

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD REGULAR MEETING
Minutes of May 12, 2020

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Julie H. Goodrich, Nathaniel Miller, Charles Morse (7:25 p.m.), and John Stevens. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Acting Clerk Kenneth McCann, Lawton Rutter (Ambulance Chief), Laura Hill-Eubanks (Chair, Planning Commission), Dennis Donahue (Utility Commission), and Bill Smith.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. In keeping with Governor Phil Scott's COVID-19 "stay at home" directive, the meeting was held remotely.

- II. SET/ADJUST AGENDA.** There were no changes to the posted agenda.

III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):

- a. Bill Smith: Community Gardens.** Mr. Smith has been speaking recently with Board member Miller, Board member Stevens, and Manager Schulz about the possibility of creating a community garden in the downtown area where residents could grow their own vegetables, etc. He understands Bonnie Donahue also has been working on this possibility so Mr. Smith has spoken to her as well. Mr. Smith believes the area to the west of the Fire Station on Wall Street would be an optimal location as the site has water access, public parking, etc. Mr. Smith said the growers could donate any extra foodstuffs to local foodbanks and this also would be a good way of getting local youth out of the house and involved in community activities. Mr. Smith said there may be negative aspects regarding the concept and/or the proposed site but he would like to start a conversation about the possibilities. Board member Goodrich thought it was a good idea but there might be the need to install some fencing in order to keep out trespassers (i.e. human and non-human "varmints"). Mr. Smith agreed and added the first step should be to have the soil tested to determine if the site is suitable. He added he was involved with the construction of the Fire Station in the late 1980s and believes the soil in the area was added during the building process. Board member Miller asked what had been on the site before the Fire Station. Mr. Smith said a foundation for a railroad roundhouse had been discovered during the construction. It was agreed this raised the possibility of lead paint on the site. Manager Schulz said it should be a simple process to collect some soil and send it to UVM Extension for testing. The same was done when the new children's parks were built in the Falls Park and by the Brown Public Library.

Board member Miller also felt this was a good idea but it might require some planning on who would administer the project. As he doesn't want to add this to the Recreation Committee's responsibilities, he suggested a new group could be formed. Chair Maxwell agreed there would be questions about the size of the community garden, how it would be subdivided, who could participate, etc. Mr. Smith said a lot of the uncertainties depend on the amount of initial public interest. Board member Miller said if a lot of people have interest, it might be necessary to hold a lottery to determine who would get the first plots. A waiting list then would be established, which is common practice for such community gardens. Chair Maxwell has heard previous suggestions for community gardens but earlier proposed sites gained some opposition due to the proximity of neighbors fearing excessive noise and foot traffic. He asked what action Mr. Smith would like from the Select Board members tonight. Mr. Smith would like their verbal support so that the soil testing and other initial planning stages can continue. The Select Board consensus was to support Mr. Smith's efforts. Chair Maxwell then thanked Mr. Smith for starting the process on what could become a true community treasure.

IV. DEPARTMENT HEAD REPORT

- a. Ambulance Chief Lawton Rutter.** Chief Rutter said the Coronavirus pandemic has resulted in some interesting moments for the Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS) as EMTs have transported both confirmed and suspected COVID-19 patients. On the positive side, NAS has been receiving a steady flow of protective equipment and supplies, such as masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, etc. that it is willing to share with other municipal departments if needed. Chief Rutter said call volume "hit a wall" in mid-March when the Norwich University (NU) students left town for Spring Break and did not return as the campus was shut down. Callouts picked up slightly in early April but then experienced another sharp decline. He felt this was largely due to potential patients being discouraged from going to hospitals unless it was a "life-or-death" situation. This has resulted in a significant reduction in non-emergency transports and hospital admissions, which has caused a seventeen percent (17%) decrease in billable callouts so far this year. Chief Rutter hopes to see more encouraging news in the next few months as the state slowly reopens.

NAS did receive federal funding intended to compensate for the loss of revenue due to COVID-19 concerns. Chief Rutter is expecting additional FEMA funds to cover the cost of purchasing pandemic supplies and he will remain alert to any new grant opportunities. Despite the recent callout drops, FY 2019/2020 NAS revenues are about eighty percent (80%) of the anticipated amount and he hopes things will pick up before the end of the fiscal year (06/30/20). Chief Rutter said the NAS building remains closed to the public and there is constant disinfection of the facility and the equipment stored there. The goal is to avoid any COVID-19 contamination and keep the EMTs healthy. Although in-person training has been suspended, online classes are available and EMTs are encouraged to participate.

