

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of December 12, 2024**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Charles Morse, Lydia Petty, Merry Shernock, and John Stevens. Also present were Manager Jeff Schulz, Laurie Baroffio (Finance Director), Meggan McCusker (Chief, Northfield Ambulance Service), Scott Bagg (Northfield Ambulance Service), Gaelin Kurtzman (Northfield Ambulance Service), Stephen DeMaio (Northfield Ambulance Service), Emily Reece (Northfield Ambulance Service), Kaelee Bouleris (Northfield Ambulance Service), Danielle Farnum (Northfield Ambulance Service), Karl Bailey (Foreman, Highway Department), and Chris Bradley.

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

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

III. DISCUSSION

a. Proposed FY 2025/2026 Town Budget

- 1. Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS).** NAS Chief Megan McCusker said in the departmental budget she submitted to Manager Schulz, she had asked that the overnight callout stipend rate be increased from \$3.00 to \$5.00 per hour, which would increase the NAS budget by \$17,470. In addition, she had asked that the hourly wage for BLS (Basic Life Support) EMTs be increased from \$17.00 to \$20.00, for ALS (Advanced Life Support) EMTs from \$20.00 to \$22.00, and for paramedics from \$22.00 to \$25.00. Chief McCusker also requested that the NAS operations and maintenance (O&M) line item for School/Training be increased from \$4,000 to \$11,000 in the next fiscal year. In addition, Chief McCusker would like to start a conversation regarding a new NAS facility as their level of operations has outgrown the current facility at the Town Garage, which is located in a flood zone and there is the serious risk of NAS materials and equipment suffering flood damage in a major storm (as has happened before during Irene, etc.).

Chair Maxwell asked that these items be reviewed one at a time and in relation to the NAS budgets for O&M, Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), and Capital Equipment Plan (CEP). As previously indicated, Chief McCusker would like the "On Call 6pm to 6am 7 Days/Week" line item increased from \$26,210 to \$43,680 as a result of increasing the additional stipend for overnight standby duty from \$3.00 to \$5.00 per hour. As for her requested hourly wage increases for BLS EMTs, ALS EMTs, and paramedics, Chief McCusker said those increases would affect several line items depending on how a particular NAS volunteer's service is categorized, i.e. Run Pay, Special Detail, etc. She doesn't have an exact figure for how much these hourly wage increases would affect the NAS personnel budget; she is hoping Finance Director Laurie Baroffio can provide an accurate amount. Manager Schulz said based on budget pressures, the proposed NAS budget he provided to the Select Board members has more modest wage increases. The hourly pay for BLS EMTs and ALS EMTs would increase by \$1.00 per hour. The hourly pay increase for paramedics has not yet been determined but will be at least \$1.00 or \$2.00 per hour. Chief McCusker noted Vermont EMS District #6 is now drafting an updated wage study and that will help confirm whether or not NAS EMTs are receiving compensation comparable to that provided by other Central Vermont ambulance services.

Chief McCusker said the NAS School/Training budget has been raised from \$4,000 to \$6,000 in the proposed NAS budget Manager Schulz provided to the Select Board members. However, she felt \$11,000 would be a more appropriate amount so NAS can increase its training programs and not have to rely on other ambulance departments to provide this service. Chief McCusker felt being able to provide a higher level of in-house training would help considerably with future NAS recruitment and retention of certified EMTs. Manager Schulz said he reviewed this request but felt that going from \$4,000 to \$11,000 in one year was too much. He felt the \$2,000 increase to \$6,000 was a more fiscally responsible amount. EMT Scott Bagg noted the cost of training sessions have gone up significantly over the past couple of years. He noted BLS training now costs \$625 and ALS training costs \$2,000 for each trainee. Chief McCusker noted that when a Norwich University (NU) student takes such training in their freshman year, it is likely that the NAS will have that EMT for the next four (4) years. It was noted that NAS doesn't currently cover the cost of EMT training unless the volunteer has served with NAS for at least one (1) year.

