

Strafford Selectboard Meeting
December 13, 2023 6 p.m.
Town Office Building, Strafford Vermont

Selectboard members participating in the meeting: Brian Johnson, Jeff Solsaa, John Freitag, David Paganelli

Attending in person: Lisa Bragg, Shelby Coburn, Andrew Lane
Attending remotely: David Grant, Anni Praetorius, Sarah Buxton

Call to order: Reading of Guidelines for Selectboard Conduct

Public Concerns – none

Minutes of the November 22 Selectboard meeting and December 6 Special Meeting were approved as written

Highways

Highway liaison Jeff Solsaa reported that on status of roads and equipment. Part of the sanding mechanism on the ton truck has rusted out and will be replaced. Jeff updated the Board on the need for a sander for the Town sidewalk clearing tractor. Sanding is needed to deal with slippery conditions that often occur. A motion was made and approved Solsaa, Paganelli and Freitag in favor, Johnson voted nay.

Road Foreman PD Hardy was out working on the roads and was not able to attend the meeting. The Brook Road project will be on the agenda for the next meeting.

Brian Johnson was unable to meet with the landowner regarding an alternative location for the Freeman bridge replacement. He will do so before the next meeting and if there is a willingness by the landowner to provide new access, the Board will consider the advantages and disadvantages of rebuilding the bridge in the current location or using the new location. Currently Freeman Road has been accessed since the July storm event by using a temporary culvert.

Bridge 30 – Since the re-use of a truss structure for replacing the sides of this bridge next to the Town House on the Brook Road has proved cost prohibitive, the Town has received an estimate using concrete panel sides similar that match in style ones used in Town after the Flood of 1927. Bridge 30 was replaced in 1939 and used a different style. There are bridge styles with design and construction plans approved by the Vermont Agency of Transportation that are closer in style to the current bridge. Solsaa will check with Daniels Construction who gave an estimate on the concrete panel option and see if they will give an estimate on this other style and what the cost comparison would be. It is possible this would be a less expensive option.

Current plans are to have work done on Bridge 30 in 2024.

Town Meeting

Town Clerk Lisa Bragg outlined for the Board the deadlines for Town Meeting now that Town at the last Town Meeting decided to go from an in-person meeting on Town Meeting Day to voting by Australian Ballot. A motion was made to have the voting by Australian Ballot use the method of sending in the mail ballots to all voters rather than voters only casting their ballot on Town Meeting Day or by requesting an Absentee Ballot if they could not make it to the polls at the Town House on

Town Meeting Day. Johnson, Solsaa and Paganelli voted in favor of mailing ballots to all voters, Freitag nay. Motion passed.

The timeline was then discussed. Town Moderator David Grant asked about when the Informational Meeting before Town Meeting Day would be held. It will be on Saturday March 2 at the Town House. Current plans are to have the Town portion go first, then the PTA lunch and the School Meeting at 1p.m. Given that there will be not balloting or voting at the Informational Meeting, it is likely to go much faster than traditional Town Meeting and the starting time will be moved from 9 a.m. to 10 pm. Grant said he would be a candidate for Moderator in 2024.

Those wishing to be on the ballot for elective office, these include Selectboard, Auditors, and Lister as well as others will need to have a petition with 10 signatures and a consent of candidate form to the Town Clerk by no later than January 29.

The last day to mail ballots to the voters in February 14. Bragg said that given the time it takes to print and prepare the mailing, warnings will need to be completed and approved no later than the end of January.

Budget

As the Town budget year starts on January 1, 2024, decisions on those who receive paychecks need to be made at this meeting tonight and the contracts and arrangements for law enforcement no later than the Board Meeting on December 27, 2023. Given the amount on the agenda for this meeting, the decision on law enforcement will take place at the next meeting.

Bragg brought up that the State in subsidizing the interest on loans for Towns to cover the cost of the July Storm event until reimbursement by FEMA. The interest rate is 1.3%. Currently the Town has a line of credit from Mascoma Bank for 1.5 million at 4.7% from which we have been paying contractors and expenses. The Board approved applying for the State loan funding.

At 7:15pm, Selectboard member Brian Johnson who was feeling ill, left the meeting.

Listers Office

The Board approved a memorandum of understanding regarding the use of the meeting room in the upper village fire station for use by the Listers as a temporary office. Freitag signed for the Town and Andrew Lane for the Firemen's Association. Basic provisions included use of that room in exchange for any extra costs than may be incurred. Thanks were given to the Firemen's Association and Listers for working out this arrangement.

Town Office personnel

At Town Meeting last year the position of Selectboard Assistant was eliminated and the line item for compensation for the Town Clerk/Town Treasurer and Assistant Town Clerk/Town Treasurer combined into one line item. While Bragg has continued to fulfill many of the duties she did while Selectboard Assistant since then, there has not been a written understanding, Bragg presented at the meeting a Memorandum of Understanding listing 16 duties administrative duties and clerical duties beyond her Town Clerk/Town Treasurer job descriptions she provides in support of the Selectboard. Unlike previously when she reported directly to the Selectboard and as with her other duties as Town Clerk/Town Treasurer she will work on these items independently from the Board. A motion was made and approved by all to approve the Memorandum of Understanding – Town Clerk Support to the Selectboard as presented.

