

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD REGULAR MEETING
Minutes of December 10, 2024

- I. ROLL CALL.** Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Charles Morse, Lydia Petty, Merry Shernock, and John Stevens. Also present were Manager Jeff Schulz, Acting Clerk Kenneth McCann, Laurie Baroffio (Finance Director), Matthew Fedders (Central Vermont Supervisory Union Superintendent), Sarah Path (Paine Mountain School District [PMSD] Board Member), Dan Morris (PMSD Board Member), Matt Sullivan (PMSD Board Member), Anne B. Donahue (Vermont State Representative), Kenneth W. Goslant (Vermont State Representative), Kelly Murch, Donald Doyon, Jessica Van Deren, Clare LaFrance, Pam Ricker, and Elroy C. Hill.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 7:02 p.m.

- II. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE.** Those present were asked to join the Select Board members in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

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

IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):

- a. Paine Mountain School District (PMSD) Board Member updates.** Chair Maxwell said he invited Central Vermont Supervisory Union Superintendent Matthew Fedders and PMSD Board members to this meeting in order to provide information and answer any questions regarding recent PMSD operations. Chair Maxwell added that the school district is now under a microscope in terms of their budgeting process and how local decisions, such as the merging of the Northfield and Williamstown school systems, have impacted the local property tax rate. He then asked about the state of education in Williamstown and Northfield. School Superintendent Fedders said he is very proud of the good work being done in the Northfield and Williamstown schools. There now are 1,300 students in the local schools with about 1,000 of them attending Williamstown schools. Superintendent Fedders added that the Paine Mountain School District is unique in that it has two separate middle/high schools. A committee has been formed to explore future school facility options, which might include having all middle and high school students taught at one location, having the middle school student taught at one location and the high school students at another, construct an entirely new facility at a new location, etc. These options will be fully explored by the committee for feasibility before being brought up for public discussion. Superintendent Fedders added that the current facilities have not yet been tested for possible PCB contamination. The estimated cost for this is \$15,000 for the Northfield schools and \$14,000 for the Williamstown schools. Once that has been done, architects could be brought in to explore the aforementioned options. The ultimate goal is to find the best alternative to maintaining two separate campuses, which is the current situation. This is particularly troublesome when one campus currently hosts only 300 students. Superintendent Fedders added that cost savings is not the only driving factor for this change since relocating students to another campus would result in increased student transportation expenses. He added that the current conversation would probably continue for the next eighteen (18) months before any architectural concepts have been developed. This probably would be followed by an additional eighteen (18) month discussion period before any action can be pursued. Board member Stevens asked if the Town of Roxbury would ever join the PMSD and thus reunite with the Northfield school system. Superintendent Fedders said it is the State of Vermont that would redraw school districts so it would have to be the state and/or Roxbury who would have to make the first move. He noted the PMSD budget is now looking at a twelve percent (12%) increase in expenses in the next fiscal year. However, he cannot predict at this time how this will impact the local school tax rate. Superintendent Fedders said that the Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety [AWPS] Task Force has provided the PMSD with a number of suggestions in order to improve ADA compliance. This has led to such upgrades as more handicapped accessible parking at the Garvey Field soccer field. In addition, the AWPS Task Force looked into arrival/dismissal times at the Northfield schools and provided suggestions to make the process safer and more efficient. Superintendent Fedders said some adjustments are being implemented based on those suggestions.

