

Strafford Selectboard Meeting
November 22, 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: Bob Wilson

Attending remotely: Lisa Bragg, Curt Albee, Rocky Fuller

Call to order: Reading of Guidelines for Selectboard Conduct

Public Concerns – none

Minutes of the November 8 Informational Hearing and November 8 Selectboard meeting were approved as written

Highways

Highway liaison Jeff Solsaa reported that the new truck with the different suspension system than the one we wanted is being tried out to see if it will still meet our needs. The new truck came with an airbag suspension system which seems to work well in some communities in Vermont but we are not sure how it will perform on Strafford roads. A decision on how to proceed whether to lease the truck for a year while a new truck is built or keep the truck after it has been tested out.

The paving grant for resurfacing Rte. 132 from South Strafford to the Thetford Town line has been received.

The Board signed the structures grant reimbursement request for the Bridge recently completed on the Justin Morrill Highway.

The deadline Municipal Roads General Permit grant is soon and personnel involved are on top of it. This grant helps Towns improve water quality by reducing erosion. Road Foreman PD Hardy is recommending that we use the grant for ditching on the Brook Road and have the work done before re-surfacing work starts next year.

The Town will also be applying for a Better Roads Grant. Projects being considered are a new culvert on the Brook Road near Kibbling Hill or an undersized culvert on the Cross Road. The Brook Road culvert is the first choice as it would be a good time to do it before the road gets repaved. However the grant is for a maximum of \$60,000 and the culvert there is already large and a new one might require a hydraulic study and a box culvert that would run in the range of a couple hundred thousand dollars. This would make it unfeasible in terms of all our other road and bridge needs for next year and hence the back-up option of replacing the currently undersized Cross Road culvert.

A minor accident occurred in October between the town tractor which was blowing leaves out of the ditches while backing up and a car attempting to pass. The Board was asked to approve going forward with the approximately \$3,000 needed for repairs of the vehicle. While not being able to determine definitively who was at fault, the Board decided that given the relatively small amount of funds involved to proceed with our insurance company covering the cost. Town Clerk Lisa Bragg will notify our insurance company.

The Freeman Bridge project was discussed. The Freeman bridge off Old City Road has washed out both in Hurricane Irene and the July Storm event this year. Temporary culverts are now in place to allow residents access to their homes. A new location farther up from the existing site which would be less likely

to wash our again is being considered. Brian Johnson offered to speak with the landowner to see about using an access point across a small part of his property. Should the landowner agree, the Town will proceed the papers needed and then put out a request for bids for putting in a new bridge next year. This bridge project has a strong potential of being eligible for FEMA funds.

There are still some contractors that have not filled out the paperwork needed for emergency work done after the July Storm event. The signed forms are needed in order for the Town to be reimbursed by FEMA for the majority of the costs. A reminder letter was sent out earlier. Solsaa will follow-up contacting them. The hope is to have the paperwork completed by the end of the year.

Grants

Stafford Tree Warden Bob Wilson asked the Board for permission to proceed with our Grant Manager Stephanie Slayton in applying for a grant to help with the Emerald Ash Bore infestation now beginning to spread in Vermont. This disease has ended up killing most of the ash trees in other states and the same result is expected in Vermont. Selectboard member David Paganelli, whose day job is being the Orange County Forester, said that the disease starts spreading slowly than there is an incredibly steep rise in the spread and die off of trees. Paganelli felt the Town would be wise to address this problem pro-actively rather than wait till there was an overwhelming situation facing our community and limited tree people to deal with it ,as surrounding communities would all be in the same situation. Wilson has done a survey of all the ash trees on town property and along the town roads, noting which ones might be taken out by the power company to protect their lines. There are potentially hundreds of trees that the Town could have to deal with as a safety matter once they die. Previously the Town budgeted \$5,000 and cut ash trees along the Mine Road where the town was able to work with the landowners and simply drop the trees on their property and a large number of ash trees were able to be dealt with. Wilson explained that the current grant, that is available is only for within a mile of town centers and is only for up to \$5,000, requires a one to one match in either funds or in-kind work. Wilson said there are more than enough ash trees in this area for the amount of money in the grant. The Board approved Wilson and Slayton applying for the grant and will put the match money needed in the 2024 budget.