Board member Stevens said the NAS seems to be operating as well as can be expected under the circumstances. He noted the Northfield Mutual Aid Task Force has asking if NAS personnel would be willing to visit local businesses that have remained open as well as those planning to reopen in the near future in order to stress the importance of protective equipment, social distancing, etc. Chief Rutter said he was willing to do this provided he received authority from the municipality to take these actions. Board member Goodrich thanked Chief Rutter for his continued commitment to the community at this difficult time. She did want to remind everyone that public use of protective masks and gloves is not a state mandate at this time but merely encouraged. Chief Rutter said he always tries to convey accurate and up-to-date information when interacting with the public.

Chair Maxwell asked how was the level of NAS staffing. Chief Rutter said it was tight. He has been able to bring back some NU student volunteers back to the state as “essential workers.” The State of Vermont also is allowing supervisors to reinstate EMTs with expired licenses during the current crisis. Provisional licensing also is being allowed. Chair Maxwell then thanked Chief Rutter for his good work and the valuable information provided tonight.

V. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- a. **April 28, 2020 (Regular Meeting).** Motion by Board member Goodrich, seconded by Board member Morse, to approve the minutes. Board member Goodrich suggested a couple minor edits. **Motion to approve the revised minutes passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **May 7, 2020 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Goodrich, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VI. APPROVAL OF BILLS

- a. **Approval of Warrant 21-20.** Motion by Board member Goodrich, seconded by Board member Morse, to approve Warrant 21-20 in the amount of \$158,469.05. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **Approval of Biweekly Payroll through May 3, 2020.** Motion by Board member Goodrich, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the biweekly payroll in the amount of \$93,073.62. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VII. SELECT BOARD

- a. **Northfield Town Plan.** Chair Maxwell said many discussions have been held and many suggested revisions have been put forward regarding the draft Town Plan the Planning Commission (PC) submitted to the Select Board members last November. This includes two (2) public hearings (01/14/20 and 02/11/20) and numerous public meetings on the topic. Chair Maxwell believes now is the time to resolve all remaining questions and approve a version that can be returned to the PC for further action. Manager Schulz said if the Select Board members can achieve consensus on revised wording, the approved changes will be forwarded to the PC to be incorporated into the full document. The Select Board members would need to hold one additional public hearing before giving its final approval to the new Town Plan. The document then would be sent to the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC), which would determine whether there are any conflicts with state law or the town plans of neighboring communities. If there are no problems, the Town Plan then would go into effect. Manager Schulz said the document dated February 13, 2020 is the only full listing of debated sections of the Town Plan along with alternate language. PC Chair Laura Hill-Eubanks recently wrote a separate memo that addresses concerns over the plan’s attempt to discourage development in areas with elevations above 1,800 feet.

Chair Maxwell was hoping to get an updated version of the 02/13/20 document indicating which of the proposed revisions have been accepted by Select Board consensus. Manager Schulz doesn’t believe there has been any recorded consensus on any of the matters under dispute. For purposes of discussion, Board member Morse would like a motion on the floor for Town Plan approval. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Miller, to approve the Northfield Town Plan draft dated November 18, 2019 with all revisions authorized by the Select Board members.

As indicated in the 02/13/20 document, the VISION statement on the plan's first page has been a contentious issue. Board member Stevens would like to insert wording stating all local economic development must be in compliance with state law. He also would like deleted references to hiring an Economic Development Director (EDD) restored in the document. Board member Morse agrees with this since Northfield voters did authorize creation of this position on Town Meeting Day (03/03/20). Board member Miller has no objections provided there is no timeline for hiring this individual in this period of economic uncertainty. Board member Goodrich was the first person to object to including specific references to the EDD position in the Town Plan. Since this would be a municipal employee under the direction of the Municipal Manager, Board member Goodrich doesn't see the need for the position to be specified in the plan. Board member Stevens feels since the plan encourages local economic development, this new position should be indicated as one tool to achieve this. Board member Goodrich noted the initial proposal was to establish this position for a three-year trial period. Since the approved Town Plan would be in effect until 2027, she doesn't want the position codified in the document should this trial period prove unsuccessful. Board members Stevens and Morse both would like the EDD references retained.