There also is a new agreement with the municipality over maintenance of Memorial Park, which the schools sometimes use for organized sporting events. Superintendent Fedders said the school will maintain the playing fields and the municipality will make sure the bathrooms, parking areas, etc. are in good shape. Chair Maxwell said there were some complaints this past summer that the playing fields were in poor condition when non-school groups planned to use them. Superintendent Fedders said the fields were mowed every other week this past summer but next year weekly mowing will be restored. PMSD Board member Dan Morris said Norwich University (NU) has offered to let PMSD make use of their playing fields when they are not using them. This has led to less usage of the Memorial Park fields by the Northfield Middle & High School (NMHS) ballplayers. However, Mr. Morris said the PMSD has committed to better maintaining the Memorial Park ballfields in future. Board member Shernock noted the Select Board members did allocate American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds for the purchase of portable steel bleachers that can be used in the park and other locations. This was in response to the poor condition of the wooden bleachers at Memorial Park, which many considered basically usable and a safety hazard. Chair Maxwell felt the public parks were a valuable local resource and should not be allowed to fall into such disrepair.

As for the school facilities, Superintendent Fedders said a new sprinkler system is going to be installed at Northfield Elementary School next year. He also would like to create a facility master plan so that improvement plans could be in place should outside funding, i.e. state and/or federal grants, become available. As far as he is aware, the PMSD has never applied to FEMA to reimburse the cost of repairing storm damage. Mr. Morris said this issue arose during a discussion of the Garvey Hill trail system, which has seen storm damage in recent years. Mr. Morris added that ARPA funds will be used next summer to help restore this trail system for school and public use.

Board member Morse asked if a possible new facility would be for K-12 students or just for part of the local student population. Superintendent Fedders said if the plan was to place all the students on one campus, this would be limited to grades six through twelve (6-12). State Representative Kenneth Goslant has heard some concerns about lead pipes on the school campuses. Superintendent Fedders said regular testing is done on the school's water supply and the results are posted on the PMSD website. Any problems detected are soon resolved. Board member Petty asked what was the best way for the Select Board members to stay aware of any developments regarding the future of the PMSD school campuses. Superintendent Fedders said the public outreach on these discussions will be provided after the next fiscal year budget has been approved. Board member Petty noted the Select Board members have allocated ARPA funds to improve the sidewalks leading to the Northfield schools, i.e. Vine Street, Cross Street, etc. It would be useful to get some feedback from the school regarding whether the current crosswalks should be relocated for safety reasons. In addition, there have been concerns expressed about how well the municipality clears the sidewalks near the schools after snowstorm. Manager Schulz said Highway Foreman Karl Bailey makes the determination regarding sidewalk clearing priorities. Board member Petty thought getting some recommendations from school officials on this could be helpful. Chair Maxwell asked if the Highway Foreman plays a vital role when the decisions are made whether to have snow days or delayed school openings after snowstorms. Superintendent Fedders confirmed Mr. Bailey does provide valuable information regarding road conditions that is a very important factor when such decisions are made. Chair Maxwell said the municipality has many important civic improvement projects scheduled in the next few years, including the installation of new water mains along Main Street, the replacement of the Main Street Bridge in 2026, etc. He felt it would be good if the Select Board members were kept aware of any upcoming major school projects in upcoming years.

PMSD Board member Sarah Path then noted that a number of amazing things are happening in our local school to the great benefit to our students. This includes regular visits from guest speakers and instructors on a number of diverse topics. Ms. Path said all the school administrators and teachers are focused on providing the best possible education for their students with the sometimes limited resources provided. As for the impact of school funding on the local property tax rate, Ms. Path said many of the factors that have led to double-digit increases in recent years are due to decisions made by the state legislators and not by local school board members.

