

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT**  
**BOARD OF TOWN SELECTMEN**  
**SPECIAL MEETING**  
**Minutes of September 18, 2017**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Chair Kenneth W. Goslant, Selectmen Lynn Doney (absent), Julie H. Goodrich (absent), Kenneth Johnson, and K. David Maxwell. Also present were Town Manager Jeffrey Schulz, Acting Clerk Kenneth McCann, Bonnie Donahue (Northfield Promise Community), Will Eberle (Northfield Promise Community), Anne Toolan (Northfield Promise Community), Sue Toolan (Northfield Promise Community), Rebecca Pearish (Northfield Promise Community), Jaime Cotton (Northfield Promise Community), Briana Howard (Northfield Promise Community), Julie Sipple-Silowash (Northfield Promise Community), Eric Howard (Northfield Promise Community), Laurie Gossens (Northfield Promise Community), Leslie Striebe (Northfield Promise Community), Sally Davidson, Richard Wobby, Jill Donahue, Kristen Gadbois, Mary Corrigan, Colin Bright, Lydia Petty, Jamie Nair, Christa Wells, Carolyn Stevens, Dan Morris, Elroy Hill, Toby Wells, Kenneth Hepburn, Josh Sanders, Dominic Spillane, and Steve Davis.

Chair Goslant called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m.

- II. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE.** The Board members and the public were asked to rise and recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

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

**III. DISCUSSION**

- a. Northfield Promise Community Steering Committee - Playground Project Grant Funds.** At last week's Select Board regular meeting (09/12/17), the Steering Committee of the Northfield Promise Community announced Northfield has been awarded \$150,000 in state grant funds which must be used within the next year "to improve the educational and developmental outcomes for children" in the community. After soliciting and receiving public feedback through several revues, the Steering Committee asked for Select Board permission to build a playground targeted for children 0-6 years old near the downtown area. The specific site under consideration is the municipal property behind the Police Station on Wall Street. There is a September 20, 2017 deadline for the Steering Committee to notify the State whether or not this particular project can proceed. As Select Board members wanted additional information and therefore were reluctant to make a decision at that meeting, a special meeting was scheduled for tonight.

Selectman Maxwell had questions about this proposal that he submitted to Manager Schulz including zoning concerns, whether there is a covenant governing how this property must be used, etc. Selectman Maxwell feels now he has the answers he needed. There also is a propane tank used for heating the Police Station near the proposed playground site. Selectman Maxwell asked if this tank could be relocated without too much difficulty. Manager Schulz would have to review this matter further but doesn't feel relocation would cause too much trouble.

Steering Committee member Bonnie Donahue then reiterated the reasons the Committee has focused on this particular property. The feedback received highlighted the need for a playground near the downtown area so it would be within walking distance for parents of young children. She added Memorial Park on King Street is too far a hike for young children and the facilities there are more geared for older children and are not fully accessible to all ages of children. Ms. Donahue felt the new playground area, like the new natural park on Water Street, would be a welcome addition to Northfield's existing public park system. Rebecca Pearish added unscheduled play with similarly aged children has an important role in kindergarten readiness.

Richard Wobby believes \$150,000 is a lot of money to spend on an additional playground area. He doesn't feel this project would do much to assist local economic development and he would like the funds used in another way. Will Eberle noted the State specified these grant funds must be used to benefit children 0-6 years of age to prepare them for kindergarten. Mr. Wobby would like to see how the \$150,000 grant funds have been budgeted as well as whether the proposed site can be considered "Brownfields." Ms. Donahue said soil testing the site for possible contaminants would be done in the early stages of the project. Mr. Eberle said the Committee would like to know if it has the Select Board's permission to use this site before it can finalize the project budget. Ms. Donahue said the Committee looked at several possible sites near the downtown area and this one was considered optimal due to its proximity to downtown businesses, etc. Mr. Eberle added one project premise is the park would be a magnet bringing more people to the downtown area on a more regular basis.