Board member Morse noted he provided his own list of suggested revisions to the Select Board members in an email last Friday (05/08/20). He now emphasized that the Town Plan is an overview of local goals for the community. Local zoning regulations, the revision of which the PC members will next address, have enforcement authority. Board member Morse said he found a few nitpicks in the document, such as the plan referring to the Cheney Farm as a community water source when it is in fact a storage area serving as a water supply. He added that some of the suggested revisions would conflict with the stated long- and short-term goals listed at the end of the document. At this point, he personally doesn't think whether the EDD is specified in the plan is important enough to further delay approval of the Town Plan. Board member Morse does agree with the elimination of the passage (p. 53) that calls for the establishment of a "minimum rental housing code" as he felt this was an overreach of local authority. As for future land use recommendations based on area average density and minimum lot sizes, Board member Morse would like rural property owners to have some flexibility when it came to subdividing their land. However, he also felt too much ambiguity would make it difficult for the PC members to create effective zoning regulations. Board member Morse therefore favor reinstating the minimal lot sizes that have been recommended for deletion from the document.

Ms. Hill-Eubanks said in drafting the document there was an attempt to move away from specific lot sizes in favor of encouraging a certain levels of population density in different parts of the community. This is in accordance with the plan's general goal of trying to focus future development and population growth towards existing residential neighborhoods along Vermont Route 12 (i.e. Northfield Center, Northfield Village, and Northfield Falls). She also believes the PC members will be able to develop revised zoning regulations even with the lack of specific numbers (i.e. minimum lot sizes) in the Town Plan. Board member Morse will go along with Ms. Hill-Eubanks' recommendation. This is with the understanding that when the revised zoning regulations are drafted, they will go through a similar public process in order to obtain Select Board approval.

Board member Goodrich believes the plan should anticipate any possible restrictions that could be incorporated in the zoning regulations. She doesn't want to create a situation that will allow for too many mandates on property owners. Ms. Hill-Eubanks noted the previous Town Plan (adopted in 2014) did not specify minimum lot sizes. Since the proposed plan would be in effect through 2027, there is an attempt to have flexible language that would reflect perhaps changing circumstances over this period. As indicated previously, the next revision of the zoning regulations will go through a long and public approval process with many opportunities to address possibly contentious issues. Ms. Hill-Eubanks said the fact that such matters are complex and sometimes controversial is the reason specific numbers are omitted in favor of general goals. Chair Maxwell favors removing the numbers in favor of the general descriptions of average density goals for various parts of the community.

Chair Maxwell asked if homeowners in the Northfield Village area be adversely affected by changes in population density goals. Ms. Hill-Eubanks said concerns were raised by residents about the downtown area roughly bordered by South Main Street, Prospect Street, Highland Avenue, and Slate Avenue being designated as "High Density Residential." She noted this area already includes multi-family structures as well as access to municipal water and sewer. Ms. Hill-Eubanks said there has been a suggestion that a historic district committee be formed to protect the historic nature of these neighborhoods by having a say in future development. She felt the current wording in the proposed Town Plan would achieve this same goal and this could be codified in the zoning regulations. Board member Morse believes the Town Plan will not adversely change any neighborhoods in the downtown area. After further discussion, the Board consensus was that the density definitions should be left as proposed.

Chair Maxwell asked what was Manager Schulz's recommendation on how the Select Board members should proceed tonight. Manager Schulz said there were two (2) basic options. The first would be for the Select Board members to agree to approve the plan tonight with all of the revisions agreed upon by consensus. Manager Schulz then will draft a new document that he will forward to the PC listing all approved revisions. The second course would be for the Select Board members to withhold approval until they have themselves reviewed and accepted the list of changes. Manager Schulz would favor the first approach as it would allow the PC to immediately start the process of incorporating the approved revisions into the full document. When the plan has been finalized in this manner, it will be made available for further public comment prior to the scheduling of the final public hearing. It would be possible to tweak wording in the document prepared for the public hearing so long as any changes made at that stage are not considered substantial.

The Select Board members then went through number of approved revisions agreed upon this evening (in addition to those specified in the 02/13/20 document), such as re-designating Cheney farm as a water "source" rather than "supply." A statement noting the importance of preserving the historic character of certain neighborhoods will be inserted into the "Future Land Use Recommendations" on page 12. The specific references to hiring an Economic Development Director will be struck. Board member Miller asked if Board member Goodrich still had objections to the plan's discouragement of development at higher elevations. Board member Goodrich said Ms. Hill-Eubanks' memo had cleared up the concerns she had.

Motion passed 5-0-0.

- b. Water and Sewer Rates.** Manager Schulz said after numerous meetings, the Utility Commissioners have created a FY 2020/2021 Water and Sewer Department budgets along with the rates that would go into effect on July 1, 2020. Due to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the Northfield community, the consensus was to keep the rates the same for the time being. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Miller, to approve the proposed water and sewer rates. Board member Morse felt due diligence was done when creating the budgets and it is possible to revisit the rates in a few months should it be determined rate increases are needed. Board member Stevens serves on the Water & Wastewater Commission as the Select Board's appointed representative. He felt a one percent (1%) increase might have been justified to cover any possible emergencies but he will accept the rates as proposed. Board member Miller has no objections. Board member Goodrich would like to have seen additional funding for future sewer line extensions.

