

MINUTES OF THE OCTOBER 21, 2024 SELECT BOARD MEETING

MEMBERS PRESENT: Board Members Chair Mike Houghton, Joe Anderson.

ABSENT: Vice Chair Allison Knab

ALSO PRESENT: Town Administrator David Moore, Finance Administrator Christiane McAllister, DPW Director Tim Stevens

Mr. Houghton opened the meeting at 7:00 pm and asked for a motion on the minutes. Mr. Anderson wanted clarification on the road naming process for public roads from the October 7th minutes. Mr. Moore will ensure the policy is reflective of their intention. They agreed to defer approval.

Mr. Houghton turned to Ms. McAllister who called attention to her submitted financial reports. She suggested they discuss them during the tax rate setting later in the meeting. They agreed.

Mr. Houghton recognized members of the public in attendance. Glen Wass, 6 Gifford Farm Rd, had two issues: Assessments and Stratham's exemptions to assessment valuations. His assessment increased 61.38% from 2019. He criticized the assessing process, saying it lacked transparency, fairness and communication. He described what he thought to be errors. Through his research, he discovered that inspections are required of one-fifth of the properties. Though he's lived here for 28 years, his property has never been inspected, yet it changed to higher building values. Only after he requested an inspection, were his ratings restored to previous values. His neighbors' ratings changed, resulting in higher tax bills.

Next Mr. Wass requested the Board consider increasing the amount of exemptions offered to elderly and lower income residents. He feels we need to look after those that are less fortunate. He thinks there should be no difference in income limits for married and single people and that Stratham's net income limits should be raised. In addition, he felt the Town should offer more exemptions, such as for the blind. Stratham follows the minimum.

Mr. Anderson inquired about impacts to the Gifford Farm area. Mr. Moore said adjustments were made due to the school. Mr. Wass feels his home was rated higher than what he feels are comparables.

Mr. Houghton thanked him for his input. They will talk to the assessors to learn more. He acknowledged that revaluations in Stratham as well as surrounding communities have caused residents to pay close attention to their assessments. Real estate has increased dramatically and that's been impactful.

Len Thibault, 3 Gifford Farm Rd, identified an error in his assessment. He thanked Mr. Wass for bringing this revaluation to his attention. He suggested that information on how to verify your

assessment be sent with the tax bills. Mr. Houghton thanked him for his comments and shared that they will help the Town for the future.

Greg Blood, 248 Portsmouth Ave., reported having difficulty setting up an appointment and requested inspections. He received a revised letter, but only after several requests. Assessing Assistant Jim Joseph was helpful in obtaining results.

Mr. Wass questioned how the Town ensures that the contract services are being followed. Mr. Moore replied that he is responsible for compliance on behalf of the Select Board. Ms. McAllister added that she met with team from DRA who are also responsible for the oversight of the revaluation. The revaluation is not just in the hands of the local municipality. Each cyclical revaluation has oversight by team at DRA and they are also tasked with checking on the work that the local assessor has done.

Mr. Houghton said that some great points were made. They will re-examine the issue and be responsive to the questions that were raised.

Mr. Houghton further explained that as far as exemptions, they will review them in our budgeting process. He noted that the Town has consistently made adjustments.

Mr. Wass expressed concern that he's been over-assessed for many years.

Drew Goddard, 1 Sanctuary Dr, said that in the past he's worked with the assessor proactively with projects and his own home. He commented that the numbers never align. Assessed value doesn't target for market, they stay lower. Mr. Houghton said that the rate of increase has caused everyone to pay attention. Every community across the seacoast is having similar conversations. We can't fix the market. Mr. Houghton expressed concern that we are being accused of not doing what we're supposed to do. We need to talk to the firm that is accountable for doing the work.

Dan Crow of Stratham Hill Park Association spoke about their plans for the structures at the park, including converting the Lynn Garland barn into an ice rink. They proposed eleven projects for which they are seeking funding. Mr. Anderson explained that the park falls under DPW, therefore Mr. Stevens will need to budget for these improvements. Mr. Houghton added that there is a Town Building & Grounds Maintenance Trust. The SHPA will need to identify what is needed and advocate those projects to Mr. Stevens who will work with the Board to set priorities.

Mr. Moore asked if the Board supported the ice skating rink proposal by SHPA. Mr. Blood said he didn't want to use town resources. Mr. Moore said that ultimately it is the Town's responsibility. The Board was supportive. Mr. Moore will coordinate departments to add details to the plan to clarify roles and responsibilities of the Town and the in-kind donation from the SHPA.

Len Thibault, 3 Gifford Farm, suggested we look at the sprinkler systems in our schools. He referenced an accident that happened at the YMCA. Mr. Houghton said he would pass it along

to the schools, as the Select Board has no jurisdiction over the schools. It was thought SMS didn't have a sprinkler system; they are working on adding them. Mr. Thibeault offered his assistance.

Drew Goddard came before the Board to discuss the naming of private roads. He urged the Board to consider his historically significant road name suggestion for the 89-91 Portsmouth Ave project. He's consulted with the Heritage Commission. He's voluntarily given the Town two easements free of charge. The Board assured him they consider all input.

Mr. Houghton recognized Tim Stevens who updated the Board on current projects at the park and throughout town. Mr. Houghton asked for more info on the propane tank work at the Municipal Center. While implementing the changes Mr. Stevens will make an effort to cause minimal disturbance to the current infrastructure. Mr. Stevens recalled the impetus for the work was an excess of water causing the tank to float due to an improperly lined hole. Further investigation discovered outdated and improperly installed buried copper line. He described his plan to remedy the situation.