PMSD Board member Matt Sullivan said it was very good to have this open discussion tonight and thanked the Select Board members for the invitation. He felt if the intention is to attract more young families to live in Northfield, the Select Board members have made a good start by pursuing a number of local civic improvements including the plans to revitalize the Town Common. Mr. Sullivan then admitted that it can only be a guessing game regarding how local school spending will impact the local property tax rate. Chair Maxwell also felt it was good to keep the lines of communication open between the Select Board members and the PMSD Board members so that both specific and common concerns can be discussed and perhaps addressed in a timely manner. Mr. Morris agrees that the actions of local school boards have limited impact in determining the school tax rate. The common level of appraisal (CLA), as determined by the Vermont Department of Taxes, often has a big impact on property tax rates if it has been determined that the appraised value of local housing is much too low. Another important factor in rising school budgets has been the exploding costs of health insurance costs for school administrators and instructors. Chair Maxwell said the Select Board members are well aware of the ever increasing health insurance costs and their impact on budget planning. State Representative Anne Donahue said those interested in school funding concerns should go to the Vermont Board of Education website as there is a new report explaining how Vermont schools are funded and how this process compares what is done in other states. The link to download the report is <https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-vermont-education-funding-system-explained-2024.pdf> and Representative Donahue highly recommends reading it. Chair Maxwell and the other Select Board members then thanked Superintendent Fedders and PMSD Board members Morris, Path, and Sullivan for attending tonight's meeting. Mr. Morris thought this was a very useful discussion and hopes additional invitations are extended in future.

- b. State Representatives Anne B. Donahue and Kenneth W. Goslant: 2025 Vermont Legislative Priorities.** Chair Maxwell thanked State Representatives Donahue and Goslant for agreeing to attend tonight's meeting and provide their views on what should be legislative priorities in the 2025 session. Representative Donahue felt better management of the state education should be an important goal for the legislature as this would have a better long-term impact on local property tax rates than any quick fixes. She felt Vermont has a number of issues, including workforce shortages, lack of affordable housing, etc. that in combination have resulted in higher education costs. However, Representative Donahue feels the major factor in driving up these costs has been ever rising health insurance costs and an accompanying healthcare crisis that has led to the planned closure of many of the state's medical facilities. These developments make it difficult for some Vermonters to purchase health insurance and even those with adequate insurance can face long delays in getting proper treatment for their ailments and injuries. Representative Donahue believes the poor state of healthcare in Vermont will be a major legislative priority in the coming year. She then noted that as a result of last month's general election, there will be significant turnover in the legislature when it reconvenes on January 8, 2025. This might result in some delays as the new members are brought up to speed. Chair Maxwell again noted that the Select Board members are well aware of health insurance cost increases as that was a major concern when employee union contracts were recently negotiated. They also are confronting this concern when drafting the municipal budget for the next fiscal year. Representative Goslant noted he will be starting his fourth term in office when the legislature reconvenes next month. He agreed the state legislature has seen significant turnover since he first started and noted that new members often seem to focus first on what they think are their own continuants' priorities rather than focusing on what's best for the whole state. Representative Goslant also felt the recent legislature supermajority resulted in some terrible results as those in the supermajority felt no need to seek meaningful compromise on important issues. Even though the supermajority has ended due to the recent election, Representative Goslant is still concerned that the majority party might focus solely on its own narrow agenda rather than directly address the real problems facing Vermont such as education funding, public safety concerns, etc.

In addition, Representative Goslant felt the money train of federal funding that former Senator Patrick Leahy provided Vermont for decades has stopped with his retirement. Federal funds probably will be much less plentiful in future and Representative Goslant felt a lot of what had come previously to Vermont had been misused by not directly addressing the major problems facing this state. He believes there should be more emphasis on making this a more affordable state to both work and live in.