Dennis Donahue is an elected member of both the Water & Wastewater Commission and the Electric Utility Commission. He said one factor in not raising the rates at this time was that many residents have seen their income decrease due to reduced work hours, etc. Mr. Donahue said there was no desire to add to their problems by making them pay more for water and sewer. Fortunately, payments on old water bonds was suspended during the current crisis and this will allow for more fiscal flexibility in the short term. As for sewer line extensions, the large expense of such projects means they would need to be fully discussed and authorized by the Select Board members before the budgeting process can commence.

Chair Maxwell asked when the water and sewer rates were last increased. Manager Schulz said there had been a 3.9% water rate increase and a 1.1% sewer rate increase when the current rates (FY 2019/2020) were approved in May 2019. Before that, there had been a 9.2% increase in water rates in FY 2016/2017 and a 5% increase in sewer rates in FY 2014/2015. There were no increases in other recent years.

Chair Maxwell noted the state permit for the Northfield Wastewater Treatment Facility (WWTF) is due for recertification in the next couple years. He asked if new state mandates on phosphorus, etc. might require extensive facility renovations. Manager Schulz said the Select Board probably will need to start budgeting for a facility upgrade in a few years. However, the construction phase probably would not be for at least eight (8) years.

Board member Morse asked if the proposed budgets anticipated the possibility the municipal pool might not open this summer. Manager Schulz said it did along with other such possibilities as the NU campus not fully reopening this fall and other local businesses continuing to operate at reduced levels. He felt the aforementioned suspension of bond payments should help us "weather this storm." Board member Morse agreed there are a lot of unknown factors at this time. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

- c. Appointment of Various Town Officials.** The terms of several Select Board-appointed Town positions will expire this spring. The vacancies were advertised and the current office holders were contacted to determine whether they would like to be reappointed.

1. Conservation Commission. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Miller, to appoint Brad Johnson to the Conservation Commission. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

2. **Development Review Board.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Miller, to reappoint Colin T. Bright to the Development Review Board. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
3. **Recreation Committee.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Miller, to appoint Lynn Doney and reappoint Bruce Wright to the Recreation Committee. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
4. **Tree Warden.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Miller, to reappoint Russ Barrett as Tree Warden. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
5. **First Constable.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Miller, to reappoint Richard Wobby as First Constable. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
6. **Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC) Representative.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Miller, to reappoint Laura Hill-Eubanks as CVRPC Representative. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
7. **CVRPC Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) Representative and Alternate.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Miller, to reappoint Jeff Schulz as CVRPC TAC Representative and Patrick DeMasi as the alternate representative. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
8. **Central Vermont Fiber Representative.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Miller, to reappoint Raymond Pelletier as Northfield's Central Vermont Fiber Representative. **Motion passed 5-0-0.** Board member Morse said the current pandemic has shown the importance of extending high-speed internet to the more rural areas of Vermont. He felt a CV Fiber alternate representative should be appointed so this important work can continue without delay. Manager Schulz said the municipality will advertise for possible applicants.

VIII. TOWN MANAGER'S REPORT

- a. **Municipal Financial Situation.** Manager Schulz said property tax collections appear to be on schedule. Friday, May 15, 2020 is the deadline for FY 2019/2020 tax payments so we will have a better picture of the municipality's financial situation afterwards. Financial statements for the current fiscal year to date (07/01/19 to 04/30/20) were distributed in the Select Board packets. There appear to be no major areas for concern.
- b. **Highway Department Update, etc.** Manager Schulz said the Highway Department has been very active in recent weeks with road grading, etc. The employees have been working split shifts in order to conform to COVID-19 social distancing requirements but should be back to full work schedules as the municipality starts to reopen. Manager Schulz said he still needs to have the conversation with Municipal Building employees regarding when the building should reopen to the public, what additional precautions need be put in place, etc.
- c. **Union Brook Road Reconstruction Project.** Manager Schulz is still working with Project Engineer Ron Lyon (DuBois & King) on finalizing the engineering report. When this is done, the project RFP will be drafted and distributed to the Select Board members for comment before being advertised. Mr. Lyon has suggested additional surveying work on culverts, etc. that would cost an additional \$7,000. Mr. Lyon also advises addressing the road's "big dip" with additional pre-construction preparations. Manager Schulz said such minor cost overruns are not unusual for a road reconstruction project of this scope and expense. Board member Stevens did not object to spending a little more in order to get the "big dip" problem fixed once and for all. The other Select Board members concurred. With this consensus, Manager Schulz will move forward on this.
- d. **South Main Street Sidewalk Replacement Project.** Manager Schulz included a draft RFP for this project in the packets. He is ready to move forward on this if the Select Board members are comfortable with the current level of financing for this project.
- e. **South Main Street Road Repair.** There has been a bump in the road near NU's Plumley Armory for several months after the installation of new utility pipe. NU hired a contractor to make final repairs to the road no later than June 2020. It might be necessary to divert traffic around the Crescent during the construction phase of the project. There were no objections.
- f. **Northfield Electric Department (NED) Outage Report.** Manager Schulz received an email from the Vermont Public Power Supply Authority (VPPSA) confirming NED will not incur any penalties for power outages during 2019 as all performance targets were met.

