

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
BOARD OF TOWN SELECTMEN
BUDGET MEETING #7
Minutes of January 5, 2017

- I. ROLL CALL.** Chair K. David Maxwell, Selectmen Lynn Doney, Nathan Freeman, Matthew Gadbois, and Kenneth W. Goslant. Also present were Town Manager Jeffrey Schulz, Finance Director Laurie Baroffio, Police Chief James Dziobek, Police Sergeant Brian Hoar, and Chris Bradley.

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

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

III. BUDGET WORK SESSION

Since Police Chief James Dziobek will be retiring by the end of April 2017, he has been working with Police Sergeant Brian Hoar on the proposed FY 2017/2018 budget for the Northfield Police Department (NPD). His added his main intention was to establish a higher level of stability within the NPD, which has seen much turnover in recent years. According to Chief Dziobek, the elements of this stability would be a livable wage; safe and reliable equipment; professional development and advancement; and reliable working conditions and communications. For the NPD, livable wage would mean looking at what other Central Vermont municipalities pay their police officers. Having comparable pay affects both recruitment and retention of police officers. Chief Dziobek said some of the NPD equipment does need to be upgrading. State and federal grant funds are available but it is becoming more common for such grants to require a local match amount. NPD officers are expected to perform various forms of training each year both to remain properly certified and also to learn new skills, etc. that would promote their own individual professional development. NPD officers are encouraged to become invested in the Northfield community and internal advancement provides for proper succession planning. As for working conditions, police officers need to know that they are being properly supported by their department superiors as well as the town officials who make final decisions. As for communications, the safety of police officers often relies upon a solid link between the officer in the field and the central dispatch location. Chief Dziobek feels that these factors would produce a stable environment not just within police departments but almost any other organization.

Chief Dziobek said the budget he submitted to management included funding for a sixth full-time police officer, which he feels is vital to reach the needed level of stability. He joined the NPD in 2008 and for most of his time here this sixth position has been left vacant with the department relying on five (5) full-time officers with a combination of overtime and part-time officers making up the difference. In recent years, however, Vermont has so changed part-time officer training and other requirements that hiring them no longer provides significant budget savings. For example, a part-time officer now cannot go out on solo patrols. Having the sixth full-time officer on board would reduce the need for part-time officers while reducing overtime costs. Chief Dziobek added that should this position be filled, it is possible that there may be some concessions from the NPD union regarding rules governing sick time, overtime, etc. in the new contract now being negotiated.

Police Department Expenditures. Chief Dziobek looked at past NPD budgets and financial statements to determine the basic cost of running the department. Some line items have been slightly raised or lowered. Chair Maxwell said there is a public perception NPD overtime expenses have gotten out of hand in recent years. However, he noted that of the \$34,000 overage in the NPD FY 2015/2016 (i.e., the last completed fiscal year) budget, only about \$10,000 was overtime costs. The rest of the deficit was due to unforeseeable rises in workers compensation and other employee expenses. Therefore, the notion that overtime was the sole cause for this budget overage is incorrect.

Manager Schulz explained that the proposed NPD budget submitted to the Select Board by management does not include the funding for the sixth NPD officer. Therefore, the "Technical" and related line items are based on five (5) full-time NPD officers during FY 2017/2018. Selectman Freeman agrees with Chief Dziobek on the need for the sixth officer. If that does not happen, he feels that the "Overtime" line item needs to be increased above \$10,000 to provide for this. Chief Dziobek noted that due to a recent resignation, he now only has four (4) full-time officers. The department will face increased overtime costs until that position is filled.

It was determined that should a sixth full-time officer be hired, the amount in the "Technical" line item would be raised from \$265,460 to about \$309,000. Manager Schulz noted other line items also would be affected such as workers' compensation, health benefits, etc. Finance Director Laurie Baroffio estimated the total budget increase between \$75,000 and \$95,000 depending on the new officer's qualifications, etc. Other slight increases may be needed in the uniform budget, etc. Selectman Gadbois noted that this would bring the entire annual NPD budget to over \$800,000. That seems a lot for a town this size. Chair Maxwell asked if another NPD vehicle would be required. Chief Dziobek said the current vehicle fleet is sufficient.

Selectman Goslant asked why the replacement for the officer who resigned has not been hired. Chief Dziobek said that the former officer submitted his formal resignation papers a couple weeks ago so some time is needed to properly advertise for his replacement. Selectman Goslant felt that this latest departure has been anticipated for some time and felt that the NPD should be more pro-active in preparing for it. Chief Dziobek said that there has been some interest expressed by already certified officers regarding the position. However, there is a limited pool of certified police officers available and willing to change departments. The alternative is to hire uncertified officers but then the municipality would face the extra expenses of sending them to the Vermont Police Academy, having other officers cover their time during this training, etc. Because of past experience, there now is a strong preference for hiring police officers who have their certification in hand. However, even though there is room in smaller departments like the NPD for professional advancement, Chief Dziobek noted that larger departments do provide higher startup pay and benefits. In addition, there has been a recent emphasis in the NPD for community policing and not all police officers want to take part in this.