Should the School/Training budget be significantly increased in the next fiscal year, that stipulation could be removed. Chief McCusker then stated her request that new line items be created in the NAS O&M budget to cover the expense of new pagers, portable radios, etc. Ms. Baroffio noted such line items are now included in the NAS CEP budget. There is an "Equipment Purchase" line item in the NAS O&M budget but that is intended to cover normal day-to-day purchases, not for capital equipment. That line item will increase from \$1,500 to \$2,500 in the next fiscal year.

Chief McCusker then turned to the New Emergency Facility CIP account, which now has a \$4.01 balance. Manager Schulz said he did not feel comfortable adding significant funding to this budget before learning how the Select Board members would like to proceed regarding a new NAS facility. Board member Morse felt any such project will require bonding to cover the large expense. He noted that one idea that has been floating around for some time was to have all three (3) local emergency services located in close proximity on Wall Street. Board member Petty hopes flood resiliency grant funds will become available that could assist with at least the planning for this long-term project. Chair Maxwell said that before any discussion of such a major project as the relocation of the NAS facility, he first wants to be sure that the current facility is able to meet immediate NAS needs in the short term. Manager Schulz noted that there is consideration of applying for a hazard mitigation state grant. Board member Petty believes these grant funds could be used to develop long-term plans for a new facility. Chief McCusker said the green space on Wall Street west of the Fire Station has been identified as their preferred future building location. Manager Schulz said there has been past discussion of either expanding the current Fire Station to house both departments or building a freestanding facility for NAS alone. He feels a shared facility makes more sense in the long run. Mr. Bagg felt that although the flooding risk at the current facility is a real concern, the more urgent problem is lack of space for NAS operations given its expanding callout numbers, etc. He added that some NAS equipment has to be stored outside due to lack of space in the NAS garage. There also is difficulty creating sufficient room for EMTs on overnight standby duty, etc. Chair Maxwell noted the CERV food shelf occupies part of the NAS section of the Town Garage. He felt relocating CERV elsewhere might create some more room for NAS operations in the short term. Chief McCusker agreed that would provide more daytime working space but wouldn't alleviate the overnight sleeping quarters problem. Chair Maxwell agreed that relocating CERV would be a quick fix that would solve some problems but not others. Perhaps a facility reconfiguration could help with the overnight sleeping quarters issue.

Chief McCusker noted NAS callout numbers have increased significantly in recent years. They now are only five (5) incidents from reaching one thousand (1000) in a calendar year for the first time. This is more than a one hundred (100) increase from last year. Board member Shernock felt that with local demographic trends, i.e. aging population, the call volume probably will continue to increase steadily in upcoming years. She then asked how the new program for non-emergency transport standby service is progressing. Chief McCusker said there now are standby staff on hand for non-emergency transports from 1:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Monday and Friday afternoons. They have been able to find EMTs to staff these hours but usage of the service has been only a moderate success so far. Chief McCusker said the new service has remained revenue neutral and non-emergency transfers has seen an overall increase, especially with long transports, but there have not been as many during the standby hours as had been anticipated. She does feel the trial period has been somewhat successful and plans to maintain it for the time being. When asked, Chief McCusker said the planned closure of some medical facilities in the state shouldn't affect NAS operations in a significant manner.

Board member Petty asked that of her budget requests, which did Chief McCusker feel were the higher priorities. Chief McCusker said the hourly wage increases she proposed were the most vital as she felt NAS compensation was not remaining competitive to that offered by other ambulance services in the Central Vermont area. The aforementioned District 6 compensation survey should be able to provide solid numbers to back up her contention, which now is based mostly on anecdotal evidence. She will forward that report to the Select Board members as soon as it is available. Chief McCusker felt the increased hourly pay that she recommended is needed for both EMT recruitment and retention. Ms. Baroffio has estimated that if the specific hourly compensation increases Chief McCusker requested are approved by the Select Board members, this will increase the NAS personnel budget from \$415,870 to \$484,140 in the next fiscal year. Board member Petty asked if there might be a reasonable compromise between these two amounts. Chair Maxwell said this could be discussed at length at a future budget meeting, hopefully with the completed compensation report in hand. Mr. Bagg then noted fast food workers in Central Vermont are now making about the same per hour as NAS EMTs. Chief McCusker then added that increasing the NAS School/Training budget is her other urgent request. She noted actual spending on training sessions were on the low side in recent years as several free training sessions were provided during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, not only have those free training sessions gone away but the cost of such training has gone up considerably in the past couple of years. Chair Maxwell noted the first review of the various departmental budgets is only the initial stage of the process. There will be further discussions and review of additional information before any final decisions are made regarding the proposed budget.