IX. BOARD MEMBERS' COMMENTS, CONCERNS, QUESTIONS

- a. **Road Grading Schedule.** Board member Morse was grateful for the road grading schedule that was included in the written Manager's Report. He was contacted contemporaneously by a resident who had concerns about the condition of his road. Board member Morse was able to happily report the road was scheduled for grading in the next couple days.
- b. **CERV Land Purchase.** Board member Stevens asked about the status of this purchase, which would allow for additional parking at the new CERV facility on Kent Street. Manager Schulz was able to get the finalized purchase agreement from the attorney. He forwarded it to CERV Board President Wendy Rae, who will review it with the other CERV Board members. Ms. Rae will contact Manager Schulz if any changes are needed and she also will begin the outreach to the property owner about the indicated purchase price, etc.
- c. **Economic Development Director.** Board member Stevens asked if the job description submitted by Kaitlyn Keating from the Northfield Community Development Network (NCDN) at the last meeting (04/28/20) was considered sufficient or if it should be further reviewed by the Select Board's Economic Development Subcommittee (Chair Maxwell and Board member Morse). Manager Schulz said he and Board member Goodrich had submitted some comments that would bring the job description more in line with those for other municipal employees and to make it clear the position answers directly to the Municipal Manager. Board member Morse felt a subcommittee review of the document might be helpful. A meeting will be scheduled for the next week or so.
- d. **Municipal Pool.** Board member Goodrich would like to know when the decision will be made on whether or not the municipal pool will open this summer. Manager Schulz believes the decision about public pools ultimately will be made at the state level. In addition, since pool revenues do not cover the cost of operating it for two (2) months each summer, the municipality's uncertain financial situation also should be a consideration. Perhaps the Select Board's Town Buildings and Energy Subcommittee (Board members Goodrich and Stevens) should look into this. Chair Maxwell watched a recent news conference with Governor Phil Scott and other Vermont officials discussing the state's phased-in reopening over the next few weeks. There was a specific question about public pools and Governor Scott said a recommendation would be provided in the next week or so. Manager Schulz said Utility Superintendent Patrick DeMasi has drained the pool in anticipation of a possible opening this summer. With the new waterline to the pool it can be refilled in a couple days (rather than the full week it used to take). The municipality therefore does have some time before having to make a decision. If the pool does reopen, Board member Morse would like the chlorination level set sufficiently high to eliminate possible contagion (but not so high as to bleach hair). Board member Goodrich seriously doubts the state will permit public pools to open this year.
- e. **Northfield Farmers Market.** Board member Goodrich asked how the first outdoor Farmers Market of 2020 went this afternoon. Board member Morse, who is a market organizer, said there were fewer vendors than normal but the number of customers were more than had been expected under the circumstances. Some vendors were sold out and Board member Morse and his wife Cassie had a learning experience on proper compliance with the new rules set up to conform to COVID-19 social distancing, etc. They spoke to the vendors after the market closed and received some useful suggestions on how to tweak the new rules for better efficiency, etc. Overall, it was a very good experience.
- f. **COVID-19 Employee Training.** Chair Maxwell asked if the municipal employees are following workplace COVID-19 requirements. Manager Schulz said they were. Each employee received a printed copy of the VOSHA training document ("Protecting the Safety and Health of Workers") and submitted proof of having read and understood the guidelines prior to the May 4, 2020 deadline. All employees have been provided with two (2) protective masks and, despite a couple of early "hiccups," have been diligently following the rules.

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

XI. ADJOURNMENT. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to adjourn.
Motion passed 5-0-0.

The Board adjourned at 9:32 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

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

These minutes were amended and approved at the regular Select Board meeting of May 26, 2020.