Insurance

The Town of Strafford has for its employees a defined benefit contribution for their health, dental and vision needs. It started in 2017 as the amount of money equal to 75% of the BCBS Platinum Plan of either the single, two person or family plan. Employees are able to use the benefit for what plan they need (single, two-person or family), for whatever health plan they choose and from what provider they choose as well as getting a single person basic dental plan. Employees who do not chose to take any plan are given as a benefit one-half the amount of the single payer plan. Each year since 2017 the Selectboard decides how much to increase the benefit contribution by. Over this time has once been as low as no increase, but much more often in the range of 3 to 4% . This year the cost of living increase is 3.2% for social security beneficiaries. A motion was made and approved by all to increase the defined benefit contribution by 3.2%. for 2024.

At the last Selectboard meeting the Town Auditors brought to the Board's attention conflicting language between the town policy and the dental plan. They recommended that accounting for the dental benefit be corrected as of January 1, 2024. A motion was made and approved by all to have the dental benefits, which for 2024 are provided for a single person at a cost \$616.32/ year, be paid by the employer as required in the dental policy, not the employee as has been the case previously. Town Clerk/Town Treasurer Lisa Bragg said she would inform the insurance companies of these decisions. Questions regarding what the Town should do regarding the discrepancy from previous years will be addressed at the next Board meeting on December 13 when the Town attorney who has been reviewing the issue will be present to discuss her findings regarding the issue and the options with the Board.

Budget

Town Clerk/Town Treasurer Lisa Bragg provided the Board a current budget as of 11/12/23 showing income and expenses for the year. Bragg also reported that letters have gone out to those who get regular funding from the Town budget for their request for the 2024 budget year.

The Board discussed pay increases for town employees for 2024. A motion was made and approved by all to give our four highway department and two Town Office employees a 4% increase. Freitag noted that there has been this year adjustments to the pay of highway employees due to a very competitive market and the need for the town to have a full crew. He said before the next meeting there would be a review of the pay for the Town Clerk/Town Treasurer and Assistant Town Clerk/Town Treasurer to make sure their compensation package was in line with similar towns and positions with similar responsibilities.

Town Office

David Paganelli reported that the mylar for the subdivision is complete and at surveyor Tom Otterman's office. This is the last thing needed to move forward on the land transfer needed to have space to build an addition to the Town Office. Should Otterman not be able to drop it off early next week, Paganelli or Freitag will go to his office in Orange Vermont and get it.

The Board then discussed with Town Committee members Curt Albee and Rocky Fuller how to proceed toward a vote on Town Meeting Day. Curt will be talking with Steve Kredell from gbA architects, whose firm did the concept drawings and price estimates for the Committee, about how they could be of further help preparing for the vote. The Board is also looking at the possibility of putting out to bid the architectural services needed to proceed with the project by the end of the year. The bid process takes around two months would be complete near the end of February. This would allow, should there be a vote to go forward at Town Meeting Day, work to start on this phase of the project immediately thereafter. This will be discussed further at the next Board meeting.

Listers

The Board noted the listserv post by Lister Tim Denny regarding the need for new temporary office space for the Listers as the current location will no longer be an option after January 8. Those in town who have space they may want to rent for a Lister Office should contact him. The Listers had to move out of their space in the upstairs of the Town Office building which was closed by the Fire Marshall this past April due to multiple deficiencies with the building.

The Board all voted to approve the request from Lister Ross Gortner to not take his stipend, but have the money stay with the Town.

Dogs

Arrangements have been made to have two dogs who can no longer be cared for by their owner go to the Central Vermont Humane Society. This has been arranged by the Town Nurse Shelia Keating working with the owner. Lisa Durstin and Pam Wasserman have volunteered to take the dogs to the shelter at the appointed time. Two hundred dollars to help cover the cost of dogs while at the shelter has been allocated by the dog officer from the dog fund.

There is just one dog in town at this point that we know of that has not be licensed and that is being worked on getting resolved.

Correspondence

Micki Colbeck wrote the board with her concern that a house that she feels has a failed septic system may be coming on the market soon. Freitag will follow-up.

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting at 8:25 p.m. All approved.

Respectfully submitted,

John Freitag

