

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
PUBLIC SAFETY OVERSIGHT & PLANNING
SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING
Minutes of October 4, 2023**

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

The meeting started at 3:00 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 August 28, 2023. Board member Petty noted it is stated in the minutes that pets were allowed at the NMHS shelter created for the July flooding rainstorm. She is uncertain if this was the case. That sentence will be deleted. **The minutes were approved unanimously.**

IV. DISCUSSION

- a. Northfield Police Department (NPD) update.** Manager Schulz said the new NPD Chief (Pierre Gomez) started on the job on Monday, September 18, 2023. He and Manager Schulz have been interacting on a regular basis and all appears to be going well. Chief Gomez also has met individually with the NPD officers to inform them of his expectations for them and the department. As the NPD remains understaffed, Chief Gomez will attempt to recruit new officers in the coming weeks. Manager Schulz noted that the Town of Stowe is also seeking new officers and its advertisements indicate that it is offering \$15,000 sign-on bonuses. This clearly indicates the high demand for law enforcement officers in Vermont. He said that Chief Gomez has his own ideas regarding officer recruitment and he will be networking with other state and local law enforcement departments seeking applicants.
- b. Northfield Fire Department (NFD).** Manager Schulz is unaware of any issues with the NFD at this time. He had planned for Board members Petty and Shernock to have site visits of the Fire Station and Police Station in the near future. As Board member Shernock will be out of town over the next couple of weeks, this probably will be scheduled for the week of September 23, 2023.
- c. Northfield Ambulance Services (NAS).** Manager Schulz said the main ongoing NAS issue is the request from Chief Meggan McCusker and the NAS members for \$66,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds in order to fully equip the third ambulance unit. The plan is to use this unit to bring in additional NAS revenue by increasing its number of non-emergency transports, which usually involve transferring patients from one medical facility to another. This matter was discussed at the Select Board regular meeting of September 12, 2023 but the matter was tabled until additional information could be provided. Select Board Chair David Maxwell specifically requested a vehicle utilization report, which has been produced. Chief McCusker said this document indicated the relative usage of the now three ambulance units. It also covers the period when one of these units was out of state being remounted. Board member Shernock believes that Select Board member Charles Morse also requested a "business plan" that would show how much additional NAS revenue would be generated with a third fully equipped unit, how this would affect NAS personnel costs, etc. Chief McCusker said if the NAS just wanted to increase revenue, it would have salaried staff on standby in case of any non-emergency transfer requests. However, keeping the current per diem staffing model would mean the revenue increase would be more modest.
- However, there could be a discussion at the upcoming budget meetings about an increase in per diem pay for NAS EMTs. This would increase personnel costs in the short term but provide more revenue in the long term as more EMTs make themselves available for performing non-emergency transports. Board member Shernock believes Board member Morse wanted this business plan in order to understand how the immediate expense of equipping and staffing the third ambulance unit would be offset by this increased NAS revenue.

NAS EMT Steven Demaio said the utilization report does provide information on NAS unit usage but it doesn't take into account the importance of having at least one of the units on hand in case of an emergency callout. He felt this was similar to the NFD having its larger trucks available in case of a major structure fire. They might be seldom used but necessary to have when needed. Mr. Demaio feels having at least one unit on hand as a backup has a secondary utilization effect that provides better emergency coverage for the community. This effect would be increased should NAS have that third fully equipped ambulance unit.

Manager Schulz said he thought Chair Maxwell was looking for information on past and current information on how often the ambulance units are put into service. Chief McCusker said as is the case with ambulance usage throughout the country, if you look at the amount of time that the ambulance units are on the road, that number will look rather low at first glance. She added that the emphasis for ambulance departments is having the response vehicles and equipment fully available when needed. The key is readiness. Board member Petty thought perhaps there should be some clarification about what data Chair Maxwell is requesting. Manager Schulz said this is a very different situation from the Highway Department where you usually expect the vehicles to be on the road during work hours. Mr. Demaio said the NAS rescue unit should have the lowest utilization amount because it is only sent out to crash scenes and similar emergencies. Board member Shernock agrees that providing utilization figures for ambulance departments would be a difficult task due to the importance of having units on hand for callout when needed.

