

MINUTES OF THE OCTOBER 14, 2025 SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING

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

ALSO PRESENT: Town Administrator Tim Roache, Director of Planning and Building Vanessa Price

At 7:00 pm, Mr. Houghton opened the meeting and stated that the purpose of the evening's public hearing was to discuss a proposed gift of land and property located at 132 Portsmouth Avenue, known as the Lane Homestead. Mr. Houghton motioned to open the public hearing; Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton provided an update on the proposed gift of property from Bill Lane. Earlier this spring, Mr. Lane met with Mr. Nate Merrill to share his intention to acquire the property and subsequently donate it to the Town. In addition to the land, Mr. Lane has committed a financial contribution of \$500,000 to support future maintenance, preservation, and repairs. The funding will be distributed as follows: \$200,000 at closing, followed by \$100,000 annually over the next three years.

Mr. Lane expressed appreciation that the property would be entrusted to individuals who would honor its legacy and maintain it in good condition, preserving the heritage of his family. Mr. Houghton stated that the purpose of the current discussion is to review the gift and follow the required acceptance process. Both the Planning Board and Conservation Commission have reviewed the proposal and recommend proceeding. As part of the statutory requirements, two public hearings must be held prior to formal acceptance. This is the second public hearing. A certain period of time must pass before the gift can be accepted. The Select Board will be eligible to vote on accepting the gift next Tuesday.

Mr. Merrill provided background on the Lane property, noting that it was previously at risk of redevelopment, prompting strong public support to preserve it. In response, the Heritage Commission and Select Board pursued and secured an L-CHIP grant, which, combined with a Town match, funded the preservation easement currently in place.

Efforts are underway to facilitate the sale of the property from the current owner, who has faced challenges maintaining it to the standards valued by the Lane family and the Town. Over the past several years, the Select Board and other groups have expressed concern regarding its condition.

Mr. Merrill emphasized the property's historic and strategic importance. It includes a fire pond critical for the Fire Department's operations, as well as the dam that supports fire suppression efforts. Ownership of the site carries responsibility, and a preservation contractor has evaluated the buildings and submitted a report. The \$500,000 donation pledged by Mr. Lane for maintenance and repairs aligns with the higher end of the estimated costs. Mr. Lane is scheduled to close on the acquisition on October 17.

Mr. Houghton referenced the detailed property inspection report prepared by Drew Bedard, which outlined recommended near-term, medium-term, and long-term repairs to maintain the property in good condition. No structural issues were identified; however, cosmetic improvements and areas of wood rot will require attention. Mr. Lane's financial contribution is expected to cover the necessary repairs.

One of the buildings on the property is currently leased to a tenant, and the lease was recently renewed for one year. The tenant, operating as the Collector's Eye, intends to continue business operations. The Town does not plan to operate the business. Rental income from the property will be directed into a maintenance trust dedicated to the property's long-term upkeep, rather than the General Fund. This approach is intended to minimize any direct financial impact on taxpayers while preserving the property for public benefit.

Mr. Houghton noted that the long-term use of the property will ultimately be determined by the Town. Future decisions may involve repurposing the buildings in various ways, though no specific plans have been established. For now, the intention is to maintain the structures as leased properties and reinvest rental proceeds into ongoing maintenance.

Mr. Merrill emphasized that Mr. Lane is not imposing any new conditions on the property. Should the Town decide—whether in 2 years, 20 years, or 100 years—that it no longer wishes to retain ownership, it may sell the property back into private hands. While the Town may choose to strengthen or amend the existing easement in the future, Mr. Lane is not requiring any such changes.

Mr. Houghton then opened the floor for questions. Patty Lovejoy, Coach Road, asked whether the Town plans to rent the unoccupied buildings. Mr. Houghton responded that he would like to pursue that option, as rental income would support ongoing maintenance. Lucy Cushman, Winnicutt Avenue, expressed strong support for renting the buildings, emphasizing the importance of keeping older structures occupied. She noted that while one business is currently operating, two additional buildings are available for lease. Ms. Lovejoy inquired about the current property tax revenue from the parcel. Ms. Price stated that the amount is approximately \$16,000.

