

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
PUBLIC SAFETY OVERSIGHT & PLANNING
SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING
Minutes of August 16, 2023**

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

The meeting started at 4:00 PM.

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

- III. APPROVAL OF MINUTES.** Motion by Board member Petty, seconded by Board member Shernock, to approve the meeting minutes of August 2, 2023. Some typos will be fixed. **The minutes were approved unanimously.**

IV. DISCUSSION

- a. Northfield Police Department (NPD).** Manager Schulz was pleased to report that a new NPD chief has been hired. Pierre Gomez has been a Philadelphia police officer for over twenty (20) years and although he will officially start working on Monday, September 18, 2023, Mr. Gomez will be in Northfield the week before in order to introduce himself to the community. Manager Schulz has informed the NPD officers and the Select Board members of this and all appear to be pleased with this decision. There also will be an NPD open house at some time so residents can get to know him. Board member Shernock noted that the next "Night on the Common" will be held on Tuesday, September 19, 2023, and this also will be a good venue for the new police chief to meet with community members. Mr. Bagg noted that representatives of the local emergency services have also attended this event in the past for interaction with the public. Manager Schulz then noted that the NPD still remains understaffed but added that the full-time officer now on family medical leave will be returning to at least part-time status soon.
- b. Northfield Fire Department (NFD).** Manager Schulz spoke to NFD Chief Peter J. DeMasi before he took some vacation time and was informed that the NFD is running well at this time with no problems to report.
- c. Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS).** Manager Schulz first asked if the ambulance unit (Unit #1) that had issues a couple weeks ago is back in service. Chief McCusker said this unit still has its fuel leak and is scheduled to go into the repair shop next Monday (08/21/23). She said the Town Mechanic did not feel comfortable doing this work himself. Chief McCusker said Unit #2, which recently returned to Northfield after a remount, has been running well and Unit #3 also is doing well. Board member Petty asked how long Unit #1 would be off the road. Chief McCusker is not sure but noted the Town Mechanic made sure the repair shop did have the repair parts there on hand so there would be no further delay waiting for their delivery. Mr. Bagg felt it should be repaired before the end of the week. Chief McCusker then reported that since the Norwich University (NU) students now are returning to Northfield, the ones that are NAS volunteers will help considerably with staffing. She noted that reopening the NU campus also leads to an upsurge in calls for service. Mr. Demaio said the first couple weeks of the fall semester can be pretty busy with minor injuries, etc.

Manager Schulz said the main purpose of today's meeting is for the subcommittee members to develop a recommendation for the other Select Board members regarding the third ambulance unit, which purchased used when Unit #1 was out-of-state for several months being remounted. The NAS members are now requesting that the third unit be retained and fully equipped in order to provide better emergency coverage for the community while also allowing additional opportunities for revenue-generating non-emergency transfers. This matter was discussed at the previous subcommittee meeting (08/03/23) and there were requests for additional information from Board members Petty and Shernock. Chief McCusker and Mr. Bagg have done their best to provide this information. However, the data regarding ambulance unit maintenance costs will not be available today but will be ready soon. Regarding whether having a third ambulance unit in service would result in the need for additional staffing, Chief McCusker noted that she remains the only full-time NAS employee. Her work shift starts at 6:00 a.m. and ends at 2:00 p.m. while the per diem NAS employees typically work twelve (12) hour shifts. Chief McCusker will be attempting to limit employees to eight (8) hour shifts in future as more NU student volunteers return to service. This is part of her overall effort to keep NAS employees from exceeding the maximum allowable number of work hours before they become eligible for work benefits, etc. Mr. Bagg said there is no indication that retaining the third unit would result in increased staffing. Board member Petty asked how dependent this staffing model was on the NU student volunteers being available. Chief McCusker said NAS has about fifteen (15) to twenty (20) NU students who are relatively active covering shift hours. She added that there appeared to be a growing trend of these NU students staying here in Northfield throughout the year. Mr. Demaio said the staffing model that Chief McCusker is considering will provide additional opportunities for NU students to perform regular work hours. He noted that a number of them are considering a career in the healthcare field and thus are just as interested in the work experience as the per diem pay. Chief McCusker said this staffing model, by allowing for additional opportunities for non-emergency transfers to medical facilities, will provide additional revenue for the municipality. Board member Petty believes the municipality will need to budget more for its emergency services in coming years. There also appears to be a trend in other Vermont communities of moving away from relying on volunteer first responders and instead towards professional emergency departments with additional full-time employees as this would provide better staffing stability. Board member Petty thought it might be more useful in the long run to prioritize funding a second full-time NAS position rather than putting more money into equipment. It also seems likely that as the local population ages, there will be additional calls for emergency services in coming years. Board member Petty then noted that fully equipping the third unit would be expensive and so would regularly maintaining that additional vehicle in the future. Chief McCusker said it is difficult to predict whether investing more in staffing or equipment will reap the most benefits in the short- and long-term. Mr. Bagg believes staffing has become relatively stable and there should be no problem providing EMT coverage for three (3) ambulance units. Manager Schulz asked if there have been any recent gaps in staff coverage. Chief McCusker did not believe this was an issue, even for nights and weekends. She does start her own work shift at 6:00 a.m. to ensure early morning coverage is not an issue. Mr. Bagg noted NU student volunteers normally have weekday classes so they actually are more available for nighttime and weekend coverage. He did note that NAS does have to refuse non-emergency transfers on occasion when there are not enough available staff members for the transfer in addition to emergency coverage. Mr. Demaio said NU student volunteers are quite often enthusiastic about participating in non-emergency transfers as they provide valuable practical experience in supervising patients, especially on a long-haul transfer.

