

MINUTES OF THE DECEMBER 16, 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, Town Clerk/Tax Collector Deborah Bakie, Parks & Recreation Director Seth Hickey, Director of Public Works Tim Stevens

At 7:00 pm Mr. Houghton opened the meeting and asked for a motion on the minutes. Ms. Knab motioned approval of the November 18 and December 2, 2024 minutes as written. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton moved to Department reports and recognized Ms. Bakie. Ms. Bakie began by saying that her office has become increasingly busy over the past few years. Because of this, she is requesting to add a full-time person to her department. Factors contributing to the increased workload include additional time necessary to keep current with the constantly changing laws regarding elections and motor vehicles. Her current part-time office assistant is shared with Finance. In addition, Ms. Bakie feels adding a person would be helpful to plan for succession. As the co-Chair of the Seacoast Town Clerks Association, she is well informed. A large part of the increase in work volume is due to new residents and the increasing complexity of motor vehicle registrations. All the car dealerships in town are registering their cars. She expressed appreciation for being able to close for lunch, however they usually work through lunch to get caught up. In her handout comparing staffing in comparable surrounding communities, she noted there is typically a Clerk, 2 full-time assistants, including a Deputy, and a part-time person.

Next, Ms. Bakie addressed compensation. It was her understanding the town voted on compensation for the clerk under RSA 31-9(b). When she took the position, her compensation was not what the town voted on. She didn't voice her concern at that time. She said that she and her deputy have worked extremely hard for a long time. She urged the Board recognize this commitment and dedication and compensate them accordingly. She discussed her budget and recommendations from the Secretary of State for equipment.

Mr. Houghton recognized Chief Denton for his department report. Lights 4 Lives Santa parade was successful. Chief Denton got an update from the State Fire Marshal referencing the Knox Box and fire alarm commercial cistern which went before the Planning Board. Only cities may do that. Train trestle fire under investigation but is not suspicious. In process of rebuilding it rapidly.

Chief Denton reported that we have hired Hearshell VanLuven as our full-time Paramedic Program Coordinator. The DEA approval will take time, but they are doing their best to get the program running as quickly as possible. They would like Mr. VanLuven's input in hiring 2 – 3 per diem medics. We expect to receive our Hospital Resource Contract with Beth Israel soon. The necessary paramedic ambulance equipment is being ordered, \$10,000 for each ambulance. The new ambulance arrives on Wednesday at 11:00am. It will take time to switch the equipment

over but it will be ready by January. Mr. Anderson asked about the plan for the old ambulance. It is unclear at this time and in the Select Board's hands to determine method of sale or transfer.

Chief Denton stated that the SVFDA received a \$3,000 donation from Pipers Landing which they hope to use to replace outdated Knox boxes. Inspections and code enforcement at Lindt is taking a great deal of his time. He recommends hiring an inspector to do a baseline life safety inspection of the Lindt campus as he has concerns with the fire hydrant system, the water supply, etc. He discussed other projects and inspections going on in town. Training and recruitment is going well.

Next, Chief Denton gave an ALS Intercept update. The Seacoast Chiefs are supporting the Plaistow Fire Department proposal: a separate, not-for-profit entity administered by their town similar to what ALS is now. Chief Denton agrees that this is the best proposal. He reviewed the proposed fee structure. Their plan would allow a paramedic to get anywhere in the district within 15 minutes. Another benefit to the program is it brings structured, region-wide training for all levels of our EMS program. In the future, the program also hopes to set up a paramedicine program which would alleviate non-emergency calls. This service would supplement our paramedic program we are starting and discussed earlier in the meeting.

Chief Denton addressed the personnel line items in his budget. He would like the Admin to work an additional day. Some uniforms are worn and need to be replaced and more are needed for new staff. Though hydrant and cistern inspections have not been in the budget in the past, going forward we will need a method to be able to fund maintenance, inspections, and dredging. Eight sets of fire gear are out of date and need to be replaced. Vehicle maintenance was high this year. The wi-fi access points need to be addressed in the future.

Chief Denton reviewed his CIP priorities including an air compressor and radios. He plans to propose an Engine 3 replacement for the 2026 Town Meeting (hoping to get the truck in 2028). NFPA suggests replacement every 10 years; we are on almost 25 years.

Regarding the potential changing of use for the EMS Fund, Ms. Knab was concerned that delineating ambulance operating cost from other fire department operating costs would prove difficult. Ms. McAllister assured her that the costs are very distinct. The change in purpose and the parameters for items that could be included would be clearly defined. Because it is a special revenue fund, it requires annual appropriation and can never be anything more than what is appropriated.

