

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of January 10, 2023**

- 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), Mitch Osiecki (Zoning Administrator), Tom Davis (Economic Development Director), Meggan McCusker (Ambulance Service), Carolyn Stevens, Gerard LaVarnway, 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. Planning/Zoning.** Manager Schulz said Zoning Administrator Mitch Osiecki is here tonight to discuss the proposed budget for his department. Mr. Osiecki's main request is for the Select Board members to adjust the zoning permit fees he charges for various actions. Mr. Osiecki has provided a chart that shows the current fees charges, those he would like to charge and by how much, and how these compare to those in nearby communities (Berlin, Waitsfield, Waterbury, and Randolph). Mr. Osiecki said he originally brought this proposal to the Select Board members last summer but was asked to present it again during the budget meetings as this would affect department revenue and there also was a preference that the zoning permit fees indicated in the current edition of the Northfield Town Report should be accurate. Mr. Osiecki's research has found most of our zoning permit fees have not been revised for about ten (10) to twelve (12) years. In speaking to the zoning administrators in the towns listed above, he learned most Vermont towns do a fee adjustment every five (5) years or so. Mr. Osiecki felt the fee that most urgently requiring revision is for hearings before the Development Review Board (DRB). Since he needs to advertise the hearing notice in a local newspaper and send certified letters to abutting property owners, holding a DRB hearing can become a quite expensive proposition. He noted Berlin charges a \$200 "publication" charge in addition to the \$75 charge for holding the hearing itself. Mr. Osiecki doesn't want to go quite that far. He merely wants to increase the DRB hearing charge from \$75 to \$125. There also are a number of other permit fees for matters he works upon regularly such as lot line adjustments, subdivision permits, etc. that he would like increased. In addition, he hasn't charged for fence permits in the past but would like to institute a \$35 fee. He added that processing fence permits can take some time, especially when the original fence is not constructed in compliance with local zoning regulations. He then asked if there were any questions.

Board member Stevens noted that Berlin charges ten cents (10¢) per additional square foot beyond the standard size amount for new structures, additions, etc. He asked why Mr. Osiecki would like to raise Northfield's charge for this extra footage to fifteen cents (15¢) per square foot. Mr. Osiecki said he discussed this with Manager Schulz and both agreed the higher amount was appropriate. He added that Berlin does charge more for a number of items than what he is now asking. Board member Stevens noted Waterbury does charge more for new construction additions, etc. than what Mr. Osiecki is proposing. Mr. Osiecki added that even though the permit cost of altering an accessory dwelling will increase from \$60 to \$75, in future he will handle these permits himself administratively rather than requiring a DRB hearing. This will save the applicant some money and also will hasten the process.

Mr. Osiecki then asked when the new permit fees (if approved) should go into effect. He would like to warn potential applicants ahead of time so they don't get stuck with the higher fee by applying a week or two late. Since the proposed budget will go into effect with the new fiscal year (July 1, 2023), Chair Maxwell suggested the new fee amounts should do the same. Mr. Osiecki agreed with this. Chair Maxwell asked if certified letters had to be sent out for all DRB hearing matters. Mr. Osiecki confirmed they did for applications on matters that might have an impact on abutting properties. This included new subdivisions, conditional use permits, etc. He doesn't send them out for sign permits as the impact on neighbors is negligible. Chair Maxwell asked if the impact of the higher fees is included in the proposed FY 2023/2024 Zoning/Planning budget. Manager Schulz said these changes would only affect the department's revenue side and these numbers can be adjusted accordingly. These will have to be rough estimates based on past year actuals.

Chair Maxwell asked Mr. Osiecki if he had any concerns regarding his department's operations and maintenance (O&M) budget. Mr. Osiecki said he did not; the major expenses in this budget are for his salary and the annual membership fee for the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC). He noted there are instances when he does waive a zoning permit fee but he does have to charge a recording fee in order to have documentation. Chair Maxwell then thanked Mr. Osiecki for his presentation. Action regarding his proposal to revise zoning permit fees will be taken up at the Select Board regular meeting held later tonight.