Representative Donahue believes the Select Board members could fill a vital role in the legislative process by keeping her and Representative Goslant aware of local concerns. These can be discussed with other legislators, who are probably confronting similar problems in their own communities. Representative Goslant said he is always willing to hear from Northfield residents as he interacts with them at the post office, grocery store, etc. Board member Morse asked how the Vermont League of Cities & Towns (VLCT) is performing in its role as lobbyist for Vermont municipalities. Representative Donahue feels they do a good job in keeping legislators aware of the particular problems that municipalities face and how proposed legislation might have an adverse effect on them. She does miss the monthly VLCT News publication that used to be provided in written form before VLCT went all-digital in its communications. Representative Goslant agreed that VLCT did a good lobbying job for its member municipalities although he did feel some larger communities benefited a lot more than smaller ones from its efforts. He added that some difficult decisions will need to be made to control costs in many fields, which might include additional school district consolidations, closing some local schools, etc. Representative Donahue felt reform of the health insurance industry should be a major legislative focus in the next year and this also might lead to some hard decisions. Mr. Sullivan agreed that Vermont is now facing a healthcare crisis with increasing coverage costs and inadequate access to health care facilities. He felt the healthcare system is not run very well at all and we are all paying a lot of money for limited services. Mr. Sullivan felt payment reform should be a priority although this might be more of a federal than state matter. Representative Donahue agreed that the federal government needs to address this issue as the state legislatures have little to no control over the healthcare industry. Chair Maxwell then thanked State Representatives Donahue and Goslant for attending tonight and providing such valuable information about the upcoming legislative session.

V. LIQUOR CONTROL COMMISSION

- a. **Liquor License Application: Fig Hospitality LLC (DBA Folino's Pizza).** Manager Schulz said this application is for a new restaurant located on Depot Square. As this is a new establishment, there is no local history regarding past liquor license compliance, etc. but Manager Schulz confirmed there are no red flags regarding this application. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the liquor license application. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VI. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- a. **November 26, 2024 (Regular Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **December 3, 2024 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. Board member Petty asked that the minutes be revised to show Economic Development Director Thomas Davis attended part of the meeting's executive session. **Motion to approve the revised minutes passed 5-0-0.**

VII. APPROVAL OF BILLS

- a. **Approval of Warrant #11-25 & 11-25A-D.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve Warrant #11-25 & 11-25A-D in the amount of \$2,176,107.09. It was noted that of the total warrant amount, \$1,373,600 was property taxes collected by the municipality and then forwarded to the Paine Mountain School District. The warrant also included \$225,362 in power purchases for the Northfield Electric Department (NED). Board member Stevens asked how a coolant leak in the Volvo loader's air conditioning system resulted in a \$14,000 repair bill. Manager Schulz will forward the itemized bill, which shows how complicated a repair job this became. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

- b. **Receipt of Biweekly Payroll through November 24, 2024.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to receive the biweekly payroll in the amount of \$103,832.83. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VIII. SELECT BOARD

- a. **American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Fund Requests.** Chair Maxwell asked if there were any new ARPA fund requests for since the last meeting. Manager Schulz said there were not.
- b. **Approval of ARPA Fund Allocation Resolution.** Manager Schulz said the Select Board members are being asked tonight to approve and sign a resolution that would redesignate up to \$449,098.83 in unallocated ARPA funds as “workforce retention” funds. These redesignated funds then would no longer be subject to federal ARPA regulations and deadlines and instead become Town General surplus funds. Manager Schulz said these budget surplus funds then could be used for already identified ARPA-funded projects. This approach and the resolution wording has been recommended by the VLCT for its member communities who would be unable to allocate all their local ARPA funds before the December 31, 2024 deadline. Manager Schulz noted that this is probably the only option so that Northfield can retain all these funds for future use. He plans to fully explain this procedure to Northfield residents in his annual report in the 2025 Town Report as well as on social media postings in the interim. Motion by Board member Shernock, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve and sign the ARPA Fund Allocation Resolution. Board member Morse thought it would have been better if a proper explanation for this process had been included in the resolution wording. Manager Schulz said VLCT was very specific about how the resolution should be worded in order to pass legal muster. Board member Shernock said the most recent ARPA fund balance summary clearly shows how these funds will be used on approved ARPA-funded projects. Chair Maxwell thought the Select Board members have performed due diligence with determining how the local ARPA funds would be spent on local projects. Approving this housekeeping resolution has become necessary to meet federal deadlines but he does believe that there has been full transparency throughout the process regarding how these funds have been and will be spent. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- c. **Appointment of Ethics Liaison.** Manager Schulz said the Vermont legislature approved Act 171 (H. 875) earlier this year that will establish a Municipal Ethics Code that applies to all “municipal officers.” Specific provisions of this law will be phased in over the next couple of years but one of the first local actions required is the appointment of an Ethics Liaison before January 31, 2025. The ethics liaison must be “an existing municipal employee or selectboard (sic) member [who will] serve as the point of contact for communications with the Ethics Commission. Ethics liaisons also receive ethics complaints referred by the Ethics Commission.” Board member Morse said it was recognized recently that the local Conflict of Interest Ordinance was badly in need of updating and it seems that the new municipal ethics policy will be able to fill this role. He also felt the Town Manager would be the best person to serve as Ethics Liaison. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Petty, to appoint Manager Schulz as Northfield’s Ethics Liaison. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- d. **Revolving Loan Fund – Loan Agreement for Main Street Water Line Project.** Manager Schulz said the Select Board members are being asked to approve this no-interest loan agreement that would cover engineering expenses for the Main Street water line and Cheney Farm water tank replacement project. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the Vermont State Revolving Fund Loan Agreement in the amount of \$128,500; to approve the General Obligation Note; and to approve the Resolution and Certificate. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- e. **Authorize Select Board Chair to Review and Approve Future Payroll and Operating Expenses through December 24, 2024 [24 V.S.A. §961(b)].** Manager Schulz noted that since the Select Board members have canceled their regular meeting scheduled for December 24, 2024, they now need to authorize Chair Maxwell to review and approve future payroll and operating expenses through that date in accordance with 24 V.S.A. §961(b). Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to provide Chair Maxwell with this authorization. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