Mr. Stevens reviewed the DPW 2025 draft budget. Conversation turned to the level of service we will provide for field maintenance. Complaints have been received regarding the upkeep of the fields. Mr. Stevens contends that intermittent use of the fields is costly. Weeds grow quickly when they aren't used. The Board questioned why we are maintaining fields that are not being used. Mr. Moore said that's a policy discussion. Volunteer maintenance of the fields has been in decline. Use of the fields change from year to year. Numbers are currently small but program changes in other communities may impact ours, increasing our numbers. Mr. Moore would like to involve the Rec Commission and the Budget Advisory Committee in the discussion. Mr. Stevens summarized that this is the reason for the increase in the Parks portion of his budget.

Mr. Moore noted a line item change in the payroll for cemeteries because of a strategy for accounting for more staff members who are serving in the cemetery. Cemetery Trustees will recommend a budget to the Board. .

Mr. Stevens will be asking for a small increase based on inflation for his highway budget. Mr. Stevens requested an increase in the budget for uniforms due to turnover, new hires and increase in cost.

Next Mr. Stevens talked about the sanitation budget, noting it is on track. He will begin to negotiate a new contract in 2025, as ours ends in 2026. He reported an increase in the disposal for household hazardous waste. Mr. Stevens estimates the numbers from Saturday's hazardous waste collection day will be higher than previous years.

Next Mr. Stevens identified issues with the park. He directed more of his resources to the park because he felt a need to increase the level of service. He remarked that the level of cleanliness of the public bathrooms has greatly improved. Mr. Anderson agreed, noting he has heard many positive comments. He's also increased trash pick-up at the pavilions. Mr. Stevens said that additional monies would be requested to repair some structures' roofs and to renovate the 4H

bathroom. Mr. Anderson asked if they were still looking to fill open positions dedicated to the park. He said they were.

Mr. Stevens reported that the Municipal Center bathrooms by the Sewall Room are not ADA compliant. They briefly discussed possible renovations.

Mr. Stevens reported receiving a basic structure estimate for a 7-bay salt spreader hanger of \$681,000 and \$753,000. He discussed completing the work on Marin Way as an upcoming project.

Mr. Stevens recommended we get a liquid de-icing program for winter road treatment. It reduces salt consumption which lessens our environmental impact. This will cost \$60,000 to outfit a truck with a machine that makes and stores the brine and treats the roads. Currently, we spend approximately \$55,000 per year in salt.

Mr. Stevens has worked with the Town's landfill closure monitoring engineering firm to discuss a more efficient Transfer Station that is in compliance with the landfill regulations. He went on to describe issues concerning behavior and risk of non-compliance with Transfer Station rules. Previously, we've been fined for violation related to batteries being left at the station. They've discovered rocks in the brush pile that would break the wood chipper. Because of these issues, he feels it's necessary to have two people work the Transfer Station. This impacts costs for coverage, especially with the town being without regular coverage for station on Thursdays. Mr. Houghton suggested installing cameras. Mr. Stevens continued, saying they need to find a new form of accepting payment. He will propose an increase in fees. Our costs are not being covered.

Mr. Stevens reported an updated timeline for truck orders. He would like to purchase a mower for 2025. The DPW has applied and are in final stages for a grant for approximately \$70,000 under the diesel replacement program for the loader. That's approximately 25% of the cost of a new loader and would need to be spent by 2026.

He thanked the DPW Administrative Coordinator for her work in preparing budget materials as well as all her contributions to the department.

At 9:10 pm Mr. Houghton motioned to go into a non-public in accordance with RSA 91-A:3, II(a) compensation of public employee (b) hiring and (c) discussion of litigation. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. Roll call: Houghton-yes; Anderson-yes.

In non-public, the Board voted to authorize the Town Administrator to make a conditional offer of employment to a candidate for Operator-Laborer in the DPW; authorized the Town Administrator to make a conditional offer to a candidate for Transfer Station Attendant; discussed but took no action on items in litigation; The Select Board unanimously approved an hourly rate of compensation for an employee for temporary to cover inspections.

At 10:45 p.m. Mr. Houghton the non-public session resumed. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Noting the late hour, and acknowledging the need to discuss the Tax Rate, Mr. Houghton asked if there were other pressing issues and if not, defer the other items to the next meeting. Mr. Moore requested the release of \$7,000 in cemetery funds for tree work. Ms. McAllister said \$35,000 as an offset to current year's budget. The Board agreed to the release of funds from the 5 year appropriation from the CIP for the tree work.

Mr. Houghton motioned to allow the Town Administrator to enter into a professional services agreement with MRI to engage Carol Ogilvie to be the interim Town Planner at \$80/hour and Peter Rowell to be the interim Building Inspector at \$75/hour. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Ms. McAllister reported that the Select Board received the Rockingham County Warrant for the year in the amount of \$1,396,482 which will be paid prior to December 17th. She gave a quick update on the revenues we received. Meals & Rooms distribution for FY 2024 was a slight increase over what was anticipated in the amount of \$760,387. We received the Highway Block Grant in the amount of \$181,572. These additional revenues were included in the offsetting revenue to determine the tax rate. Discussion ensued but no action taken, but gave further guidance to the staff.

Mr. Houghton called attention to the request from Cathedral Ledge Distillery to serve alcohol at the Farmer's Market at Cooperative Middle School. Mr. Moore noted an event permit hasn't been obtained yet. Mr. Houghton motioned to authorize the Town Administrator following consultation with the school department and any other required permitting. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton motioned to authorize Camp Lincoln to use the parking lot at Stratham Hill Park for their June 16 – August 18, 2025 summer camp pick up and drop off. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton motioned to allow the NH Amateur Radio Emergency Services to use the top of the hill at Stratham Hill Park on November 2nd. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

It was decided that Mr. Anderson would represent the Board at the Veterans Day event.

At 10:45pm Mr. Houghton motioned to adjourn. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Richard
Recording Secretary