There then was a discussion of the NAS CEP budget with a focus on the state of the NAS vehicle fleet. Chief McCusker noted one (1) NAS unit is scheduled to be sent west for a remount next year but she is still waiting to hear the exact timing for this. Of the two (2) NAS units now in service, one has a minor electrical system problem that should be resolved within the next couple of weeks. Chief McCusker stated that overall, the NAS fleet is running pretty well at this time. She then noted that stretcher replacement costs have increased significantly over the past couple of years. Ms. Baroffio said this cost increase is accounted for in the proposed NAS CEP budget. Chief McCusker said she prefers to purchase refurbished defibrillators in order to save some money. The refurbished units work very well and she will keep an eye out for their availability. Chair Maxwell then thanked Chief McCusker and the other NAS EMTs who attended tonight's meeting and provided much useful information about NAS operations and their specific concerns.

2. **Highway Department.** Manager Schulz said in the Highway Department O&M budget, personnel costs will increase 7.0% in the next fiscal year due to wage increases in the new municipal employee union contract as well as rising health insurance coverage costs. In the Contract Services budget, the Tree Removal line item will increase from \$4,000 to \$5,000 in order to perform additional tree trimming to reduce the risk of tree limbs falling into the roads or onto power lines after a bad storm. The Contracted Line Marking budget will increase from \$11,000 to \$15,000 in order to have more lasting material put down in a timelier manner next year. Board member Morse felt it might be good to hire the same company that does the parking space lining at Tops market as that was done very well and much sooner than the street lining work last year. Manager Schulz will reach out to the contractor much earlier next year so that the work can be scheduled much earlier. He also will explore other options for the process. Chair Maxwell would like the outreach for the contracted line marking and street sweeping to start right away rather than waiting until springtime. Manager Schulz said the catch basin cleaning used to be contracted out but will now be done in-house by the Sewer Department. Therefore, this line item has been reduced from \$4,000 to \$500 in the next fiscal year. The Crack Sealing budget will go up from \$7,000 to \$8,000 as this contracted work has done a very good job on helping preserve paved roads.

Manager Schulz said the Highway Department's Administrative budget will increase by 23.4% in the next fiscal year. A good part of that increase is due to the CDL License budget going up from \$200 to \$2,750 in the next fiscal year. This budget is used to reimburse Highway employees doing the training, etc. so they can obtain the higher levels of CDL licenses required to operate heavy equipment. Highway Foreman Bailey said it is difficult to hire drivers who already have the appropriate CDL license so the municipality does need to cover the training cost. He added the Highway Department used to perform the bulk of this training in-house but that is no longer allowed unless you have a state-certified trainer on staff. Chair Maxwell noted Casella has its own CDL certification facility and that might provide a less expensive option.

Manager Schulz then turned to the Materials/Supply budget, which will increase 4.2% in the next fiscal year. He noted most of the individual line items are level-funded but there are some exceptions. For example, the Mud Season/Stone budget will increase from \$35,000 to \$45,000. Board member Stevens hopes a good amount of usable road materials will be removed and reclaimed from the Dog River during the Cross Brother Dam removal project. In addition, the Chemicals/Chloride budget will increase from \$6,000 to \$10,000 so the more effective liquid chloride can be put on the backroads. Mr. Bailey agreed the flake material used recently wasn't very effective as it often blew off the backroads when the wind picked up. He noted chloride is never deposited on the paved roads. Manager Schulz said the Culvert Maintenance budget will increase from \$7,000 to \$8,000 in the next fiscal year. He added that Northfield has received considerable state funding for culvert projects in recent years so this budget amount should be sufficient. Mr. Bailey confirmed that he is comfortable with this figure.

