

MINUTES OF THE FEBRUARY 5, 2024 SELECT BOARD MEETING

MEMBERS PRESENT: Board Members Chair Mike Houghton, Vice Chair Allison Knab; Joe Anderson

ALSO PRESENT: Town Administrator David Moore, Finance Administrator Christiane McAllister, Library Director Kerry Cronin and Planning Director Mark Connors

At 7:00 pm Mr. Houghton opened the meeting then asked for a motion on the minutes. Mr. Anderson motioned approval of the minutes of January 16 and 24, 2024 as amended. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton recognized Kerry Cronin for her department report. Ms. Cronin informed them of her plan to expand the garden in back of library. They've been awarded a \$500 gift from Rye Garden Club. She would like to implement a Borrow a Tool program which lends non-motorized hand-held tools to library patrons. She plans to install a shed to store them. Mr. Houghton asked her to understand any liability involved but the Board indicated its approval. Mr. Moore will check with Primex to see if they have a guidance sheet or any exclusions for this sort of activity (tool lending).

The library participated in MLK events. An art gallery featuring SMS and CMS students' work has been installed. As part of the events, they ran a 4 week program, Standing up to Racism.

Ms. Cronin gave a building update. New carpeting will be installed March 25th. The entrance will be closed that week. Jason Pond has been painting and she expressed thankfulness for his efforts. She met with Dan Crow who will bid on the bathroom upgrade.

Wiggin Memorial Library will be participating in the Great Bay-Piscataqua Water keeper and Great Bay Stewards region-wide book discussion of Small Town, Big Oil: The Untold Story of Women Who Took on the Richest Man in the World- and Won. Free copies of the book are available at the library.

Youth services, teen librarian programs and services are going well. They are focusing on expanding their services.

Voter Information Night will be Thursday, March 7. It will largely follow the same format as last year.

Mr. Houghton recognized Mark Connors who began his quarterly report by giving an update on pending applications. The Winnicutt Rd subdivision application has been withdrawn. The final application for 189 Bunker Hill six lot subdivision is expected to come in soon. Timberland and Lindt have pending applications.

He then reviewed the two pending ZBA applications. One application, 62 College Road, is requesting a variance to allow a solar array closer to wetland than is allowed. The other application is regarding a landlocked parcel on Lovell Road.

His application for a CMAQ (Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality) grant to coordinate the lights on Portsmouth Ave. was approved and placed in the 10 year plan. It requires a 20% match, which would be approximately \$70,000 in 2028.

Open Space and Connectivity Plan public meeting will be next Monday. It will be a presentation of the draft plan. Mr. Houghton inquired if adequate public outreach had been done and Mr. Connors review the efforts including the previous public involvement through surveys and interactive maps.

The second grant for the Ross Property acquisition has come through. There are a few more steps to complete, but it is progressing. Southeast Land Trust is involved with the project.

He will be participating in Voter Information Night once again through the explanation of the zoning articles put forward for the warrant by the Planning Board.

Mr. Connors reported having a full staff for the first time in a long time. It's a good team. He and Mike Lamb attended the Chamber of Commerce economic forecast event. Mr. Connors praised the rest of the staff. Mr. Dinsmore has requested an alteration in hours in order to better accommodate trades and people working on construction projects in Stratham. The Board was supportive as long as the schedule was consistent for the public to access services.

Mr. Houghton motioned to open the public hearing to discuss 2024 warrant articles and town budget. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor. Mr. Moore gave a review of the process and timeline. He plans to review Articles 11 – 15 tonight. These will be voted on at Town Meeting on March 16. Voter information night will cover the Zoning articles as well as Article 1 – elected positions. He reminded the group that town services make up 15% of the tax rate; the rest is state, county and education taxes. He detailed the services residents receive in return. Projects this past year included Community Power, a change in our Assessing services, a transition to a new managed service provider, and many grants were applied for and received. He gave praise to the many volunteers and work they do. Challenges include recruitment and retention of employees. Drivers for 2024 include increases for wage rate adjustments and contracted services. Mr. Moore moved to the four Warrant Articles – 2024 operating budget, capital improvements, appropriations for capital reserves and vote to expend funds from the EMS Special Revenue fund. Though there is a 3.3% increase in the operating budget, when you factor in revenues and changes to other appropriations including CIP and CRF, we end up with 1.39% increase in what needs to be raised from taxes. Re-valuation, required by the State at least every five years, will take place in 2024.