IX. TOWN MANAGER'S REPORT

- a. FY 2025-2026 Budget Process.** Manager Schulz said the next budget meeting will be held on Thursday, December 12, 2024 starting at 6:00 p.m. in the Community Room. The proposed budgets for the Ambulance Service and Highway Department will be discussed at that time. The next budget meeting will be held on Tuesday, December 17, 2024 and the budget meetings then will resume after the holiday season.
- b. Wall Street Pedestrian Safety Improvements Project.** Manager Schulz said the municipality did receive a grant for this project but we are still waiting to receive the formal grant agreement from the State of Vermont. It might take some time to receive this document as some federal funds are involved with this project. However, Manager Schulz soon will be drafting an RFP for the project design. Board member Petty thought it would be good to start early conversations with New England Central Railroad (NECR) regarding easements, rights-of-way, etc. as this project will include the installation of new sidewalk at and near the railroad crossing. In addition, the project might require slightly relocating the crossing gate.
- c. Northfield Common Revitalization Project.** Manager Schulz said now that the planning and community outreach phase of this project has concluded, he will be submitting a state grant application that could provide funding for the overall project. Perhaps the grant funds could be used to redesign the water fountain should it be determined that the project can and should be completed in stages. Board member Shernock felt there should be a good number of outside funding sources for this project. Board member Stevens would like to meet with Board member Shernock soon to discuss how best to phase in this project since the overall project cost estimate of \$2,000,000 probably makes it infeasible to complete all the work at one time. They will provide recommendations for the other Select Board members in January 2025. Chair Maxwell said that would be a good time to have a full discussion on this matter.
- d. Municipal Planning Grant Application.** Manager Schulz will be applying to the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development for a municipal planning grant. If the grant is awarded, the funds would be used to hire a consultant who could assist the Zoning Administrator with further revisions of the local zoning bylaws, such as refinements of the various zoning districts. Board member Petty felt it should be specified in the grant application that the creation of new housing units and improved flood resilience measures would be focal points of the new zoning bylaw revisions.
- e. King Street Battery Storage Facility.** Manager Schulz said the developers for this project now have received approval from the state Public Utilities Commission (PUC). They next will need to reach an interconnection agreement with NED. Their intention is to have this facility online by the end of 2025 and this will benefit the community by storing energy for use during peak usage periods. This will eliminate the need to purchase power from the spot market during high usage times.
- f. Nantanna Hydropower Project.** Manager Schulz said a Canadian firm purchased the old Nantanna power plant and dam a few years ago with the intention of restarting the facility and producing power. After some delays, it now seems that the restart could be occurring in the near future and this could be another NED renewable energy source.