Turning to the Highway Department CIP budget, Manager Schulz noted the Building Improvements account has a \$452.92 deficit with \$4,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. Due to recent building renovations, he felt that the building was in overall good condition with only cosmetic improvements needed in the next couple of years. The Guardrails CIP account now has a \$38,482 balance with no additional funding allocated for the next fiscal year. Manager Schulz feels the current account balance is sufficient to cover any guardrail purchases in the near future. It was noted that a Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) grant will cover the cost of installing new guardrails on Lovers Lane.

In the Bridges CIP account, Manager Schulz said it is very likely the overall cost of the Main Street Bridge Replacement project will be a bit higher than VTrans originally estimated. This also will increase the local share amount, the budget for which now has a balance of \$276,638 with an additional \$60,000 to be added in each of the next two (2) fiscal years. It is hoped this account will have enough funds when the project is completed in 2026. However, it might be necessary to adjust the amount allocated for FY 2026-2027 after VTrans provides updated project cost estimates. Manager Schulz noted the work on TH54 Bridge 56 will be delayed for another year so that sufficient funds can be budgeted over the next two (2) fiscal years. This is now estimated to be a \$210,000 project. The current balance in this CIP account is \$110,000 and \$50,000 will be added in each of the next two (2) fiscal years. Board member Petty hopes the bridge repair costs don't go up much in the interim.

Mr. Bailey then noted the footbridge located on Vine Street has suffered damage over the past couple of years. Board member Petty thought it would be good to get cost estimates for any needed repairs. It also might be good to create a separate CIP account for this footbridge with \$1,000 the initial allocation. Board member Morse noted there is an existing Footbridge CIP account, which has been used mainly to maintain the pedestrian footbridge that connects the area behind the Senior Center and Green Mountain Apartments to Water Street. There is a current balance of \$6,000 in this account and perhaps some of these funds could be reallocated for the Vine Street footbridge. Chair Maxwell suggested transferring \$5,000 from this footbridge CIP account into a new account dedicated to the Vine Street footbridge with another \$1,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. Board member Petty thought it is possible some funding could be leftover after the sidewalk work on Vine Street is completed. These funds also could be used to address the footbridge problems. Board member Stevens asked if the recent repairs on the other footbridge meant that the snowplow could be used on it. Mr. Bailey confirmed that the new footbridge planking disbursts the vehicle's weight better so this was no longer a problem.

Manager Schulz then noted the Retaining Walls budget now has a \$105,302 balance with \$10,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. He now has an engineer inspecting the problematic retaining walls located on School Street and Pearl Street in order to determine repair cost estimates. Chair Maxwell said there were other retaining walls in bad condition on Elm Street, Water Street, etc. Manager Schulz said fixing the Elm Street retaining wall will be both complicated and expensive. There was a \$500,000 estimate from a few years ago for this project. Chair Maxwell suggested that it might be necessary to bond to cover the project expenses. Ms. Baroffio said this was possible provided the bond repayment period was spread out over at least five (5) years. Manager Schulz then said there was a \$43,409 balance in the Paving/RSMS budget with \$190,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. Chair Maxwell asked if this amount was sufficient to cover the expenses of next year's paving projects. Mr. Bailey said it should be enough. He hasn't determined which streets should be repaved next year as he would like to perform road inspections first to see where repaving really is needed. He then will make his suggestions to Manager Schulz. The Gravel Resurfacing CIP account now has a \$70,245 balance with \$90,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. The current balance will be used to address problems on Turkey Hill Road and other backroads in the late spring. The new funding will be used to address problems on other backroads next summer.