Board member Petty said Chair Maxwell also asked where the third ambulance unit would be stored should it be fully equipped. There is no room at the Ambulance Bay for another vehicle. Chief McCusker said the initial plan was to store it at the Ambulance Bay and relocate the rescue unit elsewhere. There has been an offer from Jeremy Drown to store it at Cardinal Point Screen Printing & Embroidery (the old Chouinard factory) at the intersection of North Main Street and Water Street. As indicated before, this is the least employed ambulance vehicle. Manager Schulz said he checked with Utility Superintendent James Russo and he didn't feel it should be stored at the Wastewater Treatment Facility (WWTF). It could be stored at the Police Station provided it can fit into the garage there. Norwich University (NU) is perhaps another option but that would require an agreement to be drafted. Manager Schulz would prefer that the vehicle not be stored in a private business. Mr. Demaio said they could take the rescue unit over to the NPD garage after this meeting to see if it will fit. If that doesn't work out, Manager Schulz would start the reach out to NU.

Regarding the requested business plan, Manager Schulz said that can be a difficult document to draft as it relates to municipal operations. Board member Petty certainly doesn't consider emergency services to be businesses. She also doesn't believe one Select Board member should be able to make this request; this should be a decision of the whole board. Board member Petty believes the NAS members have provided sufficient data to date regarding this request, which could be provided to the Select Board members in the form of a PowerPoint presentation. This would not be a business plan per se but should be able to answer all relevant questions about this request for ARPA funds. Chief McCusker would like to hold a summit at the Ambulance Bay at which the Select Board members would be able to view the facility, see all the NAS vehicles and equipment on hand, etc. Perhaps this would be the proper venue for the discussion of a fully equipped third unit. Board member Shernock believes this discussion should be held at a Select Board regular meeting where a vote can be taken so we can "retire this issue." Manager Schulz said we could warn a site visit of the NAS facility but the formal discussion and vote should be taken at a Select Board meeting. He then asked if the presentation could be made at the next Select Board regular meeting (10/10/23). Board member Petty would like the question of where the third unit would be stored resolved first. She doesn't want any unresolved issues that could further delay a vote on this matter. Chief McCusker said whether the NPD garage is a suitable storage facility should be determined by tomorrow.

Mr. Demaio feels there could be some remaining questions about the proposed trial period for the fully equipped third unit, i.e., the “metrics” for determining success or failure, the length of the trial period, etc. Board member Shernock would like the NAS presentation to include such information as how often the third unit would be used for non-emergency transports, how the staffing will be done, some estimate of the revenue to be generated, etc. This additional revenue stream could provide more self-sustainability for NAS while also strengthening the ties between the municipality and NU, as NU student EMTs would be providing a good share of the transport staffing. Board member Shernock said this amount of information is the same that has been asked of all those who have (or will) make requests for ARPA funds. Chief McCusker understands that the NAS ARPA funds request should be treated like the others. Manager Schulz said these ARPA fund requests are outside of the normal municipal budgeting process. Chief McCusker would like to set the trial period metrics before the request is made to the full Select Board. Manager Schulz said the potential for significantly increased NAS revenue would be the main point. Chief McCusker said with the third unit fully equipped, NAS would be able to accept a higher percentage of the transport requests, which quite often involve transport between local care facilities, Central Vermont Hospital, and the UNM Medical Center. Mr. Demaio said it might be possible to extend these services to medical facilities that are more distant. Board member Shernock felt this could become part of the test period evaluation.

Manager Schulz asked how long it would take to fully equip the third unit should the Select Board members provide the ARPA funds. Chief McCusker said that would depend on the availability of the equipment. It could be a couple of weeks or a little longer. Manager Schulz said if a favorable decision was made within the next month, that would mean a six-month evaluation period would end in May 2024, which is when the NU campus will be shut down after graduation. Perhaps NAS can start informing regional medical facilities that it might be able to provide additional non-emergency transports in the near future. Chief McCusker would prefer to resolve any remaining staffing issues first. The potential is there but this will be a multi-step process. We will need to determine whether it would be better to have the EMTs available on site or if they should be on call when needed. Mr. Demaio often interacts with the NU student EMTs and he would be able to schedule times when certain ones would be available for these transports. Chief McCusker said the NAS personnel expenditure increases would be brought up when the proposed NAS budget for the FY 2024/2025 budget is discussed with the Select Board members later this year. For the interim period before the next fiscal year starts (07/01/24), she said NAS would retain the current staffing model, which is to reach out to NAS EMTs regarding their availability when a non-emergency transport request is received. That is their only option at this time.

