

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD REGULAR MEETING
Minutes of January 14, 2025**

- 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, Thomas Davis (Economic Development Director), Debbie Zuaro (Chair, VOREC Grant Implementation Committee), Rhonda Doyon, Pam Ricker, and Elroy C. Hill.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 7:00 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. Debbie Zuaro, Chair, Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC) Grant Implementation Committee: Economic Impact Study Report.** Ms. Zuaro noted the VOREC committee's activities are drawing to a close as the grant funds have either been spent or are committed to projects soon to be completed. For example, the new wayfinding and trail signage has been purchased but the bulk of it cannot be installed along the Town Forest trail system and some other locations until springtime. One requirement of this state grant program was the production of an economic impact study that documented how these grant funds provided real and lasting benefits to the community. Ms. Zuaro said the SE Group consulting firm was engaged to produce this report and she then provided a slideshow presentation of the report's highlights and conclusions. (This document also is available on the Northfield municipal website at <https://www.northfield-vt.gov/town-forest>.) Ms. Zuaro said that to assist in the production of this study, trail counters were placed in the Town Forest to document usage of marked trails, surveys were distributed to Northfield residents and local business leaders, trail users were "intercepted" for their opinions, etc. The study did show Town Forest trail usage did increase in 2023 and 2024, which was the period when grant funds were used for trail improvements, etc. For example, use of the "Red Trail" saw a 48% increase over this period. It also was found that the trail system is used fairly steadily throughout the week and not just on weekends. Ms. Zuaro said it was also documented that 78% of survey respondents felt it was important to have outdoor recreation opportunities for community members even though many of them were not fully aware of what is now currently available in Northfield, i.e. Town Forest, Dog River Park, Memorial Park, the Northfield Falls Park, etc. Another discovery was that 23% of Town Forest trail users are Northfield residents and the most of rest live less than thirty (30) minutes from the trail system. Also, most trail users learned about their existence from family, friends, or neighbors. The Shaw Outdoor Center is the most popular entry location for the Town Forest trail system, which is what the VOREC committee members have tried to encourage due to the availability of nearby public parking. Based on the intercept surveys, it was found that 81% of trail users purchase food and/or drink from local businesses while in Northfield, 62% visit local gas stations, and 92% shop at local retail stores. Ms. Zuaro said the study also includes public suggestions for how the trail system experience could be improved, which included improved signage and having trail maps available, more convenient parking locations, better trail maintenance, etc. It was noted that these concerns were addressed either directly or indirectly through the use of the VOREC grant funds. Ms. Zuaro then thanked the Select Board members for authorizing that \$25,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds be used to supplement the grant funds spent to complete the purchase of the wayfinding signage. Board member Morse asked how long the VOREC committee has been working on the grant implementation process. Ms. Zuaro said it has been a few years as the committee first started holding regular meetings in June 2022. Before this, Ms. Zuaro said she had worked on similar projects as a member of the Northfield Conservation Commission (NCC) and as a member of various ad hoc committees before then. She added that she has been grateful for the support of the Select Board members throughout the process. She probably will address them again after all the new signage has been installed and the grant totally closed out this spring. Chair Maxwell and the other Select Board members then thanked Ms. Zuaro and the other VOREC committee members for all that they have been able to accomplish through this state grant program.

b. Thomas Davis, Economic Development Director: Non-Profit Housing Proposal.