In the Highway Department CEP budget, Manager Schulz noted there are some big ticket items here including scheduled vehicle replacements and other major equipment purchases. However, most of these CEP accounts are level funded in the next fiscal year. Chair Maxwell asked if the Western Star dump trucks could be replaced by vehicles purchased from other manufacturers. Mr. Bailey would recommend purchasing Mack trucks as replacement vehicles but not International trucks as he felt those were too light duty for backroads work. He noted VTrans does employ International trucks but uses them almost exclusively on paved roads. Mr. Bailey feels their vehicle frames are not rigid enough for service on rutted gravel roads, etc. Board member Morse noted when he was Town Manager several years ago, he asked the Randolph Town Manager about the International trucks in his highway fleet. He was told that on further reflection, they wished they had purchased Mack trucks instead. Mr. Bailey said he would prefer to purchase Mack trucks in future but since they usually cost \$50,000 more than Western Star trucks, that might not be an option. He added that he confers with other highway supervisors at heavy equipment trade shows and they also favor the Mack and Western Star trucks for their vehicle fleets. He acknowledged that the pricing for International trucks is good but he also felt that the quality just isn't there for backroads service.

Chair Maxwell then asked if it is possible to obtain good used trucks for the Highway Department. Mr. Bailey felt purchasing a used highway truck is just taking on someone else's problem. The original owner usually has a good reason for disposing of the vehicle, especially if its warranty has expired. Chair Maxwell noted vehicle warranties usually are good for seven (7) years and that is the current timeframe for heavy vehicle replacement in our Highway Department. He also noted that the 2014 Western Star dump truck is scheduled for replacement in the next fiscal year. Mr. Bailey said that vehicle has incurred some expensive repair costs since its warranty expired. The replacement cost for a ten-wheel truck now averages \$290,000 and the new vehicle should remain in service for about seven (7) to eight (8) years. Mr. Bailey noted the cost of replacing one-ton trucks also has increased to about \$145,000. As for the 2012 Volvo Loader, it is off warranty and requires repairs on a regular basis. It is scheduled for replacement in FY 2026-2028 and Mr. Bailey believes it should last until then. Chair Maxwell then asked if the fifteen (15) year replacement schedule for loaders is realistic. Mr. Bailey thought it was but he would not extend it further than that. He then stated that the 2012 Volvo Excavator is scheduled for replacement in FY 2027-2028 but probably will require the replacement of its tracks before then. Board member Morse felt the purchase of this piece of equipment was a good investment. Mr. Bailey agreed and added that the graders are in good shape. Having the second one on hand has been very helpful in fixing the backroads especially during Mud Season. In addition, the Sidewalk Machine and the Leaf Collection System are in very good shape.

Board member Petty asked about the upgrade planned for the traffic light located at the intersection of North Main Street and Vine Street. Manager Schulz said more work needs to be done but he isn't sure about the timeline for this. This work will include the installation of new cameras, etc. He noted that only one Vermont company does this type of work and this causes the scheduling delays. Board member Petty thought it fortunate that there is only one (1) such traffic light in this town. Manager Schulz then asked Mr. Bailey if the vehicle lift system at the Town Garage was still working well. Mr. Bailey confirmed it was doing a good job and it was a much better piece of equipment than the previous system.

Chair Maxwell thanked Mr. Bailey for attending tonight's meeting and commended the Highway Department crew for the excellent work they have done on the streets and sidewalks after the recent wave of snowstorms. The fact that he hasn't heard many complaints is a very good sign given that some Northfield residents seem to have unrealistic expectations for how quickly the roads and sidewalks should be cleared of snow after a winter event. Mr. Bailey said the Highway Department crew is doing its very best despite being shorthanded at the moment. He added that the utility crew have been helping out on occasion and this is much appreciated.

The next budget meeting will be held on Tuesday, December 17, 2024 starting at 6:00 p.m. The Cemetery and Planning/Zoning budgets will be discussed at that time and Manager Schulz said updates on previously discussed departmental budgets might be available then.

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

V. ADJOURNMENT. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Petty, to adjourn.
Motion passed 5-0-0.

The Board adjourned at 8:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

A video recording of this meeting is available at <https://youtu.be/kxeD8lwWmEQ>

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