD dispatching line item for the next fiscal year. If the free service does end at the end of 2023, this will cover the second half of the FY 2023-2024 fiscal year. Board member Morse asked what would happen if the free dispatching service ended without warning tomorrow. Chief Helfant said the NPD dispatcher would have to put in additional hours until an agreement could be made with a dispatching service. There are some redundancies built into the current system. In addition, there are rules in place that would prevent the State Police from ending this service without advanced notice. Board member Morse believes we should be prepared in any case. Board member Stevens felt the proposed NPD overtime budget (\$40,000) seemed rather low given actual disbursements over the past couple years. Chief Helfant believes many of the conditions that led to this situation, i.e. having officers on military deployment, officers attending the police academy, etc., will be mostly resolved in the next fiscal year. Manager Schulz agreed that having full staffing should bring the overtime expenses down over time. Chief Helfant noted part of the overtime expenses related to having a full-time office on military deployment have been offset by not paying that officer's salary.

The only NPD CIP account is "Building Improvements," which has a \$6,961 balance with \$2,500 to be added in the next fiscal year. Manager Schulz said the Police Station is in pretty good shape with many improvements done in recent years. Chief Helfant agreed that major renovations are not needed for some time. As for the NPD CEP budget, Manager Schulz said this budget was elevated last year (\$71,220) to purchase a new police cruiser. There is no scheduled vehicle replacement in the coming fiscal year so this amount has been scaled back to \$33,720. Chief Helfant thought the Select Board members would be pleased to know that the 2014 cruiser, which was subject to frequent repair jobs in recent years, was traded in and is no longer in service. Its replacement should arrive in the next few weeks. The other vehicles are in good shape. In fact, the 2018 Explorer is in such good shape that its scheduled replacement in FY 2024-2025 might be delayed by a year or two. Chief Helfant also noted that the body cameras are all in good shape and should last another ten (10) years. Chair Maxwell then thanked Chief Helfant for attending tonight's meeting and providing this valuable information.

- 3. Ambulance Service (NAS).** Manager Schulz said in the NAS O&M budget we are looking at a 6.8% increase in personnel services costs as there will be pay rises for the EMTs. Health insurance costs have been fairly stable for this department. NAS Chief Rutter did request a second full-time employee for the next fiscal year but due to the cost this request was not included in the budget presented by management. Manager Schulz said there is a 9.0% increase in the Materials/Supplies budget mainly due to higher costs for medical supplies. Overall, the NAS O&M budget will increase by 5.5%. Chair Maxwell has questioned whether the NAS budget for gasoline (\$9,500) will be sufficient due to increasing fuel costs over the past year. Manager Schulz based this amount on past actuals but suggested the amount could be raised to \$10,500. Board member Goodrich noted NAS workers compensation costs have been higher than expected over the past couple years; should this budget also be increased? Ms. Baroffio felt these recent budget overages were due to special circumstances that shouldn't repeat in the next fiscal year. Board member Petty asked if there should be a discussion of Chief Rutter's request for a second full-time position. Chief Rutter said this is the third straight year he has made this request. He felt this position was needed in order to provide more consistent shift coverage than can be achieved by relying heavily on part-time EMTs. There also have been some EMTs that have put in so many hours that there is some effort to keep them below the threshold that would require providing benefits. Having the second full-time employee would reduce the workload on several part-time EMTs. Chief Rutter felt this also would reduce NAS reliance on Norwich University (NU) student volunteers, who do help with shift coverage during the school year but tend to disappear when the school year ends or after they graduate. Even with recent wage increases, Chief Rutter does not believe NAS provides competitive pay at this time and this makes it difficult to retain experienced EMTs or attract them from other ambulance services. Manager Schulz said the proposed budget contains a \$1 increase in the hourly wage for EMTs (from \$15 to \$16) and for paramedics (from \$16 to \$17). Chief Rutter said his original request was to increase EMT to \$17 per hour and paramedics to \$19 per hour. He noted the current NAS roster has a mix of qualification levels. Board member Morse would like to see a written proposal that would indicate, among other items, the cost savings in the part-time employee budget should a second full-time employee be hired. Chair Maxwell also would like to see how NAS pay and the department's revenue stream compare to those of other ambulance services in the region. He would like to see how potential NAS rate changes, personnel compensation changes, etc. might affect the long-term stability of the department. Chief Rutter said billable calls have been trending upward in recent years along with total call volume. The recent pandemic did skew some numbers in strange ways. Manager Schulz asked if non-emergency transports were having too much of an impact on staff hours. Chief Rutter said that was possible but also noted insurance companies usually fully compensate for transport expenses so this is a fairly reliable revenue source. Chair Maxwell would like to see the same narrative that was presented to management when Chief Rutter submitted his budget request. Board member Stevens also would like to see a job description for the second full-time position. It was decided to table discussion of the NAS O&M budget until additional information is provided.

The only NAS CIP account is "Building Improvements," which has a \$1,484 balance with \$1,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. Subsequent years will see a \$500 annual addition. As with other municipal facilities, the NAS section of the Town Garage has seen some major renovations over the past couple years. This included new bathroom showers, better insulation, an improved heating system, etc. With the possible exception of new windows, he doesn't see any need for significant improvements in the near future. Manager Schulz added there are significant grant funds available (±\$500,000) for the rehabilitation of municipal facilities, especially for energy efficiency. Some of the funds could be used to replace the building's windows. Chief Rutter said it might require creating a new building envelope to do the work properly since the current windows cannot be retrofitted. NAS EMT Lynn Doney said replacing the windows should result in significant energy savings.