Mr. Davis recently sent a proposal to the Select Board members stating that the best way to generate additional affordable housing in Northfield would be to form a non-profit organization that would be able to apply for grant funds as well as private investments to accomplish this goal. He added that the rental units built would charge below the local market price, which would mean rental costs of about \$1,100 per month rather than \$1,700 per month. Mr. Davis said Downstreet Housing & Community Development has provided this role in Montpelier and some neighboring communities in the Central Vermont area. Unfortunately, their focus has shifted northward towards Lamoille County rather than in our direction. In this light, Mr. Davis proposes that a new non-profit organization based in Northfield be formed and he would be willing to help guide its creation and steer its initial operations in a capacity separate from his role as Economic Development Director. He added that this non-profit would supplement what private developers have been able to accomplish locally in recent years but its focus would be squarely on the creation of affordable housing for the community. As the expansion of certain local businesses has been hampered by a lack of suitable housing for current and potential employees, Mr. Davis feels such businesses might be willing to invest funds in this non-profit in order to improve their own financial interests. There also could be investments from local banking institutions once the feasibility of the program has shown itself. Board member Morse thought this was an admirable goal but asked where the new housing would be built as there is not enough suitable municipal property for this purpose. Mr. Davis said the non-profit would purchase appropriate property lots from local landowners. The initial target areas would be in the downtown area and along the Vermont Route 12/12A corridor where there now is access to municipal water and wastewater lines. The target area could be expanded at a later time should those lines be extended northward towards Northfield Falls and southward along Vermont Routes 12 and 12A. It is possible some of these property owners had envisioned building housing units on their lands themselves but have neither the financing nor other needed resources to do it alone. In that case, they may prefer to sell their property to the non-profit rather than pay taxes on vacant lots for the foreseeable future. Board member Morse said to meet federal requirements, the non-profit would need to have a board of directors, hold open meetings, etc. He then asked if there are any local businesses that might be interested in investing in the non-profit. Mr. Davis said Mayo Healthcare has considered expanding its independent living facilities for some time and could be assisted by the non-profit in accomplishing this. He has contacted other potential investors who might be interested in the available tax breaks, etc. Mr. Davis also noted that Darn Tough has had problems recruiting new employees due to local affordable housing shortages so they might be another possible interested party. Board member Shernock asked what would be the initial financial investment in the non-profit. Mr. Davis said the non-profit would probably start small with one or two potential projects and for this he thought \$250,000 would be a sufficient starting point. He added that this scenario is very similar to what a Randolph non-profit has been able to achieve in recent years. The non-profit would directly own any rental units but their maintenance and rent collection probably would be outsourced. Such property ownership also could serve as good leverage for future investments from banking institutions and private interests. It also is possible that a successful apartment complex could be sold at a future time in order to raise additional capital to fund new projects. Board member Shernock asked if potential investors from outside Northfield would be solicited. Mr. Davis said that was a possibility as recent civic improvements and other developments have made Northfield a good Vermont community in which to invest. This includes the future Cyber Fusion Center at Norwich University (NU) that should attract considerable interest from the cybersecurity global community. Board member Stevens asked if the property purchased by the non-profit organization would be taken off the town's tax rolls. Mr. Davis said it would not although there might be a request for a tax stabilization agreement for the property. Board member Petty asked if existing non-profits might be interested. Mr. Davis said it was possible that existing regional non-profit organizations might be interested in some potential interaction.