Christa Wells moved to Northfield fifteen (15) years ago and she agrees Memorial Park does not have many attractions for young children (other than the public pool which is open for only two months each summer). She is grateful to the Committee for obtaining these grant funds as this town now has few public facilities geared towards pre-school age children. Jamie Cotton doesn't see why this project would be in conflict with Memorial Park as each would have separate roles. Kristen Gadbois noted a recent survey found Northfield to be the thirty-third (33<sup>rd</sup>) most child-friendly community in Vermont (out of 75 towns ranked). This type of project might attract more young families to live and work in Northfield thus expanding the tax base. Kenneth Hepburn thinks the concept of this park is good but is concerned the upcoming deadline might force the Select Board to make a hasty decision.

Dominic Spillane noted there are not many opportunities for youth play during the winter months. He asked if any of this grant money could be used towards indoor facilities. Mr. Eberle said as a possible separate project the Committee has been looking at underutilized indoor spaces to be used for winter recreation. This concern could be the subject of a future grant application. Ms. Wells added although \$150,000 seems like a lot of money for playground equipment, purchasing proper safety- and ADA-compliant play equipment is quite expensive.

Lydia Petty doesn't know too much about the targeted site but she does want any new playground built in the downtown area. This way visiting the new park would be an option when trips are made downtown for shopping, meals, etc. This is in contrast to going to Memorial Park, which doesn't have nearby amenities and therefore requires a special trip. Ms. Petty also believes having the new park in a highly visible location is very important.

Dan Morris has young children and also favors having a playground area near the Common. He felt this would be a positive addition to the community. Julie Sipple-Silowash moved to Northfield recently when her husband took a position at Norwich University. They decided to live in Northfield rather than Barre because there appeared to be more community spirit here. She felt having a playground park in the downtown area truly would enhance the visiting downtown experience as residents would be able to pay their bills, purchase meals, visit the park, etc. Eric Howard is a local teacher and noted the proposed park is close to the path leading to the footbridge that so many children enjoy visiting.

Josh Sanders is concerned Northfield already has three public parks (Memorial Park, the Falls Park, and the Water Street Park) and he wonders how taxpayers will be able to afford their future maintenance costs. Mr. Eberle noted \$10,000 from the grant amount would be provided to the municipality to cover the initial years of the proposed park's maintenance.

Mr. Wobby remains concerned about the quick need for a decision absent a budget available for inspection. Ms. Donahue said a budget cannot be finalized until permission to use this particular property has been obtained. Mr. Eberle said numerous meetings have been held over the past three (3) months to gauge support for a playground area targeted for preschoolers and to determine the best location. The Committee needs to inform the State by the deadline (09/20/17) whether permission to use this municipal property has been obtained. Chair Goslant doesn't believe the Select Board members were invited to any of these meetings. (Ms. Donahue later noted Select Board member Julie Goodrich and Recreation Committee Chair Michele Langley had attended some of these meetings.) He added the Select Board must make decisions for the benefit of all community members and not just those focused on this particular issue. The municipality already has three public parks as well as a Recreation Committee advising the Select Board on how to maintain and/or improve the park system, conducts periodic fundraisers for the purchase of new equipment, etc. If Memorial Park isn't suitable for all of Northfield's youth perhaps there should be more of an effort to make it so rather than diverting resources elsewhere. Chair Goslant appreciates what the Northfield Promise Community has done but still has concerns about their request. Mr. Hepburn asked if the \$150,000 grant would disappear if the Select Board doesn't grant permission tonight. Ms. Pearish said this was a distinct possibility unless another site (or use for the funds) is found very quickly.

Mr. Wobby asked if any zoning concerns need to be resolved. Ms. Donahue said the Committee would like the Select Board's permission to move forward before it approached the Development Review Board regarding any possible zoning issues. Elroy Hill regularly attends Select Board meetings and he feels this proposal is a good one. He is a great-grandfather and understands how much young children would enjoy using the new playground park.