In the NAS CEP budget, Manager Schulz said there would be reduction in new spending from \$112,330 to \$89,000 as the current fiscal year saw extensive use of surplus funds for one-time purchases. The same level of surplus funds is not available for the next fiscal year. Manager Schulz noted Chief Rutter did request the purchase of a new defibrillator (\$26,500) for the used ambulance unit that was bought to fill the gap while one of our two ambulance units was being remounted out-of-state. This request was not included in the budget presented by management. Board member Morse thought the ever-growing call volume might necessitate the presence of a third unit in future. He would like more information on this along with firm numbers regarding the window replacement project as well as the aforementioned staffing issues. Chief Rutter said there would be definite advantages to having a backup unit on hand should one of the two main units have to go out of service for repairs, etc. Having only one unit available for a prolonged period could result in significant revenue loss while also endangering the community by delaying emergency responses. In addition, he added callouts tend to cluster rather than spread out evenly during the day so having a backup unit on hand would be very helpful. There also are times when non-emergency transports and standby assignments can reduce unit availability. Chief Rutter said if the third unit was retained after the remounted unit was put back in service, the plan would be to install older equipment (i.e. defibrillators, stretchers, etc.) into the third unit and purchase new replacements for the two main units. He thought now would be the best time to discuss the possibility of retaining the third unit rather than waiting for the remounted unit's return in a few months. He will provide the Select Board members with a written proposal. Board member Morse felt this would be useful in determining the long-term benefits (if any) of a third unit.

Chief Helfant noted that a possible cause of the NAS callout increase is that new state policies now require medical personnel be dispatched to incidents where mental health issues might be involved. In the past, such callouts might require only a police response. Chief Rutter agreed that such callouts have become more frequent and sometimes result in threats of violence to EMTs. Board member Petty would like some data on how often such callouts occur. She also felt that if there is sufficient supporting documentation, this might be the right time to transition to a local ambulance service that relies more on full-time professionals rather than part-time volunteers. Chair Maxwell said there does need to be a full investigation of the long-term viability of NAS. He also would like additional information regarding the main driving forces for increased callout volume and how to make this increase fiscally sustainable. Board member Petty believes the three (3) major factors cited before have been the aging of the local population, substance abuse, and mental illness. Chief Rutter agreed responses to drug overdoses are part of the problem and the state is looking into how to best address this growing concern. After further discussion, it was agreed that Chief Rutter will be asked to return with the requested information at the budget meeting on Thursday, January 5, 2023. He will be leaving his NAS position the following week so this meeting will be an addition to the budget schedule.

4. **Administration.** Manager Schulz would like to discuss budgets of some of the smaller departments at this time.
  - i. **Town Manager.** Manager Schulz said this department would see a 10.3% increase mainly due to salary and health insurance cost increases.
  - ii. **Town Clerk/Treasurer.** This department will have a 9.4% increase also due to salary and health insurance cost increases.
  - iii. **Board of Civil Authority.** This budget will see a 24.1% decrease since there will not be any statewide elections in the next fiscal year.
  - iv. **Accounting.** There will be a 6.7% increase due to wage and health insurance cost increases.

- v. **Listers.** This budget will decrease by 17.6% in the next fiscal year due to lower personnel costs because of fewer employee hours. Board member Stevens asked when the next townwide reappraisal would take place. Manager Schulz said it probably was a couple years away. Board member Stevens thought it might be worthwhile to hasten the process as this might result in a Grand List increase due to the number of houses that were purchased at higher prices since the pandemic.
  - vi. **Municipal Building.** Manager Schulz said the “Building Improvements” CIP account had a healthy balance (\$44,282) so only \$1,000 is being added in the next fiscal year. The major upcoming expense in the account will be structural improvements mainly affecting the basement area that CERV uses for its clothes shelf. This project now is being bid and Manager Schulz has heard some positive feedback from potential bidders. CERV will fund part of this project but the municipality will pay for the bulk of the expense. Manager Schulz noted that renovations of the building’s bathrooms should be starting in the next couple weeks.
- b. **Future Budget Meeting Schedule.** The revised meeting schedule is as follows: Tuesday, December 27, 2022; Thursday, January 5, 2023; and Tuesday, January 10, 2023. These meetings all will start at 6:00 p.m. and will be held in the Community Room. Meeting agendas will be posted beforehand that will specify which departmental budgets or other matters will be discussed at these meetings.
  - c. **Additional Budget Concerns.** At some time, Chair Maxwell would like to have a full discussion of the additional cost to the community of operating a 24/7 police department. There was a time when NPD only operated eighteen (18) hours each day. He would like to know the additional costs over the next five (5) years and whether this community can continue to support this into the future. Given the growing expense and scarcity of qualified emergency response personnel as well as spiraling costs of emergency facilities and equipment, Chair Maxwell felt this might be a good time to explore the possibility of sharing local expenses through combined emergency response departments that would cover multiple communities. Board member Petty thought that might be a good topic for discussion at the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) Community Visit that will be held here in 2023. That would allow the discussion to get full involvement from Northfield residents. Chair Maxwell thought that was a very good idea. He understands that emergency services are a necessity but given rising expenses the status quo might not be sustainable. Board member Petty thought we might also want to look towards other Vermont communities with similar concerns who might be having (or have had) the same conversation.

#### **IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED).**

- a. **Carolyn Stevens: Municipal Building Renovations.** Ms. Stevens wanted it understood that when NU engineering students designed a proposal for Municipal Building renovations, it was for the entire structure and not just for the basement area being used for the CERV clothing shelf. There are structural, drainage, and other issues affecting the entire building and this is why CERV will pay for some but not the bulk of the renovation costs.

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

The Board adjourned at 8:08 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Kenneth L. McCann*

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

These minutes were approved at the Select Board regular meeting of December 27, 2022.