Board member Petty said she would like to have additional affordable housing units created in Northfield but is concerned about potential conflict of interest issues emanating from such a close connection between the municipality and the non-profit organization. She asked if it would be possible to completely separate the two entities once the non-profit proved sufficiently successful in its endeavors. Mr. Davis said that was a possibility. As the non-profit grew, it would require additional staffing and other resources that the municipality probably would not be able to provide. Such a separation would be a natural step in the process. Chair Maxwell said at the time Jon Ignatowski was hired as Northfield's first Economic Development Director several years ago, there was a meeting with potential local investors that had discussed following in the footsteps of the Town of Bennington, which also established a non-profit organization to help with local economic development, create new housing units, etc. Bennington has benefited considerably from this and Chair Maxwell felt Northfield should view their success story as a good example of what can be achieved through such a public-private partnership. However, Chair Maxwell felt the potential conflict of interest concern should be worked out before he would endorse this proposal. Mr. Davis said the most important method of dispelling such concerns would be to maintain full transparency with public meetings, press releases, etc. in order to provide full accountability. He added there might be some future local development projects that could be handled better by private interests than a non-profit. That determination could be made by the non-profit's board of directors on a case-by-case basis. Mr. Davis said the first step for the newly established non-profit would be to locate and pursue grant funding that may or might not also be available to municipalities. Board member Morse asked if Downstreet Housing & Community Development might be willing to partner with the Northfield municipality on this. Mr. Davis said they are already involved with several Central Vermont communities and they probably wouldn't want to expand their operations into Northfield. Manager Schulz said he did reach out to Downstreet a few years ago regarding various local projects but they did not have much interest due to their other commitments. He added that establishing a new non-profit here would allow it to take advantage of local funding sources that have been largely untapped in the past. Mr. Davis emphasized that the non-profit would start its operations slowly at first while building up its resources. Board member Morse thought this would be a big step for the municipality but Northfield definitely has benefited from private development projects in recent years and this could provide even more opportunities for future community growth. Chair Maxwell asked what Mr. Davis would like from the Select Board members at this time. Mr. Davis would like an endorsement from them as he pursues this proposal. Manager Schulz said he has been in contact with the Town Attorney regarding this proposal and he has confirmed that it would pass legal muster. There would have to be a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) drafted and later approved by the Select Board members that would resolve any conflict of interest issues and any other possible concerns. Board member Petty would like to see some examples of other such situations in which a municipal employee was able to simultaneously serve as the head of a non-profit organization. Manager Schulz said the Town Attorney can provide some research on this and other related matters. Chair Maxwell feels Mr. Davis's proposal has real merits and could bring definite benefits to the Northfield community but he also would like to make sure there are no unresolved issues before the Select Board decides to formally endorse it. He then thanked Mr. Davis for bringing this proposal to the Select Board members and looks forward to discussing it further and perhaps moving forward on it after more information has been received so that due diligence can be performed.

V. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- a. December 5, 2024 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. December 10, 2024 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. Board member Shernock found one typo that will be corrected. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- c. December 10, 2024 (Regular Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- d. December 12, 2024 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

- e. **December 17, 2024 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- f. **January 7, 2025 (Special Meeting).** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve the minutes. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VI. APPROVAL OF BILLS

- a. **Approval of Warrant #13-25 & #13-25A-B.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve Warrant #13-25 & #13-25A-B in the amount of \$634,704.29. Board member Shernock asked about a \$2,083 payment to the Northfield Senior Center. Manager Schulz said this is the monthly allocation paid from the municipality's "Human Services" budget. Board member Shernock then asked about the purchase of a new Chevrolet Silverado. Manager Schulz said this was a budgeted purchase for the Highway Department and the state bid process was used to obtain a lower price. A new plow and lightbar had to be purchased separately. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- b. **Receipt of Biweekly Payroll through December 22, 2024.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to receive the biweekly payroll in the amount of \$139,285.02. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- c. **Receipt of Biweekly Payroll through January 5, 2025.** Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to receive the biweekly payroll in the amount of \$130,579.31. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

VII. SELECT BOARD

- a. **Non-Profit Housing Proposal Discussion.** This item was added to the agenda in case the Select Board members decided to take action on this matter tonight. As indicated earlier, no action will be taken as the Select Board members have requested additional information regarding Mr. Davis's proposal. Chair Maxwell said the Town Attorney should be able to provide a legal opinion in a timely manner regarding potential conflict of interest concerns and other matters. Manager Schulz said we also should get some information regarding the past experiences of non-profits organizations that started in the manner Mr. Davis has proposed. Board member Petty would like to see a written document that would clarify the governance of this non-profit and its operations. She also would like to have a legal opinion on the appropriate role of the Economic Development Director in the process. Board member Petty said all Northfield residents want what's best for the community but there might be honest disagreements on the correct course of action. Chair Maxwell also would like to see what would be the impact on local taxpayers. No public funds would be used in establishing the non-profit organization but there might be indirect costs. Board member Petty noted taxpayer money does fund the Economic Development Director's salary so that might be a concern. Also, should the non-profit attempt to purchase a desirable property for future development, that might create a potential conflict with local private parties with similar interests. Chair Maxwell said the Town Attorney and Manager Schulz should be able to get some answers for the concerns raised tonight. It is likely that this information should be available in time for review and discussion at one of next month's regular meetings.
- b. **Town Meeting Article re: Approving Budget by Australian Ballot.** At a previous meeting, Board member Petty suggested adding an article on the 2025 Town Meeting warning that would allow Northfield residents to decide whether or not the municipal budget should continue to be voted on from the floor at the Town Meeting open session or whether it should be voted on by Australian ballot in future years. This matter was put on the 2017 Town Meeting warning and the request had been rejected at that time. Chair Maxwell asked if the Select Board members want to put this on the warning again for this year's Town Meeting in March 2025. Board member Morse felt if there really was strong local sentiment for this change, its backers should have been able to add it to the warning through the petition process. Board member Petty noted that when the Town Meeting open session was cancelled in 2021 and 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the municipal budget was by necessity voted on by Australian ballot and many residents thought that was a good development as it allowed for more public participation in the process. The usual attendance at the open session is usually around 100 people whereas over 600 residents voted on the budget by Australian ballot in 2021 and over 650 the following year. Chair Maxwell said there are some home-confined residents who do not feel it is right that they are being excluded from the process.

