

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of January 16, 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), Susan Stillinger, and Elroy Hill.

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

II. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):

- a. Elroy Hill: Town Budget Suggestion.** Mr. Hill thought it might be a good idea to use \$90,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds for the gravel resurfacing of the backroads in the next fiscal year. The \$90,000 already budgeted for this purpose could be allocated instead as the local match funds for the Main Street Bridge Replacement project. This would save the \$30,000 already budgeted for this purpose. Chair Maxwell said this suggestion will be taken into consideration.

III. DISCUSSION

a. Proposed FY 2024/2025 Town Budget

- 1. Town Budget Recap.** Manager Schulz said he and Finance Director Baroffio have been working since the last budget meeting (01/04/24) in order to incorporate the possible budget revisions that were suggested at that time. Manager Schulz provided the Select Board members with a list of these revisions by email and now he will briefly review them. He noted that as a result of these revisions, the estimated local property tax increase has been reduced to 8.8%. On the revenue side of the budget, the projected revenue for the Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS) in the next fiscal year has been increased by \$24,620 to \$747,620. In addition, interest income has been increased by \$5,000 to \$25,000. Lastly, the PILOT payments from the utility departments to the municipality have been increased by \$1,530 to \$52,530. On the expenditure side, \$20,000 has been added to the NAS personnel services budget to cover the new expense of a non-emergency transfer crew that would work two (2) weekday afternoons per week. In addition, based on wage comparisons with other regional ambulance services, the hourly compensation for AEMTs (i.e., Advanced Emergency Medical Technicians) has been increased from \$19 to \$20. In addition, based on actual figures recently received, the amount the municipality must pay for the Washington County tax has been reduced by \$2,670. In the Northfield Fire Department (NFD) Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget, the amount allocated in the next fiscal year for the scheduled replacement in FY 2028/2029 of the 2007 pumper truck has been reduced by \$5,500 to \$41,500. Similarly, the amount allocated for the FY 2038/2039 replacement of the 2017 pumper truck has been reduced by \$2,200 to \$21,800. In addition, the \$55,000 cost of repairing the footbridge and the \$10,000 cost of addressing mold and other issues in the Northfield Historical Society basement will be covered through the use of ARPA funds. Manager Schulz said these were the major changes in the proposed budget from the last budget meeting. There also were some minor tweaks.

Board member Shernock is pleased that NAS AEMTs will soon be paid about the same hourly wage as that paid by other regional ambulance service providers. Board members Stevens and Morse had nothing to add at this time. Board member Petty thanked Manager Schulz and Ms. Baroffio for all their work on the current draft budget. She then asked why the hourly wage for NAS paramedics wasn't increased as was done for the AEMTs. After a brief discussion, there appeared to be a consensus that this hourly wage also should be increased by an indeterminate amount. This matter was brought up again and clarified later in the meeting. Ms. Baroffio noted that since the paramedics did not work set hours every week, she would need to estimate the impact this change would have on the NAS budget. Board member Shernock then had a few questions about the NAS fee schedule and how the amounts for certain services were determined. Chair Maxwell noted that the fee schedule was adjusted periodically upon the recommendation of the NAS Chief in order to reflect actual costs. As regards to the per capita fee charged Roxbury and West Berlin for NAS emergency coverage, Manager Schulz had provided a list of what various Vermont communities were charged for ambulance coverage by a neighboring ambulance service. He also provided the statistics showing that in FY 2022/2023, NAS made thirty (30) emergency calls to West Berlin and forty (40) to Roxbury. The current plan is to increase the per capita fee from \$32 to \$35 although some Select Board members have felt this was too low given what other ambulance services charge. Manager Schulz noted the revenue NAS currently generates does cover its operations and maintenance (O&M) budget, which is unusual for a government agency. He doesn't see much benefit in raising the per capita fee much higher. It also is possible that if the per capita fee is increased significantly higher, West Berlin and Roxbury might choose to contract with another ambulance service for coverage. Manager Schulz noted NAS revenue has shown steady increases in recent years. Board member Shernock still doesn't understand why some communities are charged a much higher per capita fee than what we charge Roxbury and West Berlin. Chair Maxwell suggested that some of the towns charged the higher amounts are more rural communities and the responding ambulance service would have to travel a greater distance (on unpaved roads) to reach their destinations. Board member Petty added that the communities charged lower fees appear to be more urban and compact. There appeared to be general agreement amongst the Select Board members that it might be useful to review the NAS fee schedule in the near future.

Board member Petty then asked if there was Select Board consensus on increasing the hourly wage paid NAS paramedics. She serves on the Public Safety Subcommittee and has learned that after they achieved a higher level of certification, several NAS EMTs have left to work for other ambulance services for more money. Board member Morse said this has happened for some time with other municipal departments with more experienced workers deciding to leave for higher pay elsewhere. Manager Schulz said NAS EMTs sometimes leave for ambulance services that have several full-time employees as this offers steadier employment. NAS currently has only one full-time employee (Chief Megan McCusker) and instead relies on part-time EMTs for coverage.