Selectman Johnson asked if the specific location for the proposed park had to be decided tonight. He favored the concept of this park but had some concerns about the property under consideration as the municipality may have plans for the site in coming years. Mr. Eberle said alternate sites had been considered but public feedback and other factors pointed to the area by the Police Station. Selectman Johnson suggested additional summertime activities for young children could be scheduled at Memorial park. Ms. Donahue said the survey respondents were adamant in having a playground area in the downtown area. The Committee had received a copy of the draft plans of the proposed expansion of the Northfield Fire Station to accommodate both the Northfield Fire Department and the Ambulance Service. The footprint of the proposed park would not interfere with these plans. Brianna Howard said Memorial Park and its facilities are good for school-age children but not for younger ones. Its main detraction for young families is its out-of-the-way location.

As indicated earlier, Mr. Wobby did have some concerns regarding this proposal but now believes the Select Board should grant the Committee's request. This is \$150,000 in grant money ready to be used for community enhancement. Ms. Pearish said the addition of this park and the one on Water Street would provide young families with various recreational options in the community, such as spending some time in the new natural park and then visiting the new playpark.

Chair Goslant still has a number of concerns regarding the use of the proposed site off Wall Street. This includes the possible Fire Station expansion, loss of potential off-Common parking spaces, limited access to the businesses in the area, etc. In addition, this area is used to store the snow removed from the Common area after severe storms. It also has been considered a possible location should a replacement municipal building be built. The current facility is in very poor condition. Ms. Donahue noted the possible Fire Station expansion is accommodated in their plans and there is a possibility of adding some new parking spaces near the proposed playground.

Chair Goslant still believes the maintenance costs for both this new park and the Water Street Park will be much higher than most people think. He added the municipality has expensive projects coming up in the near future, such as stormwater diversion, sidewalk repair/replacement, etc., so this is not a good time to take on additional fiscal responsibilities.

Chair Goslant asked if it were possible for the Select Board to grant approval of the proposed playground without specifying the exact location. Ms. Pearish said if the concept of a downtown-area playground was approved, this might be acceptable to the State. However, it would not be possible to accept these grant funds if the intention is to divert them to upgrade Memorial Park. Mr. Wobby suggested the survey results might have been different if upgrading Memorial Park had been provided as an option. Mr. Eberle said overwhelming public feedback favored a downtown playpark. He added since the grant's intention is to prepare young children for kindergarten, the survey was directed to young families.

Jill Donahue owns the Northfield Pharmacy and she felt some of the downtown parking problems Chair Goslant referenced might be alleviated if other Common business owners could be encouraged to get their employees to park elsewhere. Colin Bright noted Northfield Savings Bank has a number of empty parking spaces since its corporate headquarters moved to Berlin. Perhaps these could be opened to public use. Mr. Bright also feels the loss of a temporary snow storage area shouldn't be a sufficient reason to withhold permission for a new playpark that clearly is popular. Ms. Donahue is grateful to all those who came tonight to show their support for the Northfield Promise Community's proposal and to the Select Board members for holding this special meeting before the state's deadline.

Motion by Selectman Maxwell, seconded by Selectman Johnson, to approve the request of the Northfield Promise Community Steering Committee for a preschool playground to be sited at the proposed municipal property behind the Police Station provided all variances and other zoning permits are obtained and the Committee consider increasing the amount set aside for future maintenance costs to \$25,000. Selectman Johnson still has concerns about this particular location. **Motion failed 1-2-0, with Selectmen Goslant and Johnson voting in the negative.**

Motion by Selectman Goslant, seconded by Selectman Johnson, that the Select Board grant approval for a preschool playground on municipal property at a site to be determined as close to downtown as possible and commit to work with the Northfield Promise Community Steering Committee to identify a location as soon as possible. Mr. Eberle remains concerned the State may withdraw the grant funds if a firm commitment to location is not given at this time. Chair Goslant is hopeful the State will provide the Select Board members with a little more time given most of them only learned about this matter less than a week ago. **Motion passed 3-0-0.**

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

**V. ADJOURNMENT.** Motion by Selectman Maxwell, seconded by Selectman Johnson, to adjourn. **Motion passed 3-0-0.**

The Board adjourned at 9:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Kenneth L. McCann*

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

These minutes were approved at the regular Select Board meeting of September 26, 2017.