

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STRAFFORD SELECTBOARD

December 30, 2015

Members of the public body present: John Freitag, Stephen Marx, Toni Pippy, Brent Cadwell, Brian Johnson

Other active participants: Lisa Kendall, Town Clerk, Jon Mackinnon, Road Foreman and Public Works Supervisor, Beverly Bilsky, June Solsa, Jessica Tidman, Tom Scull, Sue Coburn, Brenda Lewis, Allan Wylie, Carlton Phelps, Lee Vormelker, Marie Ricketts, Jere Linehan, John Lloyd, Beth Preston, Bill Burden, Dave Kendall, Tori Lloyd, Steve Gex, Sarah Levin, Brian Levin, Lindsey Evans, Alan Donohue, Amy Donohue, Martha Walke, Roz Finn

Meeting called to order in the Town Office at 6:00 p.m.

1) **Citizen Concerns:**

Sarah Levin expressed her concerns to the Board regarding Strafford's high town property tax rate and the increases over that past several years. Sarah found when comparing the town portion of the residential rate of \$.68 to the surrounding towns, Strafford was higher. The taxes cannot continue to go up and changes need to be made to stabilize the tax rate. During the discussion a suggestion was made that we consider using the consumer price index for determining pay increases in the future. Tom Scull, Vice President, Employee Benefits of the Richards Group the volunteered his expertise with looking at more sustainable models to providing insurance benefits in the future.

2) Correspondence (copies of these documents are available at the Town Clerk's Office)

An email from Sarah Levin to Lisa Kendall – requesting “All letters, memoranda, reports, emails, google group discussions, or other writings and correspondence issued or received by you, your staff, or the Select Board of the Town of Strafford about the proposed tax rate for the year 2016.”

An email from Sarah Levin to the Selectboard with concerns about the budget, tax rate and pay and compensation.

An Email from John Echeverria to the Selectboard regarding his feeling that the Town should get full market value for the lease land was

An Email from Danielle Sweet regarding Town Office hours and the hours the office was closed during the holidays. John responded to Danielle.

An email from Jessica LaPatta of VTel announcing the new broadband service they are offering.

An email from Chris Gex to the Selectboard with concerns over the lack of action on the recommendations of the Pay and Compensation Sub-Committee Report.

An email from Barrie North with regard to Town employee's pay and benefits.

An email from Steve Willbanks – “Public Records Request - All letters, memoranda, reports, emails, google group discussions, or other writings and correspondence issued or received by the Select Board of the Town of Strafford or you or your staff, regarding the Elizabeth Mine solar project and Renewable Tax Credits (REWs) both prior to and following the September 15, '15 Special Select Board Meeting.”

The Richards Group provided to the Selectboard at the meeting a document of the Town of Strafford Health Insurance Summary that explains The Affordable Care Act as it relates to the Town, The Town Health Insurance Plan itemized, a summary depicting the financial impact should Domestic Partner coverage be offered and Issues to Discuss.

3) **Minutes** –Steve made a motion and Brent seconded to approve the December 14th and December 16th minutes. All approved

4) **Town Highways**

Highway and Equipment update- Jon reported that equipment was in good order and ice and snow being dealt with.

5) General

Emergency Management Director Bill Burden reported on the VT-Alert System which will be used for alerting residents of Strafford in the event of emergencies and incidents. He and Deputy Director Lee Vormelker have run a test. There were some problems and they are working with Randy Bronson of VT-Alert to get them corrected. Bill also updated us on current Federal/ State Requirements for Qualifying for Emergency Management and Homeland Security Grants. He has been staying on top of this. The aspect of “credentialing” has still not been settled at the federal and state level.

Strafford Fire and Rescue - President John Lloyd, Fire Chief Jere Linehan, and Rescue Lead Beth Preston updated the Board on their organization’s service over the past year as well as the capital improvement building and truck needs that will be upcoming in the next few years. Fire and Rescue volunteers require a great deal of training and are on call 24/7. Fire personnel not only cover our own town’s needs but provide mutual aid for surrounding communities.

Beth Preston said the number of rescue calls were up and there were over 40 this past year. This has been a fairly large strain on the small number of people in the service. John noted that Strafford is fortunate to have such dedicated volunteers as well as to have leadership by professional firefighters like Jere Linehan, and Davy Kendall and rescue leadership by Beth Preston who recently retired from a long career as a nurse at Dartmouth Hitchcock.

Lease land request - John shared with the Board information and a legal opinion the Selectboard in 2011 received on a similar request regarding lease land. Lease land was included when the town was set up to help provide support to the schools through “perpetual lease payments” As the years passed, the lease payments became so small in relation to property taxes (total of all lease payments in Strafford are \$85), that the General Assembly made a change. Under legislation enacted in the late 1960's these lease lands became subject to full real estate taxes, and the value of the small lease payments are included in those real estate taxes. The legislature also made a method to clear up the title to property that the town leases under these old leases. The Selectboard may convey any remaining interest of the Town to the holder of the lease, which terminates the lease. The Board in 2011 granted the request made at that time to end this old lease. Brent made a motion and Brian seconded that those owners with lease land who wish to have the lease land terminated can do so by having a quick claim deed prepared at their expense. All approved.