Mr. Bagg added that non-emergency transfers are not only valuable revenue sources for the municipality but also benefit the community as a whole as most of the patients involved are Northfield residents being transported between their homes and medical facilities. Board member Petty thought it might be a good idea to prioritize transfers that involved Northfield residents. Chief McCusker said that usually is the case already as the medical facility will first contact the ambulance service from the patient's hometown to see if they are available. Mr. Demaio said when NAS does transport non-Northfield patients between medical facilities it is probably because no other ambulance service is available at that time. Mr. Bagg said Barre Town Ambulance performs the bulk of non-emergency transports in this region because it has three (3) to four (4) full-time employees on daytime duty so they are contacted first by the medical facilities. Board member Petty has heard that Waterbury Ambulance is considering focusing more on non-emergency transports and will purchase an additional ambulance unit. Chief McCusker said that plan may be on hold due to other concerns. Mr. Bagg believes their facility maintenance costs have gone up considerably and unexpectedly so they might have to refocus their efforts elsewhere. Mr. Demaio said comparing NAS to other Vermont ambulance services and their vehicle fleets is sometimes misleading as many services provide a lot of mutual aid support to neighboring communities beyond their normal service coverage areas. In addition, many do not provide facility to facility transfers. Mr. Bagg said Waterbury Ambulance is the service most comparable to NAS and they have three (3) ambulance units at this time.

Board member Shernock asked if the current NAS proposal includes a request for \$66,000 in local American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) funds in order to fully equip the third ambulance unit. Board member Petty said ARPA funds probably would be used if this is to be done during the current fiscal year. Board member Shernock asked what happens with NAS revenue generated by non-emergency transports. Manager Schulz said all NAS revenue goes into the municipality's general fund. The Select Board members make the decision on how this revenue will be spent when they draft the annual town budget. Chief McCusker said there also would be a need to plan ahead for additional vehicle maintenance costs rather than think of this as a one-time expense. Board member Petty would like this subcommittee to make a recommendation to the other Select Board members on this matter. She believes there are four (4) options available. The first option would be to sell the third unit and perhaps use the funds received to hasten the scheduled replacement of the 2017 ambulance (Unit #2), which has had maintenance issues lately. Chief McCusker noted that there is now a nearly two (2) year waiting period between when a new ambulance unit is ordered from the manufacturer and when it is delivered. Board member Petty said the second option would be to retain the third unit but only as a backup that is not fully equipped to be used when one or more of the other units is out of service. Chief McCusker said this was not realistic since it is not possible to move equipment in and out of the third unit on a regular basis. Also, there is nowhere to store an empty unit at the ambulance bay. Board member Petty said the third option was to use \$66,000 in ARPA funds to fully equip the third ambulance and have a trial period (six months?) to determine whether this is a workable decision. The fourth option would be to fully equip the third unit but go forward without the trial period and also budget to purchase a replacement for the 2017 unit. Mr. Bagg felt having a test period for the third unit was vital to determine whether the expected additional revenue was actually generated to make this cost-effective. Board member Petty felt the first and third options were the most feasible.

Mr. Demaio felt as this community grows, including its older population, it will become necessary for our local emergency services to expand as well. He noted that in its 2035 Plan, NU envisions building an additional student dormitory in order to boost enrollment. This probably will mean that service calls to the NU campus will continue to rise in coming years. Board member Petty said if the choice is made to sell the current third unit, there could be additional discussions afterwards about whether purchasing a third ambulance unit would be more justifiable in the future. She would be happy to provide the other Select Board members with the more feasible first and third options for full discussion. Board member Shernock favors trying new things and feels that the test period for a fully equipped third unit might be an opportunity to strengthen community ties with NU, address the needs of a developing town, etc. Mr. Bagg believes the NAS members would favor the third option and he would be willing to provide any information requested to support this request. Board member Petty thought it might be helpful if NAS leadership attended the Select Board regular meeting when this matter would be discussed. Chief McCusker said she would be willing to make a presentation at that time if that would be helpful. Although she would be disappointed if another decision is made, Chief McCusker will understand that this would be a difficult decision with many factors to consider. If this proposal is rejected at this time, it might be possible to revive it at a later time with better arguments, documentation, etc. Board member Petty felt if a trial period is accepted, there would be clear criteria developed to determine whether or not the experiment is a success or failure. Board member Petty asked if the subcommittee should provide a preference for the two (2) options to be presented to the Select Board members. Manager Schulz believes the Select Board members probably would like a subcommittee recommendation. Board member Petty would like the subcommittee to state a preference for the third option. If, instead, the decision is made to sell the current third unit, Board member Petty hopes there will be a future discussion regarding the merits of a third NAS unit. Manager Schulz believes some Select Board members still see the purchase of the used unit last year as just a temporary measure during the remount of Unit #1. He added that it might be helpful if it can be shown that the new equipment purchased for the third unit (i.e., defibrillator, etc.) could be repurposed or resold if the trial period does not meet expectations. Mr. Bagg said the risk of funds being wasted would be rather low.

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 5:16 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

These minutes were approved at the subcommittee meeting of August 28, 2023.