Ms. Lovejoy inquired about potential restrictions on the land. Ms. Cushman clarified that a preservation easement currently applies to the buildings. Mr. Houghton added that while no new restrictions are being imposed, there are practical limitations such as limited parking and traffic flow. He speculated that perhaps the State may undertake future improvements to the area. He also emphasized the strategic importance of the fire pond, which is part of the property and essential for fire suppression. The Town will now be able to maintain it appropriately.

Tim Copeland, Raeder Drive, expressed support for placing rental income into a dedicated account to support long-term upkeep. He asked whether the funds would be placed in a high-interest account. Mr. Houghton responded that while the specifics are not yet defined, the funds will be placed in an expendable trust that will be interest-bearing, managed by the Trustees of the Trust Funds. Mr. Anderson noted that the trust will be subject to a vote at the March Town

Meeting. Mr. Houghton added that future decisions regarding the use of accumulated interest or surplus funds would be made at a later time.

Andra Copeland, Raeder Drive, raised concerns about the loss of approximately \$16,000 in property tax revenue and the added responsibilities for the DPW, such as mowing and tree maintenance. She asked whether rental income would offset these costs. Mr. Houghton responded that the use of rental income for property maintenance is still under consideration. Ms. Lovejoy suggested that net proceeds—rental income minus routine maintenance expenses - be deposited into the trust fund. She emphasized the distinction between long-term maintenance and day-to-day operational upkeep, such as plowing and mowing. Mr. Houghton agreed, stating the goal is to keep the process neutral and transparent, ensuring it does not become a burden to taxpayers. Mr. Merrill added that the Town may consider hiring a property management company, funded through rental income, to alleviate the burden on DPW.

Ms. Copeland asked about insurance coverage, particularly for The Collector's Eye, which welcomes the public onto the property. Mr. Houghton clarified that the business would be required to carry its own liability insurance and provide the Town with a certificate of insurance. The Town would also need to insure the rental properties, and those costs would be factored into the ongoing upkeep supported by rental income. Mr. Houghton noted that The Collector's Eye generates significant rental income, and leasing additional buildings would further enhance revenue for long-term maintenance.

Ms. Patty Lovejoy expressed appreciation that no new restrictions would be placed on the Lane property, referencing a prior Town acquisition that included limitations rendering it largely unusable.

Mr. Houghton thanked her for the input and invited further comments.

Joe Lovejoy, Coach Road, asked whether there had been any opposition to the proposed donation. Mr. Houghton responded that the proposal had been publicly advertised, and to date, he had received no opposition—only thoughtful questions and strong support. He remarked on the significance of the opportunity, noting how remarkable it is that someone would purchase such an iconic property and gift it to the Town for public benefit.

Mr. Merrill added that the statewide preservation community is astonished by the donation, given the historical importance of the property. He highlighted the value of Samuel Lane's diaries, which offer unparalleled insight into 18th-century life in New Hampshire. He emphasized that Stratham's heritage is uniquely enriched by Sam Lane and this property, and that its transition to Town ownership is a profound gift.

Ms. Lovejoy reiterated her support, emphasizing the value of acquiring the property along with funding for its restoration, all without financial burden to the Town. She noted the potential for substantial rental income from the main house, additional apartments, and the Collector's Eye, and voiced strong support for the donation.

Mr. Houghton asked for any other further discussion. Hearing none, Ms. Knab motioned to close the public hearing. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton turned the discussion to the request from Chief Denton for a pay increase for the two paramedics to put them at equity with the other paramedics. Both Select Board members were in support but wanted a clearer process for such requests in the future. Ms. Knab motioned support for adjusting the pay rate for Alyssa Marchand and Jessica Downing from \$30 to \$32 an hour as recommended by the Fire Chief in his Sept. 23 memo. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor. Mr. Houghton will discuss a process with Mr. Roache.

At 7:00 pm Mr. Houghton motioned to adjourn. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Richard
Recording Secretary