After some discussion, there was Select Board consensus to add this article to the warning. There will be a second article asking if non-budget items as well should be voted on by Australian ballot as this also was done during the pandemic.

- c. **Approval of the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) 2025 Certificate of Highway Mileage.** VTrans requires each municipality to confirm whether it added or subtracted any town highway mileage during the previous calendar year. Failure to approve and submit the form can result in delays in receiving state funding for local road operations, etc. Manager Schulz confirmed that there were no changes in local highway mileage in the past year. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to approve and sign the VTrans Certificate of Highway Mileage. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**
- d. **FY 2025-2026 Town Budget Process.** Manager Schulz said he and Finance Director Laurie Baroffio are now finalizing the proposed budget by including the revisions the Select Board members approved by consensus at their budget meetings. There were \$36,500 in untagged ARPA funds that by Select Board resolution were reallocated as Town General surplus funds. The management recommendation is to use \$32,500 to fund a portion of the Economic Development Director position and the remaining \$4,000 be set aside for Community Room upgrades. In addition, the \$44,000 that would have been allocated for a fourth Northfield Police Department (NPD) patrol vehicle will be redesignated for other purposes. In future, the municipality will budget for only three (3) NPD patrol vehicles. The next budget meeting was scheduled for Thursday, January 23, 2025 at 6:00 p.m. in the Community Room.

VIII. TOWN MANAGER'S REPORT

- a. **Main Street Bridge Replacement Project.** Manager Schulz said this project is still on track for the summer of 2026. VTrans is still negotiating easements with some private property owners in or near the construction site.
- b. **Cross Brother Dam Removal Project.** Manager Schulz said the final engineering plans for this year's dam removal are now sixty percent (60%) complete. The plans will be presented to the Select Board members at their February 11, 2025 regular meeting.
- c. **Pool House Renovation Project.** An architectural firm has been hired for this project and the Town Buildings & Energy Subcommittee will be holding a kickoff meeting with them on Wednesday, January 22, 2025 at 3:00 p.m. Members of the Accessibility, Walkability, and Pedestrian Safety Task Force will be invited to participate as well.
- d. **Pearl Street Retaining Wall.** Manager Schulz reported structural engineers have inspected the retaining wall at the corner of Pear Street and School Street. They found that it was in poor condition and needs to be replaced. The cost estimate for doing this is \$4,000 and Manager Schulz has signed an agreement for the project design.
- e. **Main Street Potholes.** There have been a number of complaints about bad potholes along Main Street and Manager Schulz said the worst of them either have been or will be repaired soon with hot mix. Chair Maxwell also has received many phone calls about these and other potholes and would like prompt action taken.
- f. **Depot Square Pedestrian Signal Post Damage.** Manager Schulz stated the post that supported the pedestrian crossing signal near the Common Café was knocked down over the weekend. The investigation to determine who was responsible is ongoing. He will file a claim with our insurance company so that the pole and crossing signal can be restored as soon as possible.