2. **Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS).** Manager Schulz said at the last budget meeting (01/05/2023), the Select Board members had questions regarding the impact on the proposed NAS budget should they accept NAS Chief Lawton Rutter's recommendation for hourly wage increases for NAS EMTs and to create a second NAS full-time position. Worksheets have been created for these scenarios. Another factor included is health insurance costs for the NAS Chief position since when the proposed NAS budget was first drafted last year, there was no indication Chief Rutter would be leaving his position to work for the State of Vermont. Chief Rutter had been taking a buyout from the municipality as he was obtaining coverage elsewhere. Since it is quite possible his replacement will be getting health insurance through the municipality, Finance Director Laurie Baroffio has added this potential expense to the NAS proposed budget. Also provided was a NAS "Net Cost Summary." This document confirms what Manager Schulz indicated at the last meeting: NAS revenue does cover its O&M expenses but its capital expenses require taxpayer dollars. Chair Maxwell said he had requested this information and is pleased to see the figures in black and white. He thanked Ms. Baroffio for providing this documentation.

Board member Morse would like to know what needs to be done to have NAS continue to provide its current level of service to the community. Manager Schulz said after further reflection, he does favor the \$2.00 increase in the hourly wage paid to NAS EMTs. That would raise the hourly payment to either \$17 or \$19 based on the EMT's certification level. Board member Morse asked if the part-time EMT workhours restrictions, which had kept them under the workhour threshold that would require the municipality to provide them with employment benefits, would be removed. Manager Schulz said that restriction would be retained. He will work with the new NAS Chief to properly distribute workhours amongst the NAS part-timers. There currently are 52 NAS part-time employees but a few of them do provide the bulk of workhours. As for the second full-time NAS position, Manager Schulz still has doubts whether the supposed benefits would justify the significant long-term expense.

Board member Petty does favor increasing the EMT hourly wage as Chief Rutter has recommended. She also felt that should the Select Board members decide not to fund the second full-time position at this time, there should be a full conversation with the new NAS Chief to see how that person feels about the possibility. Board member Stevens also favors increasing the hourly compensation for the part-time EMTs. He does not favor establishing the second full-time position. When this proposal first arose, he had assumed that this would largely be an administrative position that would assist the NAS Chief with dispatching duties, paperwork, etc. However, he now understands that as now proposed this position would duplicate many of the NAS Chief's functions by responding to emergency calls, etc. Therefore, Board member Stevens only favors the part-time EMT hourly wage increase at this time. He then asked if there has been any interest in the NAS Chief vacancy to date. Manager Schulz said seven (7) persons had already submitted applications. The deadline is tomorrow (01/11/23).

Board member Goodrich noted that another of Chief Rutter's recommendations was to increase the salary for his replacement. She would prefer for the hiring process to play out before making that decision. Board member Goodrich also would like to hear the recommendation from the new NAS Chief before any decision is made regarding the second full-time position. She does favor increasing the hourly part-time pay. Chair Maxwell also supports increasing the hourly part-time compensation and holding off of any staffing changes until the new NAS Chief is in place and provide input on this. If need be, this discussion can be revived later this year when the FY 2024/2025 budget is drafted. He still is not convinced that hiring a second full-time position will result in savings in the part-time EMT budget, which was one of the arguments in favor of it. Board member Morse noted that NAS will still have considerable part-time EMT expenses even if this position is created.

Chair Maxwell said it does not make sense to make major changes in the department when there soon will be a change of leadership. Raising the part-timers' hourly pay is another matter as this will help keep NAS competitive regarding EMT compensation with other regional ambulance services and thus help with the recruitment and retention of part-time EMTs. As for the salary for the new EMT Chief, that could be negotiated with the favored candidate at the proper time.

Manager Schulz asked how the Select Board members felt about another of Chief Rutter's recommendations, which was to retain a third ambulance unit. This used unit was purchased to fill the gap when one of the two current NAS units was out-of-state for several months while having its service box remounted on a new chassis. The original plan was to resell it when the remounted unit was put back in service but Chief Rutter felt there would be benefits to having a third unit on hand as a backup. Board member Morse noted the used unit has already been paid for so there would be no great additional expense even if it just sits in the Ambulance Bay. He also noted that at the last meeting, Chief Rutter said the timeline for ordering and receiving new ambulance units is now three (3) years. Provided there is no need to purchase expensive equipment for it, there are advantages to keeping this as a backup unit. Board member Petty wished the new NAS Chief was in place for that person's opinion regarding retention of the used unit. However, she did not see any reason why this matter could not be revisited when that person has been hired and the remounted unit has been returned to service. Board member Petty agreed it is debatable whether having three units is necessary but having an extra one on hand would ensure at least two units are available at all times. Board member Stevens would like to retain the third unit provided it doesn't cost too much to maintain or equip. Board member Goodrich had been very critical of keeping an older unit on hand due to the possibility of costly repair bills, etc. However, she doesn't oppose keeping it as a spare vehicle for the time being provided those costs do not present themselves. Manager Schulz said there would be additional expense related to keeping a third NAS unit but will work with the new NAS Chief to keep them under control. Chair Maxwell agrees with keeping the used unit as backup provided the extra expense doesn't come to outweigh the benefits.