Article 12 capital improvements program is proposed to increase \$15,000. Mr. Moore reviewed the chart showing projects by category. Examples of projects discussed include town-wide technology improvements, cruiser replacement; ballot machine replacement (State of NH mandated; environmental permitting, PFAS, storm water work, and the re-valuation. Other projects included Library website update and planned HVAC improvements. This year's CIP begins setting aside funds for Stevens Park improvements.

For Article 13 Capital Reserve funds – the Town is no longer putting aside \$50,000 for the Heritage Commission since the multi-year goal of \$250,000 has been achieved. The Town is maintaining highway and fire allocations at similar levels as in the past. No new funds for

Grounds Maintenance and Trust are recommended, since American Rescue Plan Act funds have been critical to maintaining investments in physical structures. Replaced Engine 1 in 2023 for delivery in 2025. Ambulance was approved in 2022 and expected delivery is 2024. A heavy duty truck was purchased in 2023 in DPW. With a new director in place at public works, the rolling stock plan for public works will get a new look for next year.

Article 14 – expending funds from the EMS Special Revenue Funds, where we deposit ambulance revenues, must be appropriated by the legislative body (Town Meeting). This funds ordinary expenses in running our EMS program – supplies, ALS services and training. The expense of \$13,000 has previously been covered by the general fund budget, but better put where revenues come in to the town. Staff recommendation is to move this expense to a special revenue fund. As a result funds will not have to be raised from general taxation.

Sean Dempsey, Patriot's Road, pointed out a difference in numbering of articles. Paul Wolf, Doe Run Lane, asked about the managed IT program. Mr. Moore explained that we now contract with Block 5. He described the services they provide.

Mr. Dempsey asked for clarification on how the tax rate is calculated. A general discussion took place concerning the revaluation. For example, the tax rate next year may be in the \$2+ range because the base valuation is expected to increase. The re-valuation re-balances all the properties based on the market. Assessors relay that generally, 1/3 of the properties go up, 1/3 down, 1/3 stay the same. Mr. Houghton said they will work at communicating before the tax bills go out. Mr. Houghton asked for any further questions. Hearing none, he closed the public hearing. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton said the board will deliberate later in the evening and move forward based on the input received.

Mr. Houghton recognized the thank you note from the 76ers. Mr. Moore described a correspondence describing a donation the Fire Department would like to donate to the Town. Value is \$8,500 for an in-kind construction project. The donation arranged by the Stratham Volunteer Fire Department Association and supported by the Fire Chief, is to construct a few walls with a window opening on the mezzanine of fire station for purpose of facilitating vent, enter, isolate, and search training on site. According to the Chief's transmittal this will assist in offering more training internally that volunteers do not need to travel to get. Ms. Knab motioned acceptance of the in kind donation for the value of materials and labor amounting to \$8,500 for the vent, enter, isolate, search training room implementation at the fire dept. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton motioned to open the public hearing on the acceptance of funds in the amount of \$16,950 for a 2024 Local Source Water Protection Program Grant. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor. Mr. Moore explained that the funds will be put towards the Ross Property, in combination with another grant and conservation funds, to acquire this parcel. Mr. Houghton asked for comments from the public. Hearing none, he motioned to close the Public Hearing. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. Mr. Anderson moved to accept the funds in the amount of \$16,950 from the 2024 Local Source Water Protection Program Grant and authorize the Town Administrator to execute the grant agreement with the state of NH. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Next, Mr. Houghton moved to the donation from Eagle Scout Tyler Denton. Ms. Knab motioned to accept the donation of \$543.31 from Tyler Denton and thank him for the donation. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton moved to the request to name the dugout at Stevens Park after John Hopping. Mr. Moore stated that in accordance with the policy, the Board needs to determine if the application is complete and schedule a public hearing as well as distribute to relevant Boards and Commissions. After a public hearing, the earliest the Board can vote is one meeting after the public hearing. Required materials have been provided. Ms. Knab asked that the Recreation Commission be made aware of the request. She will bring it to them at the next meeting. The public hearing will be scheduled after that.