Board member Petty finds the current emphasis on greater NAS revenue opportunities with the third ambulance a bit confusing because an earlier rationale was that additional local emergency coverage was needed due to the rising number of emergency callouts each year due to Northfield’s aging population and other factors. Chief McCusker said the focus has always been on providing better service to the community but the more recent emphasis on additional NAS revenue generation has come up as there was seen to be a need to show how the additional cost of a fully equipped third unit could be offset with more revenue. Another reason for a third unit is to provide a backup unit as the other units become within a year or two of their scheduled replacements and this more susceptible to breakdowns. Having this third ambulance on hand would increase the possibility that there will be at least two ambulance units ready for service in case of an emergency situation. Board member Petty believes the most persuasive argument for the third unit is that it will provide better emergency response coverage for Northfield and surrounding communities. The additional NAS revenue would be a side benefit but she doesn’t expect that NAS should be run like a private business. Additional NAS revenue in recent years has had the effect of funding operational expenses but that should not be the main emphasis. In addition, should the Select Board members authorize using ARPA funds to fully equip the third ambulance, having a follow up request for additional NAS staffing might diminish support for future NAS requests.

Manager Schulz asked if the third ambulance unit is fully equipped and put into service before the end of this calendar year, what would be seen at the end of the six-month trial period, which should conclude before the start of the next fiscal year. Would there be sufficient staffing to conduct the experiment with the current NAS personnel budget?

Mr. Demaio said there would be an immediate increase in NAS vehicle utilization. He said the purpose of NAS is to serve the people of Northfield but this service contains two separate facets. The first is to respond to emergency situations and treat patients on scene prior to transport to a medical facility. The second is to transport home those patients when their hospital stays are concluded. On some occasions, these patients will need to be transferred to another medical facility should they require more specialized treatment. This could include transfers from CVH to UVM, Dartmouth-Hitchcock, or to Boston. It often is reassuring to Northfield patients that their transportation to another medical facility is by way of a NAS unit, which might involve some familiar faces from previous encounters. Although the non-emergency transports have been viewed mainly as revenue generators, they also provide a valuable service to the Northfield community. Mr. Demaio added that the third unit, when not otherwise in use, could be employed for EMT training, for charity drives, interaction with the public, etc. In addition, this could be a very important recruitment tool for NU student prospective EMTs. Manager Schulz said such benefits are difficult to be into an evaluation matrix. Mr. Demaio agreed that there are some good reasons to have the third unit that cannot be easily quantified.

Manager Schulz said the future presentation to the Select Board members will need to include a fairly confident statement that having the third unit fully equipped will provide additional NAS revenue with increases in the number of non-emergency transports in the coming months. This should be the focus even though the other potential benefits Mr. Demaio brought up could also be part of the conversation. Mr. Demaio said the trial period would be the best time to determine how staffing concerns should be addressed. He added that there is the anticipation that fully equipping the third unit would result in a fifteen percent (15%) increase in the number of non-emergency transports as well as a fifteen percent (15%) decrease in the number of transport requests from medical facilities being declined. Chief McCusker said this estimate is correct, it would result in an additional twenty-two (22) non-emergency transports each year. As the average reimbursement for these transports is about \$500 each, that would be \$11,000 in additional annual NAS revenue. Mr. Demaio said this is an estimate as NSAS revenue projections are not an exact science. He added that reimbursement amounts are based on mileage so the total amount could increase if NAS increases its number of transports to more distant medical facilities. He believes the \$500 per transport is a conservative figure. Chief McCusker noted there are times when Medicare doesn't provide full reimbursement for such transports, which is why the NAS is better considered a public service rather than a business. Board member Shernock said such a needed service is something that cannot be put into a business plan.