Public Service Board hearing – John brought up that the Public Service Board Hearing on the solar project at the mine is on Monday January 4. He would like to testify on behalf of the Board regarding traffic and safety concerns that the Board has already raised in the preliminary comments, but felt good to remind how important that provisions be put in. He also asked that a draft letter announcing the Hearing be put out on the list serve. Board approved of both of these requests and John will follow-up.

Domestic partner request – At the December 16th meeting the Board decided to wait until there was a legal opinion on whether or not the Town was required to give domestic partner benefits before taking action on a request from the Assistant Town Clerk/Town Treasurer for this benefit. The Board has since received information that “there is no law that requires the Town to offer health insurance to a domestic partners. John moved and Brian seconded that the Town not provide domestic partner benefits. Lisa informed the Board that the requestor for these benefits has withdrawn her request. It was decided to go ahead and vote on the motion to set a policy in case other requests came up in the future. The question was moved and all approved the motion not to provide domestic partner benefits.

2015 Second Assistant extra benefits – John reviewed the hours paid in 2015 to the second assistant an 18 hour a week position and 95.7 hours was paid as benefit time off. Lisa, who uses the Town Personnel Policy as a guideline for her office, said that while according to our personnel policy, holiday and vacation time are pro-rated, sick and personnel time are not. Forty one hours of personal leave and sick pay has been paid in error. The vacation time was high this year because it was not taken in 2014 and it is allowed to be carried over. Lisa recommended and the Board agreed that the Personnel Policy be changed to not have benefits for part-time positions in the future.

End of year pay bonus – An end of the year/holiday bonus of \$150 has traditionally been given to each road crew and town office employee each year. This has not been a budgeted figure and will be expensed against compensation. The Board felt that while we should give this benefit for 2015, this should be reviewed as part of the 2016 budget process and if decided to be given be put in as a line item in the budget. Toni made a motion and Brent seconded to approve a \$150 pay holiday bonus for 2015 for all current road crew and town office employees. All approved.

Request from Town Clerk and Assistant Town Clerk for pay adjustment due to certification completions - Toni made

a motion and Brian seconded that this be tabled and considered later as part of the overall 2016 budget process. All approved.

Supervisor of Public Works – John brought up his concerns and the Board agrees that the position of Road Foreman and Supervisor of Public Works is not fully understood and has not been fully articulated since it was changed in 2012.

Effective May 12, 2012, Road Foreman Jon Mackinnon was appointed to the new position of Road Foreman and Public Works Supervisor with an annual salary of \$56,992 and is exempt from receiving overtime and comp time. The additional duties of the job includes the responsibility to “oversee and maintain Town properties, including but not limited to the Common, The Town House, Town Forest, Recycling Center and Varney Field, Whitcomb Hill, the South Strafford Recreation Fields and Old City Falls Recreation Area”. Much of the care of these areas is effectively handled by Town Boards, Committees, Groups, and private contractors, and the Supervisor of Public Works stays in contact and works with all these parties to make sure the needed work on these areas gets done. Like the Road Foreman part of the job this can mean at times responding to emergency request outside regular work hours.

Update on Municipal Building bid process – Brian reported that he had met with Jon and looked over the situation of the walkway and stairway to the upstairs of the building. It may be possible to keep the cement walkway but that the stairway would need to be completely removed and rebuilt. He will be meeting with Strafford architect Tim Utt who is volunteering consulting, on the next steps. Brian felt that we should be able to have a figure for the budget.

List serve postings – Brent brought up his concern that people may be confused when there is a posting by an individual Selectboard member because it may be mistaken as being from the whole Board. John, who serves as Chair and spokesperson for the Board, said that he will set up an account and post official Board information from his Selectboard email account and keep his private email for personal posts to help further clarify things. All Board members have the right to give their own opinion on Town issues on the lists, should they so choose. The Board agreed that any personal/individual posts on the list serve made by a Board member will begin by acknowledging that he/she is not speaking for the whole Board.

2016 budget – This item was postponed to a Special Meeting on the 2016 budget to be held on Wednesday at 6p.m. On January 6 at the Town Office.

Pay and Compensation Sub-Committee Report/ letter from Town Clerk – Tori Lloyd, Chair of the Sub-Committee responded to the questions raised in the letter sent to the Selectboard on December 15th from Lisa Kendall about the Pay and Compensation Subcommittee Report and answered questions raised by the public and the Board. As stated in the letter sent by the Board to the Sub-Committee, “The purpose of this committee is to review our current pay and classification and compensation plan for our town employees, compare what we offer with other towns of our size and circumstances, and make recommendations to the Selectboard.”

The report contains a wealth of data to be used as a starting point for discussions to determine how best to move forward with providing a financially sustainable and equitable pay and benefits package to the Town’s employees.

6) **Other** –

Brian made a motion to adjourn and Steve seconded. All approved and the meeting was adjourned 9:05 p.m.

Next Meeting: 1/6/16 Special Budget meeting 6 p.m.at the Town Office and 1/13/16 Regular Board Meeting 6 p.m. at the Town Office

Respectfully Submitted, Toni M. Pippy