Selectman Goslant thought it seems the NPD has trouble retaining five (5) full-time officers and now there is a recommendation for a sixth. Chief Dziobek felt that having a sixth officer on board would promote officer retention as it would provide the aforementioned level of departmental stability that he feels is so vital. Also, should an officer decide to leave, it would be much easier for the NPD to function one officer down when there are five (5) remaining. Selectman Goslant asked if the officers who left recently did so for higher pay. Sergeant Hoar said police officers leave one department for another for a number of factors that doesn't always include compensation. Some preferred a shorter work commute, some wanted to work at a larger department in a more urban setting, etc. He did feel NPD pay and benefits were competitive to other departments in the area. Chair Maxwell added that salary disparity doesn't seem to be a major concern during the current NPD union contract negotiations. It also is his understanding that police officer recruitment and retention is a nationwide problem. Sergeant Hoar agreed that it now is the biggest problem facing police departments. Manager Schulz noted that there are about fifty (50) police officer positions currently vacant in Vermont alone.

Ms. Baroffio asked if requiring NPD officers to perform solo patrols affected the ability to attract new officers. Chief Dziobek said it depended on the individual officer. When he started, solo shifts were much more common but more recent training programs seem to focus on not allowing officers to go into potentially dangerous situations alone. This especially is emphasized in larger departments. Chief Dziobek added that having the sixth officer would allow for greater assistance to the officers on patrol.

Chris Bradley said based on Chief Dziobek's long experience as both a patrolman and chief, he feels that the Select Board members should take seriously his request for a sixth officer. He added that this issue was reviewed in 2012 when Mr. Bradley was on the Select Board and brought up then was an FBI study indicating the proper ratio of police officers to local population. It was found that the percentage in Northfield was about half of the average in Vermont. He felt that this compromised officer safety, provided them with unreasonable workloads, and has resulted in high level of officer turnover. Mr. Bradley understands the need for fiscal restraint and accountability but also believes that budget savings cannot justify this. Selectman Goslant believes that Chief Dziobek has said this community has been kept safe with five (5) full-time officers. Mr. Bradley said Chief Dziobek has no alternative but to work with what is provided to him. He added that Chief Dziobek is the one who has had to hear complaints about excessive overtime and part-time officer expenses when this is caused by a situation not of his making. Mr. Bradley therefore strongly advocates for the hiring of a sixth full-time police officer.

Police Department Capital Improvement Plan. Manager Schulz said there is about \$14,500 in the "Building Improvements" account with an additional \$1,000 budgeted in coming years. Some minor building repairs and other maintenance, i.e. painting, should be done this summer. Selectman Goslant asked if the Police Station's heating/cooling system has always been a problem. Sergeant Hoar hasn't noticed any problems when he's been in the building. Chief Dziobek said one of the cooling "towers" did have to be replaced. Selectman Goslant asked if the structure had any major problems. Manager Schulz said there was nothing significant.

Police Department Capital Equipment Plan. Manager Schulz said that the bulk of these accounts are dedicated to the scheduled replacement of NPD vehicles. One of these vehicles, the 2010 Dodge Charger, is scheduled for replacement during the current fiscal year. He believes that the current balances and planned future set asides are in good shape. Chair Maxwell noted a separate account for radio replacement. Chief Dziobek noted that the federal government requires law enforcement communications to be all digital by 2020. The current equipment is digital compatible but money needs to be set aside for when a two-way radio fails. Chair Maxwell noted that there is about \$5,000 in the "Computers" account with the estimated cost of the upgrade at \$6,000. Chief Dziobek believes that this upgrade is something that should be done before the new Police Chief is hired in a couple months. The current computers now has Microsoft Windows 7 but need to be upgraded to the latest version (Windows 10) as soon as possible. Chair Maxwell saw there is about \$7,400 in the "Office Equipment" account. Chief Dziobek said that the Police Station has two (2) copiers; one is a color copier and the other black-and-white. Although both are working fine at the moment, they have been around for some time and eventually will need to be replaced.

There being no other questions, Chair Maxwell thanked Chief Dziobek and Sergeant Hoar for being here tonight.

Town Budget Status. Manager Schulz said that all the proposed budgets have been presented to the Select Board. The remaining two (2) budget meetings next week (01/10/17 and 01/12/17) would be dedicated to reviewing the information already presented as well as any decisions that still need to be made. Selectman Gadbois asked how higher the proposed budget was over the previous fiscal year. Manager Schulz said that the proposed budget was 3.2% higher. Ms. Baroffio said that property taxes were expected to rise 5.6%, which would add 4.6¢ to the tax rates. Selectman Gadbois asked what the impact would be should a sixth NPD officer be hired. As that figure was not immediately available, Chair Maxwell would like to see it at the next budget meeting. Selectman Goslant has been through this budget process several times and he does not see anywhere to further cut the budget this year without causing real distress to the community. He also doesn't see how additional funding can be found to pay for a sixth officer without an excessive tax increase. Selectman Goslant would like the Select Board to look at ways to obtain additional revenue, such as higher fees for cemetery plots, etc. He also felt that there might be some savings found in the Highway budget by sub-contracting backroads maintenance; privatizing some of the one-, two-, and three-house roads; etc. Chair Maxwell would like the Select Board members to forward to him their suggestions to cut expenses and/or raise additional revenue before next Tuesday's budget meeting. An additional budget meeting may need to be scheduled (01/17/17?) if the budget is not finalized by the end of next week.

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

V. ADJOURNMENT. Motion by Selectman Freeman, seconded by Selectman Gadbois, to adjourn.
Motion passed 5-0-0.

The Board adjourned at 7:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeffrey Schulz

Jeffrey Schulz, Acting Clerk

An audio recording of this meeting is available in the Town Manager's Office.

These minutes were approved at the regular Select Board meeting of January 24, 2017.