X. BOARD MEMBERS' COMMENTS, CONCERNS, QUESTIONS

- a. Highway Department Winter Road Maintenance.** Board member Morse would like to thank Highway Foreman Bailey and his crew for the excellent job they have done plowing and sanding the backroads to make them passable after the recent snowstorm. Chair Maxwell agreed that the Highway crew has been doing a good job but he would like to see the area around the EV charging station on Depot Square cleared out on a more regular basis. He added that anyone with concerns about winter maintenance of the roads and sidewalks should first contact Manager Schulz.
- b. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Training update.** Board member Shernock noted that one of the ongoing community goals the Select Board members have identified is in-person DEI training for municipal employees and officials. She noted that this training now is available through the Vermont Governor's Office of Racial Equity.

- c. **Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC) Grant update.** Board member Petty said the new wayfinding and trailway signage purchased with these grant funds have been manufactured and should be soon delivered. Some of this signage can be installed in coming weeks but some will have to wait until next spring.
- d. **Flood Resiliency Meeting update.** Board member Petty recently attended a flood resiliency meeting. After listening to horror stories from other Vermont communities, she is grateful to be living in Northfield where flooding threats, if not eliminated, have been steadily reduced in recent years though FEMA buyouts; stormwater diversion and retention projects; dam removals; etc.
- e. **Community Room Wall Mural.** There was a recent discussion of repainting the Community Room's wall and there was a suggestion that this could include a mural painted by local students. Board member Petty said there has been some interest expressed about this by the school's art teachers so this could become a reality.
- f. **Town Meeting Warning Article Suggestion.** Board member Petty said a number of Northfield residents have expressed preference for the municipal budget to be voted on by Australian Ballot in future rather than approved on the floor at the Town Meeting's open session. As attendance at the open session is usually limited to about one hundred (100) people, that change would allow a lot more Northfield voters to take part in the decision. Chair Maxwell said this discussion can be held before the warning is approved and signed. This is now scheduled for the regular meeting of January 28, 2025.
- g. **Holiday Decorations.** Chair Maxwell wanted to thank all those responsible for the wonderful holiday decorations located in and around the downtown area as well as all around the community. He also wanted to thank the members of the Northfield Activity Group (NAG) for holding the tree lighting celebration last Friday night (12/06/24). The holiday-decorated SD Ireland truck put in another appearance this year.

XI. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED)

- a. **Elroy C. Hill: Winter Sidewalk Maintenance Issues.** Mr. Hill is not pleased with how quickly the downtown sidewalks were cleared after recent snowstorms. He noted that the sidewalk in front of the Brown Public Library (BPL) was not cleared by 10:00 a.m. this morning and the same was true for the sidewalk in front of the Municipal Building. Mr. Hill had to do some shoveling himself in the area to make sure all the work was done this morning. He feels that the municipality needs to be more cognizant of the need to clear sidewalks of snow first thing in the morning, especially to create safe passage for handicapped persons. Manager Schulz said the Highway Department has been hiring additional part-time workers to better address this problem in future. Chair Maxwell asked Mr. Hill by what time he felt the sidewalks should be cleared by snow the morning after a snowstorm. Mr. Hill felt the clearance work should be done by 6:00 a.m. Chair Maxwell did not think this was a reasonable expectation given all the work the Highway crew have to perform after a major snow event.

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

The Board adjourned at 9:27 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

A video recording of this meeting is available at https://youtu.be/wUyL1zZBF_4

These minutes are subject to approval at the next Select Board regular meeting.