- 3. Northfield Police Department (NPD).** As requested by the Select Board members, Ms. Baroffio provided a five (5) NPD budget projection. Manager Schulz noted it shows how NPD personnel costs will increase over this timespan based on provisions in the current NPD union contract. Chair Maxwell had also asked for a projection of future savings should the municipality decide to no longer have 24/7 local law enforcement coverage. Manager Schulz said it would be difficult to make this determination. For one thing, that would require a renegotiation of the NPD union contract. However, if the coverage hours are reduced and the overnight shift removed, Manager Schulz said this probably would result in the elimination of at least one and possibly two full-time NPD officers. This would reduce the overall NPD budget from between fifteen (15) to twenty percent (20%). Chair Maxwell was grateful for this information as he felt reducing NPD coverage hours was one possible option to addressing spiraling local law enforcement costs. He would like residents to understand that if current trends continue, the total NPD budget is projected to increase from \$1,154,570 in FY 2023/2024 to \$1,400,789 in FY 2027/2028. Board member Petty asked when would be the best time to have this conversation with the public. Chair Maxwell noted Board member Petty had made an excellent suggestion at a previous meeting when she thought this could be a good topic for discussion when the Vermont Council of Rural Development (VCRD) holds its Site Visit here later this year. Board member Petty said Chair Maxwell had previously floated the idea of Northfield joining with neighboring communities to create a regional law enforcement agency in order to better share and control escalating personnel and equipment costs. This also could be a topic for discussion. Board member Morse felt the upcoming open session of the 2023 Northfield Town Meeting perhaps could be another venue for this discussion. Chair Maxwell said this was a possibility but noted the attendees usually represent only a thin slice of the community. It is important to engage the bulk of the community in this conversation. Board member Goodrich noted that when they were seeking public input, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Fund Outreach Committee not only held meetings but also conducted a survey to obtain local feedback. Board member Petty suggested a combination of public meetings and online surveys could be very effective. Chair Maxwell wanted it made clear that this discussion would not be an attack on the NPD but rather a proactive response to the rising cost of having 24/7 local law enforcement coverage.

- 4. Town Budget Recap.** Manager Schulz said the Select Board members now have gone through all the proposed budgets for the next fiscal year. The next step is to finalize this budget based on the Select Board conversations to date and the consensus reached on certain matters. The revised budget pages will include a summary of changes based these consensus decisions. This would include restoring \$20,000 for the gravel resurfacing of the backroads, the changes in the NAS budget discussed earlier tonight, etc. There also would be minor updates in the personnel budgets to reflect changes in health care insurance rates that have occurred since the proposed budget was first drafted a couple months ago. The revised budget will be presented at the next budget meeting. After some discussion, it was decided to hold this meeting next Tuesday night (01/17/23). The Select Board members have a tax abatement hearing at 6:00 p.m. that night in the Municipal Building so the budget meeting will be held afterwards in the Community Room.

Board member Goodrich felt one unresolved matter was whether to extend the replacement lifespan of certain Highway Department vehicles from seven (7) years to eight (8) years. Board member Goodrich still has concerns about this action, which would affect two (2) Dodge Ram plow trucks, two (2) Western Star dump trucks, the $\frac{3}{4}$ Ton Chevrolet pickup truck, and the salt truck. Manager Schulz said the extended warranty for these vehicles usually is set at seven (7) years and that is why the lifespan originally was set for that timeframe. However, given the relatively good condition of the affected vehicles, Manager Schulz felt it might be a good idea to add an additional year to the lifespan in order to spread out replacement costs in the Highway Department's Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget.

Board member Morse said snow plowing and other routine road maintenance work can have hard impacts on these vehicles. Adding an additional year to their lifespans might reduce their trade-in values when the scheduled vehicle replacement does occur. Board member Morse would like the projected lifespans kept at seven (7) years unless there is clear evidence of substantial cost savings in adding another year. After further discussion, including input from Elroy Hill, who has considerable work experience in such matters, it was the consensus of the Select Board members to keep the projected lifespans of these vehicles at seven (7) years. Ms. Baroffio estimated this change would increase the FY 2023-2024 Highway Department CEP budget by about \$12,700. This will be confirmed in the revised budget pages.

IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED). There was none.

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

The Board adjourned at 7:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

These minutes were approved at the Select Board regular meeting of January 24, 2023.