

Strafford Selectboard Meeting
December 27, 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: John Echeverria, Ed Eastman, Sue Coburn, Barbara Murray, Deb Richie
Attending remotely: Lisa Bragg, Curt Albee, Gretchen Graner

1. Call to order: Reading of Guidelines for Selectboard Conduct

2. Public Concerns – none

3. Minutes of the draft December 13 Selectboard meeting were approved by all as presented and at the request of Brian Johnson the minutes of the December 20 meeting were tabled until the next meeting.

4. Highways: Highway liaison Jeff Solsaa reported Nathaniel Cook was hired to do repair work along the Justin Morrill Highway by Huntington Farm from the recent flooding and was working with the crew to get the road edge filled in and stabilized.

Solsaa reported that he has met with State highway officials on the Freeman Bridge replacement project, talked with Strafford resident and highway engineer Andy Sillovich. The best solution for this bridge which has been taken out in both Irene and the July Strom event and whose temporary replacement suffered damage in the December rain event is still being investigated. This will be a FEMA supported project this summer.

FEMA update - all the major contractors have filled out needed paperwork for reimbursement needed by the Town. Town personnel working on FEMA related items have had the time they put in reimbursed as well. Solsaa said an estimate on an option for Bridge 30 would not happen due to the holidays till January.

5. Budget: Police services – A motion was made and the Board approved a renewal of the \$15,000 yearly contract with the Orange County Sheriff. The Board approved renewing the \$10,000 stipend for Constable Ed Eastman. The Board also approved a \$5,000 expense budget for Eastman. The Board talked about a \$2,500 Second Constable position but no decision was made.

Sue Coburn, Barbara Murray and Debby Richie came in to request a \$6,000 increase this year for the South Royalton Senior Center which provides the Barrett Hall meal site and home deliveries in Strafford. The Center is facing a financial crisis due to the closing of their thrift store and inadequate State funding for their meal program. Solsaa made the motion to put in the budget \$10,000 for the South Royalton Senior Center. Freitag expressed concerns over the significant property tax increases in the double digit range that we will be having in the Town budget due to needed work on our infrastructure and that there will need to be offsets to this addition and asked that the request be delayed until we could look at the budget more closely. Solsaa asked for the vote. Solsaa, Johnson and Freitag voted yea, Paganelli voted nay due to his concerns over the budget process. Town Clerk Lisa Bragg will work with Coburn on a payment schedule. The Board then went to the budget and looked at the line items under Community Services and penciled in potential cuts to organizations outside of Strafford to offset this increase.

The Board then talked about the highway budget. The Town is facing significant infrastructure needs that have only been exacerbated by the multiple flooding and a multiple week mudseason at the end of December. Road Foreman PD Hardy has received an estimate of \$600,000 to grind up the pavement on the Brook Road and re-pave it. There is an estimate of \$300,000 to do the section from the village to Kibbling Hill Road. Two culverts would need to be replaced. This could be done by the Town. At just before Kibbling Hill Road is having a hydraulic study being done on a large culvert there. This will likely

need to be done as a structure and put off till a later date. In order to catch up on maintenance and repairs on our paved roads and bridges we will need to do a project every year and not just when we get grants. For 2024 the first section of Brook Road will be included in the budget as well as the repair work on Bridge 30 next to the Town House. The Town has applied for a Municipal Planning Grant to create a list of priorities and a capital budget to fund them which will provide a 10-year plan. If we get the grant this should be completed by next year. Solsaa has been working with Hardy on the highway budget which will be presented to the Board at the January 10 Selectboard meeting. All Board members have been given budget work sheets to review before the January 10 meeting.

Solsaa brought up getting a yolk rake to help with the roads during mud season. He would like to purchase one in 2024. The Board has approved getting one in the Spring of 2023 but there were none available at that time. Solsaa would like it to be on the agenda for the next meeting.

Brian Johnson has said he no longer wishes to be the Zoning Administrator when he term ends in March. Brian has served as Zoning Administrator since 2009. The Board has received a letter from Bonnie Bergeron offering to step down as a voting member of the Development Review Board and continue as Clerk which would allow her to step in and take over the zoning administrator position. She said she has done extensive research in similar towns within Vermont to determine an average wage and feels \$25 per hour would be appropriate and cover her hours for both positions. Johnson thought Bergeron would be a good person to fill the zoning officer position. The Zoning Officer is currently paid a \$1,000 per year stipend. Johnson said the job was likely to be more complicated with the new zoning. The Board will ask Bergeron for an estimate of how many hour she needs for both positions for budgeting purposes.

6. Town Office update- Due to the Town Office being closed for the holidays since December 21, Bragg reported that the mail has not been picked up and whether the transfer of land needed for then addition to the Town Office has been completed is not know. The Request for Proposals for architectural services will go out by Friday December 29 at the latest.

7. David Paganelli who chairs the Ashley Forest Board asked the Selectboard to agree or disagree with the Forest Board's interpretation of the language in the Interlocal Contract with the Towns of Sharon and Strafford which would allow for flexibility in the expenditure of their annually approved budget as long as it does not exceed the proposed budget amount amount. A motion was made and all approved of the interpretation allowing flexibility in spending as long as it does not exceed the approved budget.

8. Grant update- John updated the Board on what our Grant Manager has been working on. This includes: A State loan application to cover the cost of FEMA work while we wait for reimbursement, Assisting with other FEMA work a Municipal Energy Resilience Grant for the Town Garage, Bridge Grants, Ash tree removal grant, Municipal Planning Grant, Assisting the Town Office Committee with financing options and costs, Stefanie Slayton, our grant manager, has been doing a wonderful job on the many tasks that she has been asked to take on within the confines of the 10 hours per week of her job.

9. Dog report - Dog Officer Courtney Hardy reported that all the dogs we initially had on our list are now vaccinated and licensed. She has heard of another situation which she will attend to at the start of the year.

A motion was made and the meeting adjourned at 848 pm
Respectfully submitted,

John Freitag