IX. BOARD MEMBERS' COMMENTS, CONCERNS, QUESTIONS

- a. **Slaughterhouse Road Covered Bridge Damage.** Board member Shernock was alarmed by the amount of damage to this covered bridge, which seems to have been struck by numerous vehicles. Manager Schulz said the damage probably was done some time ago but he was unsure when it happened. Board member Shernock suggested contacting the residents who live on the other side of the bridge to see if they know anything about this. She added that many tourists come to Northfield to view and take pictures of our covered bridges so they should be kept in good condition. Board member Stevens asked about the possibility of adding a steel bar at each entrance of our covered bridges to prevent oversized vehicles from going onto them. The covered bridges in Lyndonville have this installed. Manager Schulz has looked into this possibility and is obtaining cost estimates. Board member Shernock felt that the bars might not be too attractive but the alternative of regular covered bridge damage is less appealing.

- b. Zoning Regulations Consultant.** When the zoning regulation updates were recently approved by the Select Board members, there was an understanding that the municipality would be looking to hire a zoning law consultant in order to pursue further revisions that would encourage the building of additional housing units, etc. Board member Shernock asked about the status of this. Manager Schulz said the municipality will be applying for a state grant to cover the expense.
- c. Vermont Department of Taxes Equalization Study Results.** A copy of the 2024 report was included in the board packets and it indicated that the Common Level of Appraisal (CLA) in Northfield had dropped to 60.77%. Board member Stevens asked if this report required any further action. Manager Schulz said a townwide reappraisal is required when the CLA drops below seventy percent (70%) and this happened a couple years ago already. The Board of Listers have started the process for a townwide reappraisal that is scheduled to start in April 2026. The delay is due to the fact that many Vermont communities are in the same position and there is a limited number of professional appraisers who can perform the work.
- d. Northfield Citizens' Planning Project Meetings.** Board member Petty was pleased with the number of Northfield residents who attended and participated in the meetings held last Friday and Saturday at the Northfield Middle & High School (NMHS). These meetings were led by professional community planners seeking public input on how best to revitalize the community. There will be a final meeting held on Thursday, January 16, 2025 at 6:00 p.m. in the NMHS auditorium. At that time, the consultant findings to date will be presented and members of the public will be asked for their views on what should be done in future. The ultimate objective of this project is to create "a proposed Community Master Plan for Northfield's future growth and character. It will focus on downtown Northfield, Northfield Falls, and the Rte. 12 corridor connecting them. The goal is to ensure that future growth retains the town's character, while making new development affordable to construct and maintaining a reasonable quality standard."

X. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED)

- a. Carolyn Stevens: Moseley Covered Bridge Maintenance.** Ms. Stevens is pleased that the Select Board members are paying much attention to the four (4) covered bridges located in Northfield Falls but she would like more done to maintain and protect the Moseley Covered Bridge located on Stony Brook Road. Ms. Stevens said this covered bridge, which also is very popular with tourists, now needs repair urgently. Chair Maxwell agreed that we need to protect and provide needed repairs for all our covered bridges and make those responsible for the damage pay for their restoration.
- b. Elroy Hill: Sidewalk Plowing Concern, etc.** Mr. Hill noted that the sidewalk clearing machine now seems to leave a snow ridge in the middle of the sidewalk after sweeping over it. Manager Schulz will speak to the Highway Foreman about making the proper machine adjustments so that this doesn't happen in future. He added that the extreme cold weather recently has made the use of salt on the sidewalks less effective. Mr. Hill also would like to remind people to be more kind to each other in their daily interactions.

XI. EXECUTIVE SESSION. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Petty, to go into executive session, in accordance with 1 VSA 313 (a)(1)], in order to discuss a personnel matter with Manager Schulz present. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board went into executive session at 9:17 p.m.

Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Petty, to come out of executive session. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board came out of executive session at 9:45 p.m. No action was taken.

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

The Board adjourned at 9:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

A video recording of this meeting is available at <https://youtu.be/A992YzvojOw>

These minutes were revised and approved at the Select Board regular meeting of January 28, 2025.