

Special Meeting of the Strafford Selectboard
October 4, 2023, Town Office at 6 pm

Selectboard members attending the meeting: David Paganelli, John Freitag

Attending in public: Steve Faccio, Micki Colbeck, Anne Fayen, Mike Hebb, Maria Cabri, Mike Mann, Dennis Preston, C. Punka Brown, Donald Graham

Attending via zoom: Chris Behr, Tii Mclean, John Sackaloski, Jim Schley

The meeting was called to order at 6pm by Selectboard Chair John Freitag

Freitag thanked all for coming to this Special Meeting to inform members of the Conservation Commission and the public regarding a request for the Justin Morrill Driftskippers Snowmobile Club to use part of the Town's Whitcomb Hill property to connect their trail system after part of their old trail was cut off due to a change in landownership.

Freitag said that this issue had come up on the last Selectboard meeting under Citizen Concerns and that he improperly allowed a motion and a vote on the request which had not appeared as a warned item on the agenda. He apologized for the error and said it would not happen again. Freitag said this informational meeting was intended to restart the process.

Freitag said that having a snowmobile trail cross Whitcomb Hill had not been discussed when the land was given in 2012 and although there was language in the deed for no motorized vehicles on the right of way to the property, there was no language in the deed that legally prohibited the Selectboard from considering the request being made. He then turned the meeting over to the Snowmobile Club.

Michael Mann, President of the Snowmobile Club outlined on a map of the property roughly where the Club wanted to put the route if approved. For the last two years they have been working on finding a new route on this section of trail that connects all the way to East Thetford. The section they propose that goes across the lower part of the Whitcomb Hill property is the last part they need. Michael emphasized that the club is required to put in water bars, reseed disturbed areas and they have been good stewards of the land they use for trails for nearly the last 50 years. Mann said maintaining this section of the trail system in Vermont gives the club the needed funds to operate. Denny Preston said the trails would only be used between December 15 and April 15 and then only when there was at least a foot of snow on the trail, leaving little impact on the land. Michael also mentioned that the Club allowed cross country skiers and those snowshoeing on the trails and helped the community by grooming the Lions Ski Hill and Cross-Country Trail behind the Newton School.

Mike Hebb who was instrumental in working with the Bob and Fran Nye when they offered to give the land to the Town felt that it would be a betrayal of agreements and understandings made with the Nye's on conditions of non-motorized use of the land. He presented an email from their son regarding some of the conditions of which this was one. While these conditions were not written into the deed or any legal document that we know of, Selectboard member David Paganelli said they still held weight. Donald Graham suggested going back through the Selectboard minutes to see what was written about the gift of land and any conditions there. Freitag said he would do it before the next Selectboard meeting. C. Punka Brown, whose grandfather sold the land to the Nye's said he felt that the Nye's, who were noted for their generosity and community mindedness, would if they were still alive and knew of the request by the Club and the importance it held for their trail system, likely agree to allow it.

There was disappointment that there was not a more accurate map (a computer problem) . Others spoke of the appreciation and quietness of Whitcomb Hill as a valued town asset. Mike Hebb proposed if the Selectboard decided to allow a snowmobile trail, to use an alternative route that would use less of the

Whitcomb Hill property. The Selectboard will be making a decision at their next meeting when all members can be present. It is currently scheduled for Thursday October 12. In the meantime, besides Freitag doing more research, Mike Mann and Mike Hebb will be hiking the proposed trail and making a map of that route as well as the alternative route Mike Hebb has proposed. At the end of the meeting Freitag thanked all for attending. He said this was one of those difficult decisions for a Selectboard that was in a gray area and for which there were two competing goods for our community. He said the way people at this meeting listened, sought to understand, and respected each other even while disagreeing was greatly appreciated.

The meeting adjourned at 7:15pm

Respectfully submitted,

John Freitag