The Selectboard then moved to a request from Bragg for an adjustment to the line item in the budget for the line item in the budget Clerk and Treasurer Office of which reflects the compensation paid to her and her assistant. The Selectboard at the previous meeting approved a 4% increase in the wages of

the road crew and the town office employees. Bragg noting that both she and her Assistant this past year completed a level three certification in courses offered by the Vermont Municipal Clerks and Treasurers Association and a comparison with other towns from other areas of the State's compensation for their office personnel requested an additional increase of \$1.86 per hour for both her and her assistant. Solsaa indicated he was in favor of this increase, Paganelli suggested a 1% increase bringing the total increase to 5%. Freitag said that having a skilled experience town office personnel is critical and is appreciative of the work being done by Lisa and Regina. Freitag felt that the total amount allocated to Town Office personnel needed to be adjusted but felt a 1% increase too low and the \$1.81 a bit too much. Shelby Coburn who served as Town Clerk before Lisa 18 years ago and occasionally still helps out in the office, says the amount of complexity and regulation that has occurred since she was town clerk is incredible. Freitag made a motion to approve a \$1.50 / per hour increased for both positions with along with the 4% cost of living increase will result in the \$102,239 spent this year on town office personnel increasing by a bit over \$9,000 for 2024. Freitag and Paganelli voted yea and Solsaa nay. Motion passed.

The Selectboard then considered a request to make this pay increase retro-active to July 1. Solsaa was in favor of this request and Paganelli and Freitag opposed and the pay increase will start on January 1, 2024.

Town Office Project

The transfer of the gift of a small portion of land next to the Town Office from Morgan Smith which will enable adding an addition onto the Town Office should be finished before the end of the year. Morgan has also indicated his willingness to think about the possibility of the town clerk having a temporary office in the front part of his house during construction.

A Request for Proposal (RFP) regarding bids for architectural services will likely go out before the end of the year, so if the project is approved in March we will be able to get started right afterwards.

There are outstanding questions that need to be answered regarding the project and how it will be worded on the Warning for the 2024 Town Meeting. Those questions will be addressed at our next Selectboard Meeting on December 27.

Delta Dental Insurance Question

At the November 8 Selectboard meeting the Town Auditors discussed with the Selectboard a discrepancy found by Town Clerk Lisa Bragg in the dental policy between how the policy was paid for and what is Town Personnel Policy. They recommended that the policies be put in line for the upcoming year and that the Board look at taking action regarding whether town employees have been rightfully compensated going back to 2017. The Selectboard has for 2024 made a correction so that the two policies are now in line. The Selectboard also engaged the services of a firm Tarrent Gilles & Shems that specializes in Vermont municipal law to find what liability if any we had regarding our past practice.

At 8pm Sarah Buxton, an attorney from this firm zoomed into our meeting. As a first order of business the Selectboard decided since this was a policy not personnel issue, this item would not be in Executive Session. Buxton then went on to go over her findings in a 4 page memorandum which had been shared earlier in the day with Selectboard members, Auditors and the Town Clerk. Buxton had done research with the dental policy providers, reviewed the Town policy regarding insurance and past minutes. She also interviewed Selectboard member Toni Pippy and reviewed information from Insurance consultant Tom Scull from the Richards Group. Pippy and Scull helped institute the way the Town provides insurance to its employees through a defined benefit contribution which is used as an offset for the health, vision and dental plans employee choose. Buxton's conclusion was that the town had performed on its promise to provide for a net defined benefit and there was no additional amount deducted from employee paychecks in the process of withdrawing

some as a “dental” contribution and some as a “health care” contribution. The town does not carry liability for reimbursing past employees contributions to dental insurance premium because employees paid no more than they otherwise would have contributed if it had used a different accounting method.

The Selectboard agreed with her conclusion. They also asked if before the next meeting she would suggest a line or two that would clarify the insurance section of the Town Personnel Policy before the next meeting for the Selectboard to review and to consider making in order to lessen the likelihood of future misunderstanding.

Ashley Community Forest

David Paganelli, who serves on the Ashley Forest Board, updated the Board on the Ashley Community Forest Management Plan and the Strafford Selectboard’s role in this property jointly owned the towns of Sharon and Strafford. A proposal was presented for the consideration of the Selectboard, that outlines a procedure for the implementation of management activities on the forest. This is an attempt to clarify language in paragraph 6(6) for the Interlocal Contract that defines oversight responsibility for the forest. A motion was made and the proposed process was approved by the Selectboard.

A motion was made and the Selectboard also approved the Ashley Community Forest Board request to modify their budget so that they may use funds from the Ashley Community Forest Management Account to seek a legal opinion on access from the Sharon side of the property.

Correspondence

The Board received a proposal from Bonnie Bergeron regarding the Zoning Officer position. This will be on the agenda for our December 27 meeting.

The Board received a request from Steve Willbanks for potential help from the Board in getting a propane company to remove tanks no longer in use from the Historical Society property in South Strafford.

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting at 8:55 p.m. All approved.

Respectfully submitted,

John Freitag