Board member Petty thought another important factor to be considered is the amount of money that the third unit will require for repairs, regular maintenance, etc. Perhaps a maximum amount should be set for this. Manager Schulz thought it would be a good idea to have the third unit taken to a ambulance unit dealership with expertise in such matters. Mr. Demaio doubts that this could be scheduled in time for the information to be available at the next Select Board regular meeting (10/10/23). He would like to be sure that there will be no unanswerable questions brought up the night of the formal presentation so a decision can be made that night. Further postponements are not tenable. In the interest of transparency, Board member Petty believes staffing issues also should be part of this presentation. There might be some recriminations if this matter only arises after the ARPA funds have been authorized. As she has been NAS chief for less than a year, this will be the first time Chief McCusker will be directly involved with drafting the NAS operating and capital budgets for the next fiscal year. She has, however, worked with former NAS chief Lawton Rutter on such matters in the past so this will not be any entirely new experience for her. Chief McCusker noted that requests for increases in NAS personnel expenditures and other budgetary requests have become relatively common in recent years. Board member Petty cannot know for sure the thinking of the other Select Board members, but she does recommend that the upcoming request for higher NAS staffing spending should be part of the presentation.

Chief McCusker said the third unit will bring in additional revenue without increased staffing but having it would result in a larger increase in NAS revenue. Therefore, it is not "needed" but would provide greater benefits in the long run. Chief McCusker said the success of the trial period would not be contingent on additional staffing. Board member Shernock said as this would be an experiment, it is hard to see how anyone could expect one hundred percent (100%) accuracy with current predictions.

Board member Petty noted that Kaelee Bouleris asked (remotely) how the presentation could be successful if some Select Board members remain committed to seeing this ARPA funds request strictly in business terms, i.e., the additional NAS revenue, while ignoring the other overall benefits to the community. Board member Shernock said that focus should be challenged if it appears to be the overriding factor for some people. Manager Schulz said the Select Board members do have the responsibility for overseeing the municipal budgets that have been approved by Northfield voters. Having a third ambulance unit is a major change so the Select Board members do have to consider the long-term financial implications of this in terms of vehicle maintenance costs, the cost of new equipment, higher personnel costs, etc. The Select Board members have other budgetary implications to keep in mind other than spending on the emergency services, such as the Highway Department, the utility departments, etc. Chief McCusker plans the upcoming PowerPoint presentation will include all the relevant information discussed at these subcommittee meetings

Board member Shernock thought another way to approach this request is to discuss how national and statewide trends for increased emergency response volume are affecting other regional ambulance services. She noted the major factor cited in increased emergency callouts is the aging population. Mr. Demaio said increasing numbers of callouts for mental health concerns and drug overdoses are other factors. Chief McCusker noted that the State of Vermont is performing a statewide survey to determine what local ambulance departments are doing right and what could be improved. This came in response to the recent near collapse of Maine's statewide emergency response system. The recommendations will be forwarded to the state legislature for corrective action. Part of this process is a series of regional meetings and the next one will be held in Northfield at the Brown Public Library on Wednesday, October 11, 2023 starting at 6:00 p.m. Chief McCusker will report on any information coming out of this meeting that would be pertinent to the ARPA funds request. She added that the main question now under consideration is whether each community should have its own ambulance service or if regional departments would work better. Local emergency response departments struggle to meet staffing goals so perhaps a regional pooling of resources would work better.

d. Other Business

- 1. Emergency Operations Center (EOC).** During the last subcommittee meeting (08/28/23), there was a discussion of how the EOC located at the Fire Station during the July flooding rainstorm lacked certain "creature comforts" that would make more pleasant a long-term stay there during an emergency situation. Board member Shernock subsequently spoke to the Northfield Rotarians and they are willing to fund some upgrades such as new kitchen appliances, room carpeting, new chairs, etc. Chief McCusker said having more comfortable chairs during a long standby event makes a great difference. Manager Schulz will bring NFD Chief Peter J. DeMasi up to speed about this possibility so we can move forward on this.
- 2. NPD Chief Certification, etc.** Board member Shernock noted NPD Chief Gomez came here from out of state so he doesn't have Vermont law enforcement certification. Manager Schulz said Chief Gomez has started taking the requirement coursework and if all stays on schedule, he should have full certification within the next three (3) to six (6) months. Board member Shernock also wants to be sure Chief Gomez is aware that mediation also is an option when dealing with local law enforcement concerns.
- 3. July Flooding Rainstorm After-Event Report.** Regarding the upcoming written report regarding the local emergency service response to the flooding rainstorm, Board member Petty asked if that would be available for subcommittee review. Manager Schulz confirmed it would.

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 4:22 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

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