Elroy Hill asked how the Highway crew are paid compared to what the NAS paramedics now receive. Manager Schulz said the Highway crew members are union employees who are paid according to a wage schedule in the current union contract. The amount paid is based on years of employment, etc. He believes the lowest paid Highway crew member is now making about \$25 per hour. Mr. Hill doesn't think it is right for someone who drives a plow truck to make more per hour than a certified paramedic. Board member Shernock noted that the snowplow drivers also make more than a schoolteacher based on the number of work hours teaching actually requires.

Board member Petty asked if there was any consensus on whether to increase paramedic pay and, if so, by how much. Chair Maxwell felt that increasing paramedic pay by \$2 to \$3 per hour would have a minimal impact on the NAS budget, perhaps a couple of thousand dollars. He added that since it is unlikely that the municipal budget will be finalized tonight, he would like the numbers crunched to determine the actual impact of such a wage increase on the budget. Board member Morse noted such an increase would bring NAS paramedic pay within ten percent (10%) of the regional average.

Board member Morse then returned to Mr. Hill's earlier suggestion to use \$90,000 in APRA funds for backroads resurfacing, shifting the funds now allocated for this to the Main Street Bridge Replacement project budget, and reducing the budget by the \$30,000 now allocated for this purpose. Ms. Baroffio noted that this \$30,000 now comes from Town Highway prior year surplus funds. Board member Petty said it has been suggested during these budget meetings that ARPA funds shouldn't be used to cover recurring expenses such as backroads maintenance. Chair Maxwell thought Ms. Baroffio could be trusted to make sure the proper combination of ARPA funds and prior year's surplus would be allocated for this purpose. Mr. Hill noted ARPA funds are not really "free," as federal taxpayers eventually will be paying the bill.

Board member Petty thought it was a good development that there have been some savings in this budget due to lower than anticipated municipal insurance costs. Ms. Baroffio confirmed that the cost of workers' compensation insurance had declined by 8.2% in the next fiscal year budget. She added that the actual amount has fluctuated in recent years. Board member Petty also was grateful for the additional information provided regarding the Jerry Bridge replacement. The current management recommendation is that \$110,000 in Town General surplus funds be allocated for this project in the next fiscal year. Board member Petty thought it might be a good idea for the municipality to conduct its own examination of the local bridges for which it is financially responsible. That would allow the Select Board members to better prepare for future bridge rehabilitation and/or replacement projects. Manager Schulz said an engineer would have to be engaged to perform proper inspections as there is no one qualified to perform this service internally. This could be a major expense so Manager Schulz will investigate to see if there are any grant programs that could provide the funding. He also will contact the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC) to see if they can provide any assistance.

Board member Petty thought at the very least we should have an inventory of all municipal bridges, their age, and apparent condition. Manager Schulz said that could be done. If any of the bridges look in any way distressed, we could have the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) come in to provide its opinion. He added that VTrans will pay for about ninety percent (90%) for major bridge projects provided that the project makes its priority list. The criteria for this status include the importance of the bridge to the local community, which usually is based on average traffic volume. The bridge also must be a minimum of twenty feet (20') in length. Board member Morse felt the aforementioned local bridge inventory should include bridge length as well. It is possible smaller local bridges could have problems that could be fixed by our Highway Department, such as replacing bridge planks, etc. Board member Stevens felt the price quote for replacing the Jerry Bridge with a steel truss bridge was rather high (\$282,000). Manager Schulz said the project price could be significantly lower if the project is put out to bid. It also is possible other construction materials could be used. Chair Maxwell said we can keep our fingers crossed.

IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED).

- a. Elroy Hill: Winter Sidewalk Maintenance.** Mr. Hill is disappointed the ends of the Slate Avenue sidewalk by South Main Street were not plowed out last Thursday afternoon. He had mentioned the problem to Highway Foreman Trent Tucker earlier that day but it was not addressed by the time Mr. Tucker left work that day. Mr. Hill then did the snow clearing himself. He is disappointed the Highway crew don't seem to take public safety concerns more seriously.

- V. EXECUTIVE SESSION.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Petty, to go into executive session, in accordance with 1 VSA 313 (a)(1)], in order to discuss a contract negotiation with Manager Schulz present. Chair Maxwell noted this discussion might have budget implications. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board went into executive session at 7:01 p.m.

Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Petty, to come out of executive session. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board came out of executive session at 7:32 p.m. No action was taken.

Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Petty, to go back into executive session, in accordance with 1 VSA 313 (a)(1)], in order to discuss a personnel matter without Manager Schulz present. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board went back into executive session at 7:33 p.m.

Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Petty, to come out of executive session. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board came out of executive session at 7:50 p.m. No action was taken.

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

The Board adjourned at 7:50 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 23, 2024.