Mr. Moore gave a quick update on the progress of the website steering committee. The Board expressed interest in participating in the vendor demonstrations.

Mr. Houghton recognized Steve Atwell, 3 Moray Court, who identified himself as a pickle ball player. He spoke in support of improvements at Stevens Park, especially the pickle ball courts. Another resident, John Singleton, agreed.

Mr. Houghton moved to a discussion on the budget. Mr. Moore began by reviewing the potential Warrant article subjects. Mr. Houghton dismissed the people in the room. Ms. Knab

felt that Mr. Hickey should be called back, as they planned to discuss a Stevens Park Warrant Article. The other board members wanted to focus on the budget and discuss the warrant articles at another time. Mr. Anderson specifically wanted to talk about the budget and CIP tonight. Ms. Knab wanted to ensure that decisions were not being made without all the parties involved. Mr. Moore recalled that the previous limited deliberations on the proposal for next year was funding of the Stevens Park Project would be taken from the fund balance and be structured as a choice for the Town Meeting via a special warrant article, but the Select Board had not finalized that approach pending further info and discussion.

Mr. Moore began by saying he and Mr. Stevens identified areas in which the project be phased and other changes to help the project move forward. He urged the Board to adopt a policy regarding expending from the EMS Fund went into detail as to language what would be included in the policy. In reviewing the Fire Dept. appropriations and cash balance for past five years, Ms. McAllister felt it was easy to identify ambulance costs. She looked at remaining balances and felt that the reserves being held each year was sufficient to cover the cost of a new ambulance every 12 years. Because this line item is very specific to ambulance operation, it shouldn't grow beyond its purpose. Ms. McAllister noted that what they hadn't included in the language is moving Comstar billing into EMS. It makes perfect sense that it would be there but the General Fund has been paying for that contracted cost. They discussed the best method for ensuring future expenditures from this fund would be made in accordance with the intended purpose.

Mr. Moore raised other potential Town Meeting items, such as elderly exemptions, veterans' credits, and Stevens Park. Conversation turned to revolving funds and donations. Ms. McAllister stated that the recommendation from NH Municipal Association legal and our auditors is to create an expendable trust to hold any donations that are received and intended for the Recreation Dept. This expendable trust would be held by the Trustees of the Trust Funds and would be expended via a recommendation from the Recreation Director or the Recreation Commission via the Recreation Director for how they intended to make use of the donated funds. Ms. Knab spoke about how boosters have started to fundraise to support certain sports. It is unclear as to the use of the funds. This is problematic because they appear to represent the Town, but they are not working in collaboration with the Recreation Commission or the Recreation Director. This could lead to misunderstandings with the residents. Mr. Moore felt there needed to be clarity on the donated funds meeting the mission of the Town's recreation programs as defined by the Town. Ms. McAllister informed them that state statute says that every donation to the town has to be accepted and should have a statement of purpose.

Mr. Moore speculated that a vote at Town Meeting would be needed to authorize the Select Board to create expendable trusts.

Mr. Anderson turned the conversation to Stevens Park, though he didn't want to talk about it in depth. He feels it will be a multi-part plan and suggested funding the project by being more aggressive about lapsing some of the prior year capital so it would be available next year. Mr. Moore and the Board agreed, conceptually, that it was a good idea.

Mr. Moore said we are at an \$.08 increase, or 4% in the estimated tax impact reflective of all appropriations, estimated revenues, and projections impact of elderly and veterans' credits adjustments. The operating budget increase shows a total increase of 3.6%. We're budgeting for a slight dip in revenues based on interest rate drops, as we won't be earning as much in interest. Mr. Anderson felt we are due to increase building permit fees. He asked if we were covering costs at the Transfer Station.

Mr. Moore said the overlay and the tax credits will be a conversation with Mr. Hamilton. Ms. McAllister added that the overlay doesn't have to be set until the day the tax rate is set. By then, we'll know what we've paid out in abatements.

Mr. Moore noted that Eric Herring has replaced Jennifer Scrafford as the School Board rep. to the BAC. Mr. Houghton asked if Ms. Bakie's request was included. Mr. Moore said no, because the documents were prepared in November. Mr. Moore then spoke to the transition to benefits eligible for the additional hours by the Admin Coordinator in the Fire Department. Benefits would cost the Town approximately \$35,000. Mr. Moore said he was unaware Ms. Bakie wanted to move forward with her request, which she previously discussed with him in concept, until today. He has some ideas on how to address the issue.