Mr. Houghton moved to the Welfare Guidelines. Mr. Moore explained we use the Rental Cost Survey to keep our values accurate in determining rental assistance payments for general assistance applicants. Mr. Houghton motioned to adopt Appendix A for the Welfare Guidelines for the Town of Stratham. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

At 8:11 pm Mr. Houghton moved to enter into a non-public session in accordance with RSA 91-A:3, II (a) compensation of public employee; (b) hiring of a public employee (c) discussion of pending litigation as well as discussion of legal advice. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. Roll call: Houghton-yes; Knab-yes; Anderson-yes.

The meeting resumed at 9:15 p.m.

At 9:15 p.m. Mr. Houghton moved to seal the minutes finding that failure to do so would render a proposed action ineffective. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. Roll call: Houghton-yes; Knab-yes; Anderson-yes.

Mr. Moore reviewed the timeline for finalizing the budget, and the Town Report. He and Mr. Connors will prepare videos for Voter Information Night on March 7. Town Meeting is on March 16th, the election is on March 12th. He recommended inviting the Moderator to the March 4th Select Board meeting to go over logistics. March 5th is the School District Meeting. Mr. Moore will draft the Select Board Report. They discussed the dedication.

Mr. Moore said that he and Ms. McAllister compiled a preliminary 2025 budget. They are forecasting it to be less than this year's final budget primarily as a result of the final payment on a bond. This doesn't include our energy aggregation effort transition to Community Power for the last quarter of the year or information about new NH Retirement rates which will impact six months of the year.

In other Town Administrator items, Mr. Moore reported a condition at Marin Way that needs to be addressed. The \$11,000 fix will be taken from our budget and is approved by the state. The area needs a more involved repair, but a recommended fix for the short-term.

Seabrook drill is this week.

Mr. Moore stated the Town Clerk has received a petition earlier in the evening for hand counting ballots. It will be Article 15 on the Warrant.

The Board briefly discussed increasing the value of the monies to be used for EMS supplies in the SRF Article (Article 14) at the request of the Fire Chief. Mr. Houghton motioned to move the 2024 Town Budget and Articles, as amended to include the Special Revenue Fund EMS article for \$16,500 for EMS supplies to the Warrant and to show the four special articles as unanimously recommended by the Select Board. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

RESERVATIONS

Ms. Knab motioned approval for Stratham Community Church to use the top of the hill at SHP for their Easter sunrise service on March 31st. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Anderson motioned to approve June Sawyer's use of the Morgera Room on June 29, 2024 and waive the alcohol prohibition. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Anderson motioned to allow Jay Flagg to use the Joan Sewall Room on March 14th for a pickle ball pot luck and waive the alcohol prohibition. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Ms. Knab motioned to approve the re-appointment of Frank MacMillan to the Zoning Board of Adjustment for a three year term set to expire in 2026. Mr. Houghton seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Ms. Knab motioned to appoint Lucy Cushman to the vacant alternate position on the Zoning Board of Adjustment for a term to expire in 2025. Mr. Houghton seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton moved to the action item related to 13-15 Stoneybrook. Ms. Knab motioned support for the Board chair to write a letter to the ZBA as appropriate for reconsideration of the Stoney Brook Ave decision of January 9th. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Moore noted veterans' credits and elderly exemptions to be signed.

At 9:41 pm Mr. Houghton motioned to adjourn. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Richard, Recording Secretary