Mr. Houghton wanted no more than 3% increase, so at 4% he feels it's too high. He noted these additional asks would push the budget even higher. Ms. Knab looks forward to having the Budget Advisory Committee give their opinion, as they represent the community. Mr. Anderson warned that the schools will put pressure on the tax rate. They discussed the use of fund balance to bring down the tax rate. Mr. Houghton reminded them that recently we've yielded to the auditor's recommendations, which has taken our fund balance higher than it used to be, which is a good thing. Mr. Moore said he restored use of fund balance in the rate projection to the more typical amount matching most all of the years previous to the 2024 rate setting.

Ms. McAllister suggested looking at her reports from the DRA to get the actual amounts. They continued to talk about the fund balance and how much to retain. Ms. Knab noted the ARPA funds are gone; they offset a lot of costs over the past few years. Mr. Houghton felt the funds were spent wisely. The remainder of the funds will be spent on the new computers and switches and the brine applicator and mower. Mr. Anderson asked about the culvert. Mr. Stevens said the culvert failed last spring due to heavy rain and the road around it collapsed. It will go into the 2025 year's budget. Conversation moved the Gifford Barn façade restoration and its funding. The group continued to discuss year end spending. They talked about adjusting the Capital Reserve Funds.

Mr. Stevens said the brine applicator and mower are priorities for him. They talked about moving items from the CIP. The encumbrance for Gifford barn has not been expended.

He also said the Casella contract for the transfer station will be up for renegotiation next year. We can re-examine the fees at that time. Mr. Moore explained that the contract includes curbside collection as well as for disposing some of our transfer station materials.

The Board agreed it was good to adjust the Capital Reserve Fund to reflect year-end purchases that preclude the need to raise more funds in 2025 appropriations.

Mr. Houghton motioned to approve the proposed IT computer replacements and the Fire Department switches to be funded from the remainder of the ARPA funds. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Moore summarized, the brine applicator and two mowers for DPW will come from the unexpended 2024 DPW operating funds. He reviewed the areas where he decreased funding in the proposed 2025 spend to offset. The goal is to overall apply the ARPA funds in total and in accordance with the commitment deadline of December 30, 2024.

The group talked about organizing the spreadsheets differently to present the materials in a more transparent way. Ms. McAllister discussed the five-year appropriations. Mr. Houghton wanted to focus on prepping for the BAC submittal. Ms. McAllister called attention to a significant amount which has been appropriated for revals. She suggested this amount could be reduced. Mr. Moore described projects listed on the handout and funding them through the CRF. He recommends the library bathroom renovation take priority. He reduced budget amounts for other infrastructure projects, such as the hydrants/cisterns and road restructuring, reasoning that funding may come from other sources. PFAS costs, which had been funded in part with ARPA, will now need to be fully funded by the Town beginning in 2025 absent new installations for which they Town has one year left of the \$350,000 remediation grant from the state. Mr. Moore went through the CIP items. Mr. Anderson asked about the fire truck. Ms. McAllister didn't think the CRF appropriations could be any tighter based on replacement schedules. Mr. Moore thinks we're planning well in order to avoid spikes next year. They reviewed the adjustments they made this evening.

The primary increase is associated with the staffing in the Fire Department to support the new paramedic program and add in station coverage. The rest of the operating budget is flat. Health insurance increased thanks in large part to the expiration of the debt payment.

Mr. Houghton called attention to the operating budget at 4%. Ms. Knab was in favor of getting feedback from the Budget Advisory Committee. They agreed that they want to include the Elderly Exemptions and will discuss further with Mr. Hamilton.

Mr. Houghton called attention to Stevens Park. Mr. Moore recommended they defer further deliberation on that topic this evening, noting he would like to bring a more defined proposal to a future meeting before they need to finalize the warrant. Because of funding, he believes the project may need to be done in phases. After the January 6th meeting, they will decide whether or not to put it on the Warrant and how it will be funded. Ms. McAllister suggested they can make it a Warrant Article with a multi-year appropriation where you specify the portion that is from taxation for this year and from next year.

Ms. Knab motioned to accept the \$3,000 from Pipers Landing to the Fire Dept. for the Knox box program. Mr. Anderson seconded

Ms. Knab motioned to support the Lights 4 Lives raffle to be held for the Fire Dept. to be held through the end of the month. Mr. Houghton seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Anderson wondered if there was anything more they could cut from the budget. Ms. McAllister directed him to the CIP Master and gave suggestions.

Ms. McAllister said that Stratham has developed a pattern of 5 year appropriations which is outside the norm for CIP appropriation. We should identify what you will spend in a year. Appropriations should be in a single year. It is not meant to be a savings tool. She explained how she did not feel we were managing the five year appropriations as we should. Mr. Houghton wanted to continue this discussion.

At 10:15 p.m. Mr. Houghton motioned to adjourn. